



## Intra-cultural Dialogue as a Precursor to Cross-Community Initiatives:

Nic Craith, M., & McDermott, P. (2023). Intra-cultural Dialogue as a Precursor to Cross-Community Initiatives: the Irish Language among Protestants/Unionists in Northern Ireland. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 30(5), 744-762. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2022.2063498>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

### Published in:

Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power

### Publication Status:

Published (in print/issue): 01/01/2023

### DOI:

[10.1080/1070289X.2022.2063498](https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2022.2063498)

### Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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To cite this article: Mairéad Nic Craith & Philip McDermott (2022): Intracultural Dialogue as a Precursor to Cross-Community Initiatives: the Irish Language among Protestants/Unionists in Northern Ireland, *Identities*, DOI: [10.1080/1070289X.2022.2063498](https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2022.2063498)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2022.2063498>



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Published online: 19 Apr 2022.



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# Intracultural Dialogue as a Precursor to Cross-Community Initiatives: the Irish Language among Protestants/Unionists in Northern Ireland

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## ABSTRACT

While peace agreements are major milestones in ending conflict, the remnants of antagonism often continue well beyond the signing of a 'text'. Language issues are often far more important for the stability of a post-conflict region than is generally recognised. We focus on Northern Ireland as a case study of a society that has been divided along religious and ethnic lines and where language has reflected these schisms. Drawing on 20 years of fieldwork in the region, we focus on the significance of intracultural dialogue among the Protestant community as a precursor to cross-community language initiatives. The lack of mechanism for intra- as well as multi-cultural dialogues has stymied the emergence of respect for linguistic diversity, which is at the heart of the discourse central within many peace processes.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 23 February 2021; Accepted 5 April 2022

**KEYWORDS** Northern Ireland; Irish language; unionists; cross-community; dialogue

While peace agreements are a major milestone in a process of healing divisions in society, the remnants of conflict often continue well beyond the signing of a 'settlement'. Cultural and linguistic antagonisms between communities can harden rather than dissolve in a post-conflict context. In this article, we focus on Northern Ireland; a place long divided along religious and ethnic lines and where language has represented these dynamics. In a previous publication, we explored scenarios of how governments recognised competing linguistic identities in the aftermath of conflict (McDermott and Nic Craith 2019). Our case-studies included the non-recognition of linguistic minorities, such as Kurdish in Turkey (Zeydanlioğlu 2012), grass roots interventions from communities themselves, such as for Basque (Urla 2012) and state support from government policy as was the case for Mayan languages in Guatemala (Holmlund 1999). We also explored transnational recognition via

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the intervention of international organisations in regions such as North Macedonia (McEvoy 2011). That contribution identified the potential of multicultural dialogue as a key stage in the journey to reconciliation. While reinforcing the importance of all forms of dialogue, this article argues for intracultural dialogue within groups themselves as a precursor to later cross-community engagement on difficult cultural issues, such as those pertaining to language. Without self-reflection within a community, it is challenging to then make subsequent intercultural progress across community boundaries.

Engagement within and between groups on the thorniest and most intractable aspects of conflict is necessary but difficult to further in post-conflict contexts. There are many occasions in which post-conflict societies have given some form of recognition to languages in the public space, such as South Tyrol (Alcock, 2001), Bosnia-Herzegovina (Askew 2011), South Africa (Bamgbose 2003) and Guatemala (Barret 2008; Plant 1998). However, the *actual* implementation of recognition can vary greatly and does not always result in improved relations. Giving rights to one community can often be considered an attack on another group's identity. Nonetheless, recognising a variety of languages in areas, such as public administration, education, the arts, and in the wider public space, as recommended by the OSCE's *Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies* (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe 2012), is considered international best practice and integral to the stability of democratic principles in contested places. Such recognition relates to the esteem of identities and improving the status of groups that may previously have been undermined by the state or those in positions of power. Moreover, the enhancement of dialogue on aspects of antagonistic and shared linguistic heritage is an area often missing in this endeavour.

Language issues are more significant for the stability of a post-conflict region than is generally recognised. In exploring these questions further through extensive fieldwork in Northern Ireland over the past two decades, we have assessed the public debate on both the divisive and reconciliatory potential of language. Our key hypothesis is that unless mechanisms for intracultural dialogues are established post-agreement, it may well be the case that antagonism between different linguistic communities quickly re-emerges. Many societies in transition do not place sufficient emphasis on the actual application of intracultural dialogue as an initial step in negotiating difficult issues. Intracultural dialogue revolves around the exploration of difficult cultural issues within a community. Such discussions then may provide an initial platform for the emergence of multicultural dialogue across ethnic divides. Multicultural dialogue which has not been preceded by intracultural dialogue is unlikely to make considerable progress. The lack of

mechanism for both forms of dialogue stymie the emergence of the actual acceptance of cultural and linguistic diversity that is at the core of the discourse within the texts of many peace agreements.

## Language and conflict

The rhetoric of cultural diversity has come under increasing pressure even since our previous work on this subject (McDermott 2016). We would like to return to this topic and its specific applicability in the context of the case-study of Northern Ireland. We will examine how the role of intra- and multi-cultural dialogues can relate to questions around linguistic identity in a deeply divided society. For us, a deeply divided society is one where different ethnic groups align to historically constructed identities that represent opposed views to power, territory, or national sovereignty. As Nagle and Clancy note: 'In divided societies, social identities are often constrained by communal allegiances, which provide little room for multiple and fluid encapsulations cross-cutting the divisions. For this reason, civic and social life tends to occur within, rather than across, ethnic cleavages' (2010, 1). Perhaps, we also need to consider how to transform the internal discussions within communities into resources for social and cultural change.

Our case study is based on field work conducted over the past two decades. The analysis draws on a primarily interpretivist methodology, which in the Weberian tradition, considers how macro-level factors generate apparent 'social facts', particularly in this case as these relate to questions of national identity. In this respect, the originality of our article derives from a re-assessment of the context of the language debate through a *verstehen* approach, which 'goes beyond recording of voices and cultural collecting' and instead 'involves a commitment to considering social and cultural phenomenon as "total" or "totalities"' (Macdonald 2013, 8). It is in this vein that we consider how political changes since the 1998 Agreement have altered the dynamics of the language debate in Northern Ireland somewhat and have influenced, in some domains, how people interpret the context of their lives and their identities in new (linguistic) ways. We also critique how the political system has failed to take account of and capitalise on these altering dynamics. Throughout the article, we draw on our engagement with the community development sector and their work towards reconciliation on themes of language and heritage.

Northern Ireland is a region whose constitutional status is often somewhat simplistically viewed as a place contested by those of British identity who wish to remain part of the United Kingdom (unionists, who tend also to be protestant) and those of Irish identity who wish to achieve an all-Island state (nationalists, who tend to be catholic) (cf O'Leary 2019, 9). While recent years have witnessed more fluid interpretations of national identity, antagonisms

are still evident through ritualistic flag or emblem veneration, entrenched parades, commemorations, and the politicisation of distinct traditions. Likewise, speaking a particular language, or affiliation towards that language, can be considered as a nationalistic act. The inter-generational transmission of these practices and affinities is frequently a feature of intractable conflict. Memory and heritage are selectively harnessed by communities to reinforce apparently incompatible identities in antagonistic ways (McDowell and Braniff 2014). The very speaking and/or promotion of a particular language by an individual or a community can, through this process, be viewed as a hostile political act.

Similarly, political decisions by government, such as the recognition or indeed non-recognition, of a language in public policy can be viewed by different sides of an ethnic conflict as highly emotive. The politics of language clearly matters in deeply divided societies and linguistic conflicts can, if not managed, act to destabilise peace processes. From the Balkans to South Africa, from Rwanda to the Basque Country, from Northern Ireland to Guatemala, the issue of language and language planning has been a controversial issue that authorities have aimed to address within peace agreements and constitutional measures. However, we will illuminate how even in such post-conflict places there are opportunities for identities, including linguistic identities, to become more malleable. Since culture itself is 'a mosaic of meanings', the dialogic processes that come with such fluidity have the potential to contribute more fully to peace and reconciliation (Nic Craith 2004, 280).

### **Intra- and multi-cultural dialogue**

A key aspect to our argument is the necessity for distinct types of dialogue in a post-agreement period. This dialogue comes in two forms and takes place in two phases (which can be either parallel or consecutive). We define intra cultural dialogue as a form of reflection or dialogue within a group where individual members share generally similar senses of identity, although which are at the same time not totally monolithic. We consider that such interactions are a form of internal liminal dialogue. While such debates take place at the grass roots, they often illuminate complex and diverse opinions, which do not align to the narratives channelled by political elites. This grass roots discussion, or intracultural dialogue, has the potential, if listened to by those in power, to inform and shape strategic pathways such as language policy.

Dialogues within communities of traditional speakers about a language that they view as part of their heritage may lead to processes, such as language activism and successful recognition of their own language identities. However, this process on its own is unlikely to ever alter attitudes

towards the language of a 'former enemy'. In the case of Northern Ireland, for example, discussions regarding Irish language rights have been most prominent within the Irish nationalist community. Therefore, traditionally the political perceptions have meant that empathy for the Irish language has been less pronounced within the unionist community. Perhaps, it is the case that intracultural dialogues within potentially hostile groups about the language of their 'other' has the capacity to break down such negative language attitudes over time. We consider that the intracultural discussions within a previously hostile community is a prerequisite to the development of better relationships and successful multicultural dialogues.

We use the concept of multicultural dialogues in relation to discussion and debate that takes place across communities. Whilst some might prefer the term 'intercultural' we recognise that dialogue has always been central to the multiculturalist debate (Modood and Meer 2012; Taylor 1994). This argument was furthered by Modood (2017) who proposed that dialogue between different cultural groups has been central to multiculturalism for three reasons. Firstly, it is only through cross-cultural understanding that one arrives at genuine solutions that require re-designing the public space in a way that ensures that it is genuinely shared and not simply a reflection of the dominant, host culture. Secondly, such dialogue contributes to a growth of understanding between different communities that enables them to arrive at a solution that is genuinely novel and potentially unpredictable. Finally, the dialogue increases a sense of belonging between different parties as the process builds a relationship of trust and co-operation between them. For this reason, we adhere to this use and understanding of the term 'multiculturalism'.

Our central argument will be on the role of both intra- and multicultural dialogue in discussions on language rights in post-conflict societies. Dialogue which enables people to discover their identities at a collective level has been at the heart of research by multiculturalists such as Iris Young (1990). Dialogue is also central to Parekh's concept of multiculturalism (Parekh 2000/2006). Modood (2007/2013), within the wider context of 'a community of communities' has presented multiculturalism as a form of 'dialogical citizenship'. Moreover, international discussions on diversity have been influential on academic debates in post-conflict places like Northern Ireland but with varying levels of success in its actual implementation (McDermott and Nic Craith 2019). Building on these academic insights, we place particular emphasis on the need to support debates within communities before engaging in cross-community endeavours, allowing for multiple standpoints to emerge from particular groups.

Our research has affirmed that exceptional conditions have allowed for embryonic and nuanced discussions about Irish to emerge primarily from within sections of a unionist community that is clearly not monolithic. Intra

cultural dialogues among some unionists have started at a very isolated level, but over time these have led to more sustained cross-over activities, such as learning the language and understanding the history and relevance of that language as heritage shared by both nationalists and unionists. We argue that government needs to support these processes of intracultural discussion more formally. At present, the potential role of language as a prism through which to explore similarities as opposed to differences has been largely ignored at official levels.

### Parallel monologues

While there is a mosaic of languages in Northern Ireland including Irish, Ulster-Scots, and various immigrant languages, such as Polish and Chinese, our focus in this contribution is on Irish which has formerly been aligned with the catholic, nationalist community. Our application means that we are focusing on one language and its reception firstly within the British protestant community and then across protestant and catholic communities. For decades, Irish had no formal recognition until a community movement arguing for better infrastructure lobbied the British government to the point that it could no longer refrain from recognising these claims and thus the identities of Irish speakers (Muller 2010).

The first major step was the inclusion of clauses supporting the development of Irish in the 1998 Belfast-Good Friday Agreement (GFA). This Agreement provided a pathway out of a 30-year ethno-national conflict (Nic Craith 1999). Article 3 of that Agreement advocated 'respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots, and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the Island of Ireland' (HMSO 1998). However, all languages were considered separately and in parallel with one another with limited focus on how the speakers/supporters of these languages could interact with the language of their 'other'. Greater significance was given to Irish, and some specific commitments were made on the behalf of the British Government where such actions were deemed appropriate.

The GFA stated that the governments would promote and encourage the use of the Irish language both in private and in public where there was appropriate demand. Where possible, the Government agreed to remove any restrictions that might hinder the development of Irish and to develop an infrastructure that would facilitate communication in Irish between speakers and public authorities. The emphasis clearly was on a two-way communication between Irish-speakers and the British and Irish states as guarantors of the Agreement but not within or across communities themselves. A statutory duty was placed on the Department of Education to promote Irish

medium education in a manner like that of integrated education. Also promised was the opportunity to develop greater visibility for Irish in the media. This included making *Teilifís na Gaeilge* (the Irish-medium television service in the Republic of Ireland) available in Northern Ireland as well as the provision of financial support for Irish language television and film production in Northern Ireland.

The Agreement encouraged sensitivity for the use of symbols in Northern Ireland in a manner that would promote 'mutual respect rather than division'. Little (if any) consideration was given to the promotion of dialogue within and between different language groups to cultivate that respect. A North/South Language Body was established to monitor language issues. Two independent and parallel agencies were established – *Foras na Gaeilge* (with joint headquarters in Dublin and Belfast) and *Tha Boord O Ulstèr-Scotch* (based in Belfast). *Foras na Gaeilge* was charged with implementing Irish language policy on an all-Ireland basis. This provides a classic example of where there is both advocacy in accommodating cultural difference, yet ambiguity in furthering the potential for dialogue as a precursor to reconciliation. The establishment of two autonomous agencies did not encourage multicultural dialogue. Instead, it pitted groups against one another for increasingly diminishing funds. While this may seem an appropriate reaction by the state to various grass roots' claims for recognition, it does not in itself facilitate crossover debates within or between communities.

This is not to suggest that there was a lack of recognition of the need for a mechanism to promote multicultural dialogue. It is rarely noticed that the GFA advocated the establishment of a Civic Forum which intended to include representatives from business, the community sector, trade unions, and others to act as a consultative mechanism on cultural as well as social and economic issues. The Civic Forum as McDermott (2016) notes, could have acted as an important means of furthering simple binary or 'bi-cultural' narratives to more multicultural ones. The lack of clear vision regarding the remit of this forum meant that it did not have any real impact on the language question.

In 2013, the NI executive introduced a flagship community relations programme 'Together: Building a United Community' (NI Executive 2013). This aimed to create a society of 'good relations and reconciliation – one which is strengthened by its diversity, where cultural expression is celebrated and embraced and where everyone can live, learn, work and socialise together, free from prejudice, hate and intolerance' (NI Executive 2013, 3). The proposed action focused on areas relating to cultural expression and while it covered the need for debates on flags and emblems and 'the difficult past' in some detail, the issue of languages was commented upon only once in relation to its role as a vehicle of cultural expression (NI Executive 2013, 91). Considering the examples presented in this article, we argue that language

issues should be considered more seriously within the community relations agenda in Northern Ireland, and indeed in other divided societies. Language issues clearly have the symbolic power to bring down a government, as they did in Northern Ireland when the impasse on Irish language legislation contributed to a collapse of government in March 2017. This was in the context of debates at grass roots level, which indicated the potential of debates on language to deconstruct fixed notions of identity. We return to this later in the article.

### **Dialogue without communication**

Following the 1998 Agreement, there were local attempts at structured dialogue across communities within Northern Ireland. An organisation called Community Dialogue ran over 500 events between 1998 and 2004. The Forum's purpose 'was to encourage dialogue among people who disagreed deeply with each other about the past, present, and future and who were hurting deeply because of the conflict' (Community Dialogue 2004). A key aim of this dialogue was to enhance a sense of understanding rather than agreement across communities. The organisation believed that by encouraging communities to 'walk in each other's shoes', people would begin to understand the perspective of the other which might then pave a pathway towards agreement.

Identity and symbols were central to Community Dialogue's work. The intention was to encourage an understanding of different reactions to the same symbol from competing communities. A feature of this dialogue was a focus on individual perceptions of communal identities. To generate genuine discussion, Community Dialogue focused on individuals who might influence the emergence of a new understanding between the wider communities of protestants and catholics, unionists, and loyalists. As the dialogues progressed people began to listen to each other and become more confident and less antagonistic.

Identity issues featured prominently in community dialogue but not always in reconciliatory ways. For instance, the problem of segregation was regularly heightened by on-going tensions regarding Northern Ireland's future as part of the British State or the Island of Ireland during the annual summer marching seasons. Kockel (2001) described these marching rituals as 'a dialogue, like a more or less silent game of chess, enacted in the streets'. The contestation was not about the march itself but the territory on which the march was held. In this example by 'marching along the Garvaghy Road, Ulster Unionists claim this area as theirs. By opposing their march, Irish Nationalists deny that claim'. (Kockel 2001, 100) Any intervention in the cultural sphere by either the British or Irish Government was perceived as a gain or loss for either the unionist or nationalist community.

In the case of Northern Ireland, dialogues held under the auspices of Community Dialogue were held in English. Although speaking the same language, participants did not necessarily 'hear' one another and thus were not always 'in dialogue' with one another. John Dunlop (2007) attributes cultural factors to this mis-communication. Dunlop (2007) notes: 'Presbyterian language does not have too many layers to it; it does not possess too much flexibility'. For this reason, he argues that they are not good negotiators. They have a strong commitment to literal truth. In contrast, Catholics are more relaxed about the precision of words and listen for the hidden meanings 'behind the words'. This cultural context disrupts but does not completely block the process. However, progress has been slow and much of the past decade has witnessed individuals and communities talking 'at' rather than 'with' one another. Such conversations can harden tensions regarding Irish.

Over the years, there have been many provocative gestures from some unionist political leaders that have hardened lines of communication on issues of language. As an example of this, we point to the renaming of a fisheries protection boat from Irish into English by Michelle McIlveen, the Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) agriculture, environment, and rural affairs minister (Black, *Belfast Telegraph*, September 29th, 2016). Originally launched in 2010, the boat was called *Banríon Uladh* (Queen of Ulster), but the DUP minister reverted to the English translation arguing that there had been no consultation on which language to use when the boat was originally named.

An action with more social ramifications was the failure of the then Minister for Communities Paul Given of the DUP, to carry out equality tests before cutting a small bursary scheme that facilitated disadvantaged children to visit native Irish-speaking areas in the west of Ireland. An article in the *Irish Times* (a Republic of Ireland newspaper) noted the findings of an equality investigation that the ministerial department 'did not undertake screening and equality impact assessment at appropriate times', when taking the decision to withdraw funding (Fergusson, *Irish Times*, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018).

Likewise, unionist councillor, Alan Lewis, branded the use of street-names in Irish as a 'ridiculous waste of money' (*Rainey News Letter*, 27 November 2019). He declared that street-names in Irish were a 'party political vanity project' on behalf of nationalist parties. There was some sense of acknowledgement in the commentary by another unionist councillor, who said it was more the order of the languages rather than the use of Irish that was the problem. He noted 'what's really annoying people is that Irish is used as the first language and English is second. Unionists could have accepted it if it had English first and Irish second' (In Rainey, 2019). While the last sentence indicates acceptance of Irish as part of the community infrastructure, this example, and others that we have cited, show that community tensions can harden and make both intracultural and multicultural dialogue more

challenging. What is significant is that these examples reported in the public domain reflect the views of certain political leaders and these tend to dominate the wider public narrative on language attitudes. These may have hidden the more nuanced discussions occurring at grass roots, which do not necessarily align with the views of those in power.

### Recognition of the need for dialogue

Although an infrastructure for dialogue was not fully explored in the 1998 GFA Agreement, the need for recognition of a shared context was more explicit in the later St Andrew's Agreement (2006). This addendum to the GFA, noted the necessity 'to develop a shared sense of respect'. In that Agreement, the British Government agreed: 'to build confidence in both communities and to pursue a shared future for Northern Ireland in which the culture, rights, and aspirations of all are respected and valued, free from sectarianism, racism and intolerance' (Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Government of Ireland 2006). Insufficient thought was given to the nature of the infrastructure required to promote the dialogue and shared respect within and across communities. A language-policy document issued in 2006 recommended the establishment of a Language Forum which would serve as an 'umbrella' to bring the various agencies together. Some degree of recognition was given to the need for dialogue although this would be encouraged primarily between users and providers, rather than within and across communities. There was also recognition of the need for dialogue specifically on the issue of language and the development of understanding and mutual respect. The strategy noted that: 'society must take responsibility for initiating communication, developing dialogue, and enhancing intercultural understanding' (Gillespie, Johnston, and Corráin 2012). This recommendation was not acted upon and an opportunity for initiating different forms of dialogue was missed.

Indeed, what is often absent in the discourse of peace processes and subsequent social and cultural policies, which attempt to implement them, is a robust infrastructure to promote the challenging conversation within and across groups. Twenty-two years after the 1998 Agreement, a new deal was drafted to iron out the creases which groups could not agree on – including language. The *New Decade, New Approach* (NDNA) embraced more fully the cultural dynamics with the proposed establishment of an office of cultural expression 'to promote cultural pluralism and respect for diversity, including Northern Ireland's ethnic, national, linguistic and faith communities' (UK Government and Irish Government 2020, 31). At the time of writing this body has not been established and neither has its structure and form been fully determined. Also, when NDNA talks of language it reverts to notions of

both 'promise' and 'ambiguity' simultaneously. In addition, the committees established to oversee new policies are again segregated into two separate language groups (Irish and Ulster-Scots).

### **Intracultural dialogue as a 'bridge' to multicultural conversations**

Despite the lack of a formal infrastructure for cross-community dialogue on language, we have observed and engaged with several local initiatives, which facilitated, against great odds, emergent dialogic conversations. In the 1990s the ULTACH Trust was formed as a non-governmental heritage body to promote reconciliation through the Irish language and championed its use among protestants. An early survey carried out prior to the GFA, evidenced the hostility held by many protestants towards Irish (see Mac Póilin 2018, xviii). This research noted that the language at this time was labelled by some as '*Taig* talk' (*Taig* is a derogatory slang word for Catholic). In the early 1990s, protestant respondents to Mac Póilin's work argued that Irish was for '*Taigs*' and not for protestants. Many hated its use and regarded it as a political tool of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). The explanation given by Mac Póilin (2018) for this attitude was constitutional. Every question in the ULTACH Trust survey was interpreted by respondents as a query about loyalty to the UK or to the Republic of Ireland. Language was more than a means of communication. Instead, it incorporated identities, worldviews, religion, and political loyalties (see Mac Póilin 2018). This was a situation that the ULTACH Trust sought to challenge.

One mechanism used to facilitate dialogue about Irish within the protestant community was the focus on the long-term relationship between Scottish-Gaelic and presbyterians. Scottish-Gaelic is closely related to Irish and its native speakers in the Western Isles of Scotland are mainly protestant. In laying the groundwork for cross-community engagement, the ULTACH Trust encouraged self-reflection on the historical role of presbyterian clergymen in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as key champions of both Scottish- and Irish-Gaelic, at a period when these Celtic languages were under threat from the encroachment of English (McCoy 1997). In the case of Irish, the language was representative of a place to which these early presbyterian scholars, had affinity, but not necessarily political loyalty (McCoy 1997; Pritchard 2004).

In the 1990s, the ULTACH Trust also held a range of 'ground-breaking' Irish language classes in venues such as the Linen Hall library and the Ulster People's College as well as more traditional protestant areas, such as Glencairn Community Association and Shankill's Women's Centre (Dawe 2018, ix). These initiatives served as a catalyst for an initial shift in some protestant views towards Irish (McCoy and Ní Bhaoill 2004). Despite its incredibly important work, the ULTACH Trust had serious funding withdrawn which curtailed its operations (BBC 2014).

The ULTACH Trust was an early effort to promote intra-community dialogue among protestants on the question of Irish. Perhaps, its efforts came too soon in a peace process where identity issues have more recently been scrutinised as increasingly malleable and fluid. Debates from within communities have shown increasing awareness of how people interpret their own senses of 'Irishness', 'Northern Irishness' and 'Britishness' as cultural rather than party political aspects of their identity (Braniff 2021). Arguably, if a genuine multicultural dialogue is ever to emerge *across* the traditional divisions of Northern Ireland society, then debates on difficult issues of identity need to happen *within* communities first. In supporting such initiatives through public policy and the provision of resources, governments can help build the necessary bridging capital that will later allow different linguistic communities to generate dialogue with one another about the role, nature, and place of different languages in their region.

Our argument is that this process has begun to emerge (with very limited state funding) within working-class protestant communities through projects such as '*Droichead*' (Bridge). This is an initiative of the Irish language cultural centre (*Cultúrlann*) in the city of Derry/Londonderry and 'promotes awareness of cultural identity between the Irish-speaking community and those perceived to be non-traditional learners of Irish, particularly from broadly unionist communities' (*Cultúrlann* 2020a). This initiative developed through networks formed during the city's tenure as the first UK City of Culture in 2013. The emergence of a 'new shared story' driven by fresh dialogue between communities was a particular outcome of that year (McDermott, Nic Craith, and Strani 2016). *Droichead* offers introductory classes in Irish for interested protestants.

Catherine Pollock, a member of the protestant community, facilitates aspects of the *Droichead* project. While working in partnership with one of the authors of this article during an event on linguistic diversity in 2017, she noted the opportunities that Irish presents to protestants. Pollock argued that her increased interest in Irish complemented her Britishness and consolidates her attachment to an Irish place that she regards as home. This was the ethos of the project that did not necessarily attempt to de-politicise the language as a cursory assessment would lead one to believe. Participants were engaging with the language not to de-politicise it but rather 'multi-politicising' it by realigning their own conceptions of connection to their region (ULTACH Trust/ Iontaobhas ULTACH 1994). As Jak, an arts facilitator taking part in the *Cultúrlann* project testified in his evaluation:

As a wee protestant lad from a family in the fountain (Protestant area of the city), I never felt Irish was 'for' me, but always deeply curious. How wrong I was - I've felt a new found connection to our land, to our community and to OUR shared language. Irish is for everyone, it's never too late to start. (*Cultúrlann* 2020b).

This was mirrored by others who, in their evaluations of the project, also indicated that the language was something that connected them to the local place and the environment in which they live.

Irish language classes led protestants to reconsider the very concept of indigeneity and the issue of ownership of the language. Of course, traditionally Irish has been connected to the identity of Irish nationalists. Helen, a community worker, paradoxically talks about the shift in attitudes that can occur because of intracultural dialogue. She states:

My ancestors were probably not native or indigenous to Ireland but they did live on the land and speak the native tongue. My Grandad from Drumahoe, who recently passed away at the age of 96, had quite a few *focals* (words) and often reminisced about the times when the language was widely spoken in the North (Cultúrlann 2020b).

These examples have been facilitated also by the nature of the environment in which the dialogue is taking place. Intracultural dialogue must take place in a space in which the community feels comfortable. In the case of *Droichead* the learning of the language occurred within familiar spaces for the protestant community. Heather noted how important it was that that spatial dimensions for teaching Irish were broken down. She commented, '[w]hen the opportunity arose to learn Irish in a building that I was already very familiar with (being my own Church) I was delighted, and it happened at a time when I was working to expand my social horizons' (Cultúrlann 2020b).

Mitchell and Miller (2019) note the potential of *Turas* (journey) – another intracultural project. This initiative promotes language learning for protestants in traditionally unionist East Belfast and is hosted at the Skainos Community Centre. Linda Ervine, a community officer from a working-class unionist background, spearheaded the project from its inception. Ervine initially attended beginner classes in a neighbouring nationalist area and has furthered her interest by studying Irish at Queen's University, Belfast. Intra community dialogue can prove controversial and antagonistic within communities and Ervine faced many challenges from those who are still sceptical of (or even hostile towards) her empathy with Irish. Her opponents argue that any protestant focus on linguistic questions should profile Ulster-Scots and its associated cultural movement, which champions the notion that Lowland Scots was brought to Ulster in the seventeenth century by protestant settlers and is still spoken today (McDermott 2019). Despite such opposition, Ervine argues for a more nuanced approach. She says that 'some people say we should be interested in Ulster-Scots language and culture rather than Irish, but I'm interested in both Irish and Ulster-Scots because they are both part of my identity' (Ervine 2014). She also notes: 'As British as I feel in terms of my nationality, I am Irish and Gaelic culturally. Irish is as much a part of my cultural DNA as anybody else's' (Ibid).

As with the *Droichead* project, participants have broadened their perspective and have considered more fluid interpretations of their identity. While unwaveringly British, they acknowledge the connection that the language provides to their own sense of place. As one participant in the *Turas* project noted in recently published work by Anthea Irwin:

It got me thinking why don't I know Irish the language of the Island I was born in ... I am British, Northern Irish and now that I have given myself permission to be (throwing off shackles of childhood) I am Irish. I want to fully appreciate my culture and background and feel I can achieve this through Irish (Cited in Irwin 2018, 110).

Such views are massively controversial for many within Ervine's own community. Social media has become a particular sphere where the intra-cultural tensions become evident especially regarding the decision by some protestants to learn Irish. Nonetheless, the *Turas* project continues to attract Irish learners who hitherto would not have engaged with the language. Indeed, the project has been so successful that there are now plans for an Irish-medium nursery school, *Naíscoil na Seolta*, situated in protestant East Belfast. The proposed school aims to work in an integrated way and attract children from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it proposes to move from an intracultural to a multicultural context where children from different cultural backgrounds learn Irish together. In this case, intra-community dialogue has facilitated a breaking down of binary senses of identity, which has the potential to develop new engagements across other groups and generations.

The projects discussed above could be regarded as the legacy of the ULTACH Trust, which initially prompted new dialogue in relation to Irish in Northern Ireland. In the region, the process involved appealing to two distinct imagined communities with competing senses of linguistic belonging to Ulster. For protestants (especially those of the presbyterian faith), the connection to Scotland was drawn upon. The sister language of Scottish-Gaelic created a cultural bridge to Britain. For catholics, the connection to Irish was appealing in an Ulster context but also generated a wider sense of belonging to the rest of the Island. Such connections, we argue are the foundation stones on which to build a formal infrastructure between linguistic communities and to build trust which is often lacking.

What kind of infrastructure is needed post peace-agreement to ensure that people across communities actively engage with one another beyond the publication of an agreed text? How does one take a dynamic process beyond a static text? Without opportunities for dialogue, language can be used as a tool of division rather than as a bridge between communities. In the case of Northern Ireland, engagement with Irish has been presented as a positive opportunity to broaden a sense of Britishness and a positive sense of belonging to Ulster. Intra-community initiatives profiled the Gaelic connection with

Scotland, the Gaelic origin of local Ulster placenames and provided an opportunity to learn the language. These were the positive incentives presented to protestants, who engaged with Irish. As Article 11 of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Ljubljana guidelines (2012) suggest, 'it is preferable to use positive incentives to ensure compliance rather than punitive measures' (p. 21). Rather than presenting the Irish language as an opportunity to engage across communities with catholics, the emphasis was on the advantages to protestants themselves of interaction and participation in affairs traditionally aligned with Irish nationalism. There was no penalty for protestants who did not engage with the language. Despite the challenges faced by some who still resist engagement with Irish, this intra-community dialogue has been a cornerstone in foregrounding future work across the protestant-catholic divide. The significance of this intra-community dialogue cannot be under-estimated since it enables the discovery of mutuality and shared linguistic heritage, thus laying the path for reaching out to the 'other'.

## Conclusion

This essay has highlighted a series of local initiatives that foster intra-community dialogue in post-conflict Northern Ireland about the Irish language. Our central critique has been the lack of a formal, long-term structure at state-level for dialogue within and across communities. Instead, the region has relied on local, parallel initiatives, which are highly dependent on audacious individuals and short-term funding. Given that a peace process may spark new areas of contestation, we are arguing for a form of 'managed dialogue' regarding language issues, which may require new organisational structures or new approaches from existing ones (McDermott 2016). The mechanism needs to be discursive and take account of the local context. The text of any peace process is static and cannot replace the necessity for a fluid ongoing dialogue housed within an infrastructure where participants can speak, listen to, and genuinely hear one another. The need to provide formal support for such dialogue should be a critical point of consideration in the implementation of the stipulations in the *New Decade, New Approach* policy. This is especially critical regarding the nature of the implementation of language rights and the overall focus on cultural diversity.

A final criticism here might be that the creation of such infrastructures is not necessarily the role of those implementing a system of language rights, but our core argument is that the applicability of language rights must include dialogue if they are to succeed in the long term. Too frequently normative approaches have been taken which have hindered rather than improved relations within and across communities. We also argue that the

application of language rights in ways that place an intra-cultural element of application at their core can be justified, as they strengthen the base for democratic dialogue and participation in cultural matters. Therefore, in this essay we posit a new theoretical framework for language rights that is applicable in the very fraught circumstances of ethnic conflict.

Sceptics of multicultural ideologies posit that the implementation of group rights merely serves to cement silos (cf. Barry 2001). In post-conflict societies, the phrase that 'high fences make good neighbours' is often referred to highlight the failure of actual discussions to take root. Fundamentally, our contribution highlights the logocentric approach of peace processes that focus on the written text and neglect mechanisms for intercultural dialogue that are required to foster harmonious relations and intercultural understanding when language rights are being implemented. A key aspect of our argument is that different forms of dialogue are necessary for conflict amelioration or resolution. If language rights are to avoid an antagonistic future after peace processes, then formal infrastructures must go beyond the mere accommodation of linguistic minorities in silos. Processes which generate cross community dialogue *about* the language of the other have the potential to lead to engagement with a previously despised language and its respective community. This cross-over has potential, as affirmed in Northern Ireland, to deconstruct simple ethnic binaries and play a more formal role in reconciliation processes.

## Acknowledgments

We appreciate the thoughtful and helpful feedback from the anonymous reviewers at *Identities*. We also wish to thank INCORE for facilitating an earlier presentation on this topic at Ulster University.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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