

## THE IRISH LANGUAGE IN NORTHERN IRELAND 1987

### Preliminary Report of a Survey of Knowledge, Interest and Ability

#### 1. Background

While a range of European languages is taught in schools in Northern Ireland, little is known about the extent of knowledge of European languages among the general population of NI. The Irish language has, for at least part of the population, a cultural dimension beyond that of other commonly taught second languages. There is a particular lack of information on the extent of use of the language and the level of competence of Irish speakers in NI.

This paper presents the results of a recent study conducted among the general population of NI which provides information on the knowledge of, interest in and ability to use Irish in comparison with other modern European languages. First, the paper will touch briefly on the historical context of Irish within the island of Ireland and then more specifically within NI. Reference will be made to the position of Welsh and Scots Gaelic to place Irish in a wider context of the other spoken Celtic languages of the British Isles. Interest in the Irish language will be considered and reference made to research conducted in the Republic of Ireland on the extent of interest in, and the use of the Irish language among the general population.

## 2. The Irish Language in Ireland - Historical context

Irish is a Celtic language most closely related to the Gaelic of Scotland and Manx. It is related in a more distant way to the other Celtic languages of Britain - Welsh and Cornish, and to the Celtic languages of Western Europe (see, O Murchu 1985). The position of Irish as the dominant language in Ireland was first influenced by the Anglo-Norman invasion of the 12th Century when Norman-French and then English displaced it. However, by the end of the 16th century Irish remained the language of most of the population of Ireland apart from the Pale along the Eastern coast and a few restricted rural areas (Edwards, 1984).

During the 17th century a process of language shift began establishing a 'dynamic of decline' for the Irish language (O Riagain, 1988a). By the end of that century English was well established as the language of the Law and of government and public institutions. The use of Irish was discouraged, though not prohibited in everyday affairs, and the language declined in social status becoming the language of the poor and rural classes.

In 1851, the first census to register language returned the number of Irish speakers as 1,524,286; 25% of the population. It is likely that this figure represents a substantial decline on the earlier part of the century, accelerated by death and emigration during the Famine period (1846-48).

The latter part of the 19th and early part of the 20th century were characterised by further decline in the proportion of the population speaking Irish as social and economic pressures accentuated the language shift toward English. During this period numerous revival movements attempted to maintain the language in those areas where it

remained a community language and to promote its revival in other areas. Not until the designation of Irish as the national language of the Irish Free State in 1922 was any reversal in the decline of Irish speakers noted.

#### Irish speakers in Ireland

---

census	Irish speakers	% of population
-----	-----	-----
1851	1,524,286	25%
1891	680,245	15%
1901	641,142	14%
1911	582,446	13%

---

### 3. The Irish Language in Northern Ireland - Historical context

It is clear even from the census of 1851 that a marked decline in Irish speakers had already occurred in the eastern part of Ireland, with less than 10% of the population of the Eastern counties of what is now Northern Ireland speaking Irish at that time. This pattern of decline in the east and peripheralisation of areas with substantial Irish speaking population to the west continued into the early part of this century. By 1911, less than 2% of the population of the 6 counties which were to become NI spoke Irish and the census of that year registered 4 persons within that area as speaking only Irish.

Irish speakers in the 6 counties of Northern Ireland

---

	census		
	1891	1901	1911
Number of Irish speakers	28,729	15,858	21,432
% of the population	2.3%	1.3%	1.7%

---

The census of 1911 was the last to record the extent of Irish speaking in Northern Ireland. Detailed analysis of the 1911 census shows that there were essentially no monoglot Irish speakers in NI at that time and Irish was spoken by a substantial proportion of the population in only three areas (Adams, 1964). In all 1.7% of the population of what was to become NI spoke Irish in 1911 and bilingual Irish speakers represented more than 30% of the population only in an area of the Sperrin mountains to the west, the Red Bay area of the Glens of east Antrim and on Rathlin Island. A total of 8 areas, some of which were peripheral to the two mainland Irish speaking areas, registered 5% or more of the population as Irish speakers.

No further information of this nature is available for NI after 1911 but it is likely that the decline of Irish speaking continued after that time even in those few areas where a relatively high level of Irish speaking had been registered in 1911. Census information for the Republic of Ireland shows a relatively low level of Irish speaking in the first half of this century with significant increases becoming noticeable only in the early 1960's.

Irish speakers in the Republic of Ireland 1926-1981

---

	census date					
	1926	1936	1946	1961	1971	1981
Proportion of the population aged 3 years and over	19.3	23.7	21.2	27.2	28.3	31.6

---

In 1981 there were just over 1 million Irish speakers in the Republic of Ireland but the increase in the proportion of the population speaking the language masks an underlying change in the incidence of bilingualism. Irish can only be said to have survived as a community language in the designated Gaeltacht areas in the West of the Republic but even there as a result of demographic change, inward migration and economic pressures the position of Irish has declined (see Bord na Gaeilge, 1988). In 1961, 87% of the Gaeltacht population over 3 years of age were returned as Irish speakers in the census, a figure which had fallen to 77% by 1981.

In 1911, the Irish speaking areas in the west contained 16% of the population of the Republic and 57% of the Irish speakers, but by 1981 they contained only 2.3% of the population and 7.4% of the Irish speakers (O Riagain, 1988b). Thus there has been a decline in Irish speakers in the traditional indigenous Irish speaking areas of the Republic but an increase in the proportion of Irish speakers in other areas. The increase has been among people who have learnt Irish at

school rather than as a native language.

#### 4. The position of Welsh and Scots Gaelic

Both Wales and Scotland contain significant communities of Welsh or Scots Gaelic speakers and these languages have come under similar social and economic pressures as Irish in Ireland. In contrast to the increase in the proportion of Irish speakers in the Republic of Ireland in the more recent part of this century, available information indicates a continuing decline of Welsh speaking in Wales and of the small Gaelic speaking portion of the population of Scotland.

##### Welsh speakers in Wales

---

	census date				
	1931	1951	1961	1971	1981
Proportion of the population 3 years and over speaking Welsh	36.8	28.9	26.0	20.8	19.0

---

The decline in Welsh speakers has been most marked in the traditionally anglicised districts of the east with large proportions of Welsh speakers increasingly concentrated in the rural districts of the west. Only the county of Gwynedd returned over 60% Welsh speakers in the 1981 census. Districts showing over 60% Welsh speakers were concentrated in Gwynedd and the other western county of Dyfed.

In Scotland a downward trend in the proportion of Gaelic speakers has been recorded in each census since 1891 when it stood at 5% of the population.

Scots Gaelic speakers in Scotland

---

	census date			
	1951	1961	1971	1981
Proportion of the population 3 years and over speaking Gaelic	1.8	1.5	1.7	1.6

---

In the census of 1981 1.6% of the population of Scotland aged 3 years and over were returned as Gaelic speakers. Areas containing high proportions of Gaelic speakers are restricted almost exclusively to the Highland and Island districts. The 1981 census identified 7 areas where Gaelic was spoken by more than 5% of the population. This included areas with very high proportions of speakers such as the Western Isles where 80% spoke Gaelic and areas with much lower ratios such as Sutherland where 11% of the population spoke Gaelic. Even in these areas a noticeable decline in Gaelic speakers occurred between 1971 and 1981 (although possibly influenced by a change in question wording on the census).

## 5. Interest in the Irish language in NI

By the time of the 1911 census the proportion of Irish speakers in NI had fallen to under 2% and no subsequent estimates for the province as a whole are available. Irish has continued to be taught as a modern language in NI schools (Pritchard, 1982) but this is restricted almost exclusively to the maintained, Catholic education sector. The language is widely perceived as being of interest only to the Catholic community. There has always been some interest in Irish among Protestants in NI (O Glaisne, 1981) but its link in history with Irish Nationalism has largely curtailed this. Interest in the Irish language is low among the Protestant majority of NI despite the Irish and Scots Gaelic heritage of the area (see Adamson, 1982).

One of the few available sources of information on the extent of knowledge of Irish in NI are the secondary school examination entries in the subject. These figures show some 1800 students in the most recent year of available data, 1986, taking secondary level examinations in Irish. This compares with roughly 9,000 taking French and 1,000 German. These figures of course reflect only those taking formal examinations in the language and take no account of pupils who may study Irish at secondary level but not take it to examination level. It has been estimated that 24-25,000 pupils study Irish at post primary level (Pritchard, 1982).

Modern language examination entries in Northern Ireland

---

	1972	1977	1982	1986
1	—	—	—	—
O'level/CSE entries				
Irish	2131	1917	1658	1529
French	8428	9700	9979	9073
German	1094	1206	1169	827
A' level entries				
Irish	329	320	319	268
French	1512	1323	1264	1264
German	282	246	236	221
2				
number of 15 year olds in secondary education	16,735	25,678	27,717	27,734

---

1

Begun in 1973

2

excluding further education

It is difficult to use these figures to gauge any change in interest in Irish as a school subject over the period 1972 to 1986 since they will be influenced by the demographic changes in the school population during this period.

Irish is also taught at primary level and a primary school in the Belfast area where all teaching is through the medium of Irish has provision for over 300 children, and now has maintained status. There is also considerable informal pre-school provision in Irish in West Belfast and formal and informal adult education in Irish in that area.

Undoubtedly the highest level of interest in Irish is in the West Belfast area and this area recently received an award from the Irish-speaking society Glor naGael for its contribution to the advancement of the Irish language. A study of West Belfast in 1984-5 identified almost 70 adult Irish language classes, most of which were outside the normal education system and taught by unpaid teachers (O hAdhmaill, 1985). The reasons for learning Irish given by people in these classes most frequently related to 'national identity' (the response given by 86% of those interviewed).

A number of household surveys of local areas in West Belfast have reported very high levels of interest in Irish. In one study of the Twinbrook area in 1986, 70% of the households surveyed contained at least one person who wanted to speak Irish. Such extensive interest in the Irish language and its promotion is not evidenced to any similar extent outside of the West Belfast area.

**6. Competence and use of Irish and the interest in the language - the experience in the Republic of Ireland**

Even in the Republic of Ireland no information existed until relatively recently on the level of competence and extent of use of Irish by those recorded by censuses as Irish speakers. An examination of age cohorts in census data suggests a 'constant slippage' from the high ability levels of those of school age suggesting that Irish was not widely used in the community following its acquisition at school (O Riagain,

1988b).

The Irish government established the Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research (CLAR) in 1970 and under its auspices a major national survey of language attitudes, use and ability was conducted in 1973 (CLAR,1975). A subsequent national survey of similar methodology was conducted in 1983 (see O Riagain, 1988b and Bord na Gaeilge, 1988). The results of these surveys suggest that

"...only about 13% of the national samples unambiguously regarded themselves as competent Irish speakers, while a further 10-15% claim that status for census purposes even though on their own estimate they possess only partial fluency in Irish." (O Riagain, 1988b, p37)

While these national surveys consistently reflected a much lower level of active competence and use of Irish than census figures would indicate, they also consistently reflect very positive attitudes towards the language and its position in Irish society, tempered by a pessimism about its future.

"The average person would seem to place considerable value on the symbolic role of the Irish language in ethnic identification and as a cultural value in and of itself. But while this would appear to be the central attitudinal element (and its strength is sufficient to support a desire to guarantee the transmission of Irish) it seems to be qualified by a generally pessimistic view of the language's future and a feeling of its inappropriateness in modern life." (CLAR 1975, p229)

The results of the more recent 1983 survey indicate a continuing discrepancy between support for the Irish language and the degree to which it is used and even indicate some reduction in the strength of positive attitudes (O Riagain, 1988b). It may be that this reduction is related to a change in the conception of Irish identity toward one based on citizenship rather than ethnicity (Tovey, 1988).

#### 7. The context of the current research

The continuation of Irish as a language subject within a large number of NI schools, together with the high level of interest in very specific areas of the Province in its cultural and ethnic aspects, contrasts with the lack of information on the extent of knowledge and use of the language in NI.

All but a very few Irish speakers in NI would be expected to be 'secondary bilinguals' who will have learnt the language in a school context rather than at home. In this context, the status of Irish in NI is closest to that of other second modern languages acquired in a school setting.

A series of questions dealing with modern languages in the context of the European Community was included in a Province-wide household survey in 1987 (see Annex 1 for details of design and methodology). This survey instrument was designed to assess the following aspects of the respondents knowledge of the 9 official languages of the EC:

- . Familiarity with/ knowledge of the language
- . Interest in further knowledge of the language

- . Opinion on the importance of the language
- . Formal/Informal study of the language
- . Formal educational qualifications gained in the language
- . Current ability to use the language (self-assessed) in the context of the four main language skills-
  - understanding
  - speaking
  - reading
  - writing
- . Use of the language at home

The survey recorded this information for each adult (ie persons aged 16 and over) in the surveyed households and, in addition, registered language knowledge and use at home among children between the ages of 3 and 15 from their parents.

While all 9 EC languages were covered by the survey this report focuses on the results for the Irish language and presents these alongside those for the second languages which were most commonly known among the sample interviewed - French, German and Spanish.

The aim of this report is to present a preliminary descriptive account of the results for the Irish language and as such presents these in terms of factors likely to be relevant to the knowledge of Irish, principally religious affiliation and age .

## 8. Results of the survey

The following text provides a descriptive commentary on the main results of the survey presented in Tables 1 to 18. In these tables bases may vary slightly between tables as a result of information missed or refused on questionnaires.

Differences which are highlighted in the text are those which were statistically significant.

### a. Language knowledge

Of the 5111 adults interviewed in the survey 15 did not have English as their first language, and of these 2 gave Irish as a first language.

In all, 41% of those aged 16-69 said they knew at least one of the 9 languages about which they were asked. Language knowledge varied markedly with age dropping from 64% of those aged under 25 to less than a fifth of those aged 60 or over. Catholics and Protestants did not differ in the extent to which they had knowledge of at least one language.

Apart from the four languages presented in Table 1 - Irish, French, German and Spanish - none of the remaining 5 languages asked about on the questionnaire were known by more than 1% of the sample.

Eleven per cent of the sample said that they had some knowledge of Irish but this was restricted almost exclusively to Catholics (Table 2). Over a quarter of Catholics knew Irish compared with 2% of Protestants. Knowledge of Irish also varied considerably with age, 17% of those aged under 25 having some knowledge of Irish compared with 5% of those aged 60 to 69. Forty per cent of Catholics under the age of 25 said they had some knowledge of

Irish.

Of the commonly known languages, French was known by the largest proportion of people (35%) and among Catholics significantly more knew French (29%) than knew Irish (26%). Of those Catholics aged under 25, the group displaying the greatest proportion with a knowledge of Irish, 56% knew French in comparison with 40% knowing Irish.

Knowledge of Irish was lower in the East of the province (8%) than in either Belfast (12%) or the West (15%) (Table 3) but this reflects the religious composition of the population in these areas. For Catholics only, there was no difference in the proportion knowing Irish across the three areas of NI.

In general, language knowledge was higher in the East than in the other two areas. This was reflected, for Catholics, in French and Spanish, and for Protestants in French and German.

**b. Interest in further language knowledge**

Interest in having further language knowledge was high, 45% of respondents saying that they would be interested in knowing more of at least one language (Table 5). Like knowledge of the languages this interest was highest among the under 25's, 57% of whom were interested in further language knowledge (Table 4).

Interest in language was higher among Catholics than Protestants and notably so for those under 25. Sixty five per cent of Catholics in this age group expressed an interest in further language knowledge compared with 51% of Protestants.

Eleven per cent of the sample expressed an interest in further knowledge of Irish and, as with knowledge of Irish, this interest was restricted almost exclusively to Catholics. Just under a quarter of Catholics (23%) were interested in further knowledge of Irish compared with 3% of Protestants.

Interest in Irish was highest among Catholics under 25, just over a third of this group (34%) being interested in further knowledge of the language. In all, 17% of the under 25's in the sample were interested in further knowledge of Irish, interest declining with age to 5% of those aged 60 to 69.

In comparison with the other three languages shown in Table 5, a smaller proportion of the overall sample expressed an interest in further knowledge of Irish than in French or German. Overall more Catholics expressed an interest in knowledge of French (28%) than of Irish (23%), although for Catholics under 25 there was no significant difference in the proportion expressing an interest in Irish or French.

Catholics and Protestants did not differ in their interest in French or Spanish but significantly more Protestants (18%) than Catholics (11%) expressed an interest in German.

**c. Importance of language knowledge**

A high proportion of the respondents expressed the view that it was important to have a knowledge of at least one of the 9 languages included in the questionnaire. This view was expressed by 63% of the whole sample and 70% of the under 25's (Tables 5 and 6).

Twelve per cent of the sample thought it important to have a knowledge of Irish, with a fifth of the under 25's and a third of Catholics in this age group giving this response. A quarter of all Catholics thought it important to have a knowledge of Irish compared with 3% of all Protestants and 7% of Protestants under 25.

In comparison with the other languages fewer in the sample gave Irish as an important language to know (12%) than gave French (54%), German (32%) or Spanish (19%). While a quarter of Catholics gave Irish as an important language the same proportion gave that response for German and more than half gave French as an important language.

**d. Language study and qualifications**

Those respondents who said they had some knowledge of each language were asked whether they had ever studied (or were currently studying) that language in a formal setting (eg a language class) and/or informally.

Almost all (96%) of those who said they had some knowledge of Irish had studied the language either formally or informally (Table 8). Ninety per cent of those with a knowledge of Irish had studied the language at school or in a formal class and 16% had studied it informally eg with the aid of TV/radio broadcasts.

A similar high proportion (97%) of those with a knowledge of French had studied the language, but more had studied it formally and less informally than was the case for Irish.

In contrast to both Irish and French, a relatively high proportion of those who knew German (11%) or Spanish (23%) had never studied the language. Of those who had studied German or Spanish, formal

study was less common and informal study more common than for Irish or French.

Two thirds of those with a knowledge of Irish did not have any formal qualifications in the language (Table 9), significantly more than the proportion of those who knew French but held no formal qualifications in that language (56%).

e. **Language ability**

Current ability to use each language was self-assessed by respondents who said they knew the language, separately for each of four language skills - understanding, speaking, reading and writing. Only a few respondents found it impossible to assess their own language ability by reference to the ability levels and examples given on the 'Show cards' (see Appendix 3).

At least 39% of those with a knowledge of Irish considered they had no current ability in each of the four language skills (Tables 10 - 13) and more than half said they could not currently speak or write Irish. Just over half of those with a knowledge of Irish said they could understand simple spoken phrases/sentences and just under 10% said they had the ability to understand complicated speech eg a radio or TV broadcast. While more than half of those who knew Irish said they could not currently use it in conversation, 41% said they could carry on a simple conversation and 6% thought they could conduct a complex conversation in Irish.

These self-assessed ability levels for Irish were lower than those given by respondents who had a knowledge of French. For understanding and speaking the language the difference was mainly at the level of 'simple' ability. Two thirds of those with a knowledge of French said they could understand simple phrases compared

with 51% of those who knew Irish. Fifty five per cent of those with a knowledge of French said they could carry on a simple conversation in French compared with 41% of those who knew Irish. Similar proportions of those knowing French and Irish placed their ability to understand and speak the language at the highest level.

As an initial attempt to establish a composite measure of language ability from the self-assessed language skills, two different levels of language ability were derived. Elementary ability in the language was inferred for all individuals who said they had at least some ability in all four skills for that language. A higher degree of ability, 'Full' ability was inferred for those who placed their ability in the language at the highest level on all four skills. The proportions of respondents falling into these categories are shown for Irish, French and German in Table 14.

Using the lower measure of ability, just over a third of those with a knowledge of Irish had an elementary ability in the use of the language at the time of interview. This compares with just under half of those with a knowledge of French and almost 40% of those who knew German.

Five per cent of those with a knowledge of Irish placed their own ability at the highest level on all four language skills. This proportion was similar for those with a knowledge of French or German.

**f. Use of language at home**

Sixteen per cent of those with a knowledge of Irish said they used Irish occasionally, or more frequently, at home (Table 15) but this was significantly more than the proportion who used French (10%) or German (7%) at home.

g. Language knowledge of children aged 3 to 15 years

The parent or guardian with direct responsibility for children aged between 3 and 15 years was asked about the language knowledge of these children.

Forty per cent of parents said at least one of their children had some knowledge of a second language and significantly more Catholics (44%) than Protestants (37%) gave this response. A high proportion of parents (83%) thought that it was important that their children should know a second language and again this response was more frequent among Catholics (85%) than Protestants (81%) (Table 16).

Irish was considered an important language for children by just over a fifth of all parents (22%) and by almost half of Catholic parents (48%). A small proportion of Protestant parents (3%) thought it would be important for their children to have a knowledge of Irish.

A similarly high proportion (78%) of both Catholic and Protestant parents thought it important that their children should have a knowledge of French.

Table 17 presents, by age group of the children, and in relation to the religion of their parents, the proportion of children with a knowledge of Irish and the other 3 most common languages. Overall, 31% of children between the ages of 3 and 15 had some knowledge of a second language.

Eleven per cent of all children aged 3 to 15 had some knowledge of Irish. A third of Catholic children in this age group and more than half of those between 11 and 15 knew Irish. Ten per cent of

Catholic children under the age of 11 were said by their parents to have some knowledge of Irish.

As with adults, French was more commonly known than Irish by all children and by Catholic children of 11 to 15 years. However a substantial proportion of Catholic children under 11 (10%) had some knowledge of Irish while very few (2%) had any knowledge of French.

Of those children who did know Irish almost 70% were recorded as never using it at home while 24% used Irish at home occasionally and 5% used it daily in the home setting (Table 18).

## 9. Discussion

The results presented here provide a great deal of information on knowledge, interest, importance and ability in the Irish language of the population of NI as a whole. Information of this nature has not been available before for NI and a measure of the extent of knowledge of the Irish language has not been available since the census of 1911. By presenting the information on the Irish language alongside that for other commonly known second languages this paper has attempted to provide a meaningful context within which to assess the Irish language. Since only two of the sample of over 5000 interviewed gave Irish as their first language it can be taken that, for practical purposes, all of those indicating knowledge of Irish have learnt it as a second language and it is therefore appropriate to consider Irish in relation to French, German and Spanish. However, it must be accepted that the cultural significance attached to the Irish language by many of those learning it will be quite different from that associated with French or German and this survey did not address this issue.

It must be concluded, from the results presented, that Irish is a commonly known language in NI but that widespread knowledge of the language is restricted almost exclusively to Catholics. The measure of language knowledge employed in the survey was set deliberately low to include even casual familiarity with a language. However, the fact that almost all of those saying that they had some knowledge of Irish had in fact studied the language at some time suggests that this measure is an accurate reflection of the proportion of respondents who have had, at least at some time, more than just a familiarity with the language. This was true also of French, the most commonly known language, but, in contrast, many respondents stated that they knew German or Spanish without ever having studied the languages.

Surprisingly few of those with a knowledge of Irish had any formal qualification in the language given that almost all had studied it at some time. This result may reflect the fact that many may take Irish only in junior forms and do not continue with the language to secondary level examinations. It has been common practise for Irish to be compulsory for junior forms in many maintained sector secondary schools.

The knowledge of Irish was higher among the younger age groups in the sample being notably so for the under 25's. This was however true for all four languages considered and, in fact, French was more commonly known among young Catholics than was Irish.

An interest in having further knowledge of Irish was expressed by roughly the same proportion of the sample as stated knowledge of the language. This was the case also when respondents were asked about the importance of knowledge of the languages. The proportion of the overall sample and of Catholics who considered it important to have a knowledge of Irish was the same as that stating knowledge of the

language. This finding may result from the fact that the question on language importance was phrased in terms of importance to the respondent personally rather than in any general terms and as such the responses are internally quite consistent.

The methodology employed in the survey for assessing ability in the use of languages worked well. Respondents found little difficulty in placing their own ability within the frame provided for each of the four language skills and the results suggest that the methodology is capable of disaggregating ability levels to some degree. This is evidenced by the fact that, given the relatively low pitch of the first ability level, substantial proportions of those with a knowledge of each language considered themselves to have no current ability in relation to specific language skills.

The level of current ability to use Irish showed more than half of those with a knowledge of the language unable to converse in the language at all and well over a third unable to understand the spoken language. Although ability to use Irish seemed lower than that for French, still a substantial proportion of those knowing this language also placed themselves at 'no ability' on the language skills.

The difference in ability in the three most common languages is seen clearly in the composite measure of ability. At what was termed the 'elementary' level, ability in Irish was considerably less than that in French and much closer to that for German. Obviously it cannot be claimed that this measure of ability reflects in any direct way the ability of respondents to use a particular language. However, the fact that respondents had little difficulty with the self-assessment of their language skills would suggest that the measures have at least face validity in relation to the concrete examples used on the 'Show cards'. In all the proportion of respondents having 'elementary'

ability in Irish represents just over a third of those with a knowledge of Irish, just under a tenth of Catholics and 4% of all respondents. The highest level of composite language ability identified equal proportions of able respondents for all three languages, although a relatively small proportion of those with knowledge of the language.

The results presented for children between the ages of 3 and 15 suggest a similar pattern to those for adults. A large proportion of these children have some knowledge of Irish (a third of Catholic children) and almost half of the Catholic parents of children in this age band considered Irish an important language for their children to know. However, French is known by more Catholic children than is Irish and it is considered important by more Catholic parents than is Irish. Only among Catholic children under 11 do substantially more know Irish than any other language. It was not possible within the survey to assess the level of ability for such children.

Thus overall, although Irish is widely known, at least among Catholics, there is little evidence that the language is used widely. The results do show that both for adults and children Irish is more likely to be used in the home than either French, German or Spanish. The generally lower ability levels in Irish might suggest that Irish is little used or experienced outside the educational context within which it is learnt and that it is commonly learnt as a second language but not commonly used.

The results do however point up the fact that the Irish language is known, is of interest and is considered important by a substantial proportion of the Catholic community, and particularly its younger members,

Table 1 Knowledge of any EC language by age

All persons aged 16-69 years

Language	Age group			
	16-24	25-39	40-59	60-69
	Proportion having knowledge of language			
At least one language	64%	49%	29%	19%
Irish	17%	13%	8%	5%
French	60%	43%	21%	13%
German	10%	10%	7%	4%
Spanish	6%	5%	3%	2%
Base = 100%	997	1700	1603	811

Table 2 Knowledge of any EC language by age, religion and sex

All persons aged 16-69 years

	Total	Catholic	Protestant
	Proportion having knowledge of language		
Total			
At least one language	41%	39%	41%
Irish	11%	26%	2%
French	35%	29%	38%
German	8%	3%	11%
Spanish	4%	4%	4%
Base = 100 %	5111	1922	3023
Aged 16 to 24 years			
At least one language	64%	64%	63%
Irish	17%	40%	0%
French	60%	56%	62%
German	10%	5%	14%
Spanish	6%	7%	5%
Base = 100 %	997	422	549

Table 3 Variation in language knowledge by area and religion  
 All persons aged 16-69 years

	Total	Catholic	Protestant
Proportion having knowledge of language			
Belfast			
At least one language	35%	32%	35%
Irish	12%	25%	1%
French	30%	24%	32%
German	6%	5%	7%
Spanish	4%	3%	3%
Base = 100 %	886	391	454
East			
At least one language	45%	45%	45%
Irish	8%	28%	2%
French	40%	34%	41%
German	11%	4%	13%
Spanish	5%	8%	5%
Base = 100 %	2287	506	1699
West			
At least one language	38%	38%	38%
Irish	15%	26%	2%
French	31%	29%	34%
German	5%	2%	8%
Spanish	3%	2%	3%
Base = 100 %	1938	1025	870

Table 4 Interest in further knowledge of language by age  
All persons aged 16-69 years

Language	Age group			
	16-24	25-39	40-59	60-69
Proportion having an interest in further knowledge of language				
At least one language	57%	52%	40%	26%
Irish	17%	12%	9%	5%
French	35%	33%	26%	16%
German	20%	19%	12%	8%
Spanish	16%	15%	10%	5%
Base = 100%	997	1700	1603	811

Table 5 Interest in further knowledge of language by age and religion  
All persons aged 16-69 years

	Total	Catholic	Protestant
proportion having an interest in further knowledge of language			
Total			
At least one language	45%	48%	43%
Irish	11%	23%	3%
French	29%	28%	29%
German	15%	11%	18%
Spanish	12%	11%	13%
Base = 100 %	5111	1922	3023
Aged 16 to 24 years			
Any language	57%	65%	51%
Irish	17%	34%	4%
French	35%	37%	35%
German	20%	16%	22%
Spanish	16%	14%	17%
Base = 100 %	997	422	549

Table 6 Importance of knowledge of language by age

All persons aged 16-69 years

Language	Age group			
	16-24	25-39	40-59	60-69
Proportion considering it important to know a language				
At least one language	71%	67%	61%	49%
Irish	19%	12%	10%	7%
French	60%	59%	52%	42%
German	34%	36%	31%	24%
Spanish	26%	22%	16%	12%
Base = 100%	997	1700	1603	811

Table 7 Importance of knowledge of language by age

All persons aged 16-69 years

	Total	Catholic	Protestant
Proportion considering it important to know a language			
Total			
At least one language	63%	62%	64%
Irish	12%	25%	4%
French	54%	51%	56%
German	32%	25%	36%
Spanish	19%	19%	19%
Base = 100 %	5111	1922	3023
Aged 16 to 24 years			
At least one language	71%	74%	68%
Irish	19%	34%	7%
French	60%	59%	61%
German	34%	30%	36%
Spanish	26%	25%	25%
Base = 100 %	997	422	549

Table 8 Formal and Informal study of language by religion

All persons aged 16-69 years who had knowledge of each language

	Base = 100%	Formal study	Informal study	Formal or informal study
		1		
		Proportion who had ever or were currently studying the language		
<b>Irish</b>				
Total	560	90%	16%	96%
Catholic	499	92%	16%	98%
Protestant	48	67%	21%	85%
<b>French</b>				
Total	1778	95%	11%	97%
Catholic	559	95%	12%	97%
Protestant	1143	95%	10%	97%
<b>German</b>				
Total	415	69%	29%	89%
Catholic	65	65%	34%	89%
Protestant	325	70%	28%	89%
<b>Spanish</b>				
Total	207	47%	37%	77%
Catholic	74	62%	27%	85%
Protestant	117	38%	41%	70%

1

The proportions do not sum to 100 because of overlap in responses

Table 9 Language qualifications by religion

All persons aged 16-69 with some knowledge of each language

		Level of qualification				
		None	Degree	A'level	O'level	Other
		Proportion with each qualification				
base = 100%						
<b>Irish</b>						
Total.....	560	66%	1%	3%	19%	10%
Catholic....	499	65%	1%	3%	20%	10%
Protestant..	48	*	*	*	*	*
<b>French</b>						
Total.....	1778	56%	1%	5%	32%	6%
Catholic....	559	56%	0%	5%	31%	8%
Protestant..	1143	56%	2%	4%	33%	6%
<b>German</b>						
Total.....	415	73%	1%	3%	17%	4%
Catholic....	65	*	*	*	*	*
Protestant..	325	72%	2%	3%	18%	5%

\* Base too small to provide percentage

Table 10 Level of ability in understanding the spoken language  
 All persons aged 16-69 with some knowledge of each language

	base = 100%	Ability to understand the language		
		no ability/ don't know	simple ability	complex ability
		percentage giving each ability level		
<b>Irish</b>	560	39%	51%	9%
<b>French</b>	1778	27%	66%	7%
<b>German</b>	415	32%	59%	9%

Table 11 Level of ability in speaking the language  
 All persons aged 16-69 with some knowledge of each language

	base = 100%	Ability to speak the language		
		no ability/ don't know	simple ability	complex ability
		percentage giving each ability level		
<b>Irish</b>	560	53%	41%	6%
<b>French</b>	1778	40%	55%	5%
<b>German</b>	415	45%	49%	6%

Table 12 Level of ability in reading the language

All persons aged 16-69 with some knowledge of each language

	base = 100%	Ability to read the language		
		no ability/ don't know	simple ability	complex ability
		percentage giving each ability level		
<b>Irish</b>	560	43%	46%	10%
<b>French</b>	1778	29%	59%	13%
<b>German</b>	415	34%	53%	12%

Table 13 Level of ability in writing the language

All persons aged 16-69 with some knowledge of each language

	base = 100%	Ability to write the language		
		no ability/ don't know	simple ability	complex ability
		percentage giving each ability level		
<b>Irish</b>	560	57%	35%	8%
<b>French</b>	1778	44%	44%	12%
<b>German</b>	415	53%	37%	10%

Table 14 Level of composite ability in language by religion  
 All persons aged 16-69 who had some knowledge of each language

	Elementary Ability					
	French		Irish		German	
	Base = 100%	Able	Base = 100%	Able	Base = 100%	Able
Total.....	1778	48%	560	34%	415	39%
Catholic.....	559	47%	499	36%	65	*
Protestant...	1143	47%	48	*	325	38%

  

	Full Ability					
	French		Irish		German	
	Base = 100%	Able	Base = 100%	Able	Base = 100%	Able
Total.....	1778	4%	560	5%	415	5%
Catholic.....	559	5%	499	5%	65	*
Protestant...	1143	3%	48	*	325	5%

\* Base too small to provide percentage

Table 15 Use of language at home  
 Persons aged 16-69 who had some knowledge of each language

	Base = 100%	Use the language at home		
		Never / can't say	Occasionally	Daily
		percentage giving each response		
<b>Irish</b>	560	84%	15%	1%
<b>French</b>	1778	91%	9%	1%
<b>German</b>	415	93%	6%	1%

Table 16 Languages considered important for children by parents

All persons aged 16-69 years with responsibility for children aged 3-15 years

	Total	Catholic	Protestant
Proportion considering each language important			
At least one language	83%	85%	81%
Irish	22%	48%	3%
French	78%	78%	78%
German	43%	33%	51%
Spanish	26%	27%	24%
Base = 100 %	1233	525	667

Table 17 Knowledge of languages by children aged 3-15 years by religion of parent

All children aged 3-15 years

Age group and language knowledge of children	Religion of parent		
	Total	Catholic	Protestant
Proportion having knowledge of language			
<b>Total</b>			
At least one language	31%	47%	41%
Irish	11%	33%	--
French	25%	38%	40%
German	3%	2%	6%
Spanish	2%	4%	2%
Base = 100 %	2107	454	577
<b>Aged 3 to 10 years</b>			
At least one language	6%	10%	7%
Irish	3%	10%	-
French	3%	2%	5%
German	1%	-	2%
Spanish	0%	-	1%
Base = 100 %	1291	198	277
<b>Aged 11 to 15 years</b>			
At least one language	71%	76%	72%
Irish	24%	51%	-
French	66%	67%	72%
German	7%	4%	10%
Spanish	4%	7%	3%
Base = 100 %	816	256	300

Table 18 Use of language at home by children aged 3-15 years

All children aged 3-15 who had some knowledge of each language

Religion of parent	Base = 100%	Use the language at home		
		Never	Occasionally	Daily
percentage giving each response				
<b>Total</b>				
Irish	237	69%	24%	5%
French	587	75%	21%	2%
<b>Catholic</b>				
Irish	232	69%	25%	5%
French	174	80%	18%	1%
<b>Protestant</b>				
Irish	--	--	--	--
French	231	67%	28%	3%

## ANNEX 1

### The Survey Design and Method

The language questionnaire was included as part of the education section of the 1987 Continuous Household Survey (CHS). Full details of the design and methodology of this survey can be found in PPRU Monitor 1/88 and earlier issues.

The CHS samples and interviews households throughout NI over a 12 month period. Addresses are allocated to interviewers and completed on a monthly basis to ensure a representative spread over the calendar year. The addresses are selected from the Rating Valuation list in such a way as to generate a representative sample of households from the whole of NI.

The language section was included in the 1987 survey for which fieldwork was completed between January and December of that year. An effective sample of 2971 household was interviewed during that period, with a response rate of 70% over the year. The language section was administered to all adults aged between 16 and 69 years in the interviewed households.

### Area

The sample design for the 1987 CHS was a stratified, simple random sample design. Simple random samples were selected within three regional strata: Belfast - the District Council area, the remainder of the province split into East and West along District Council boundaries. This sample design generates a sample representative of NI as a whole and permits sub-regional analysis as presented within this report.

## Religion

Religious denomination was recorded in the survey and recoded for analysis purposes as follows: Catholic - Roman Catholic; Protestant - other christian religions; Other - other non-christian denominations, no denomination, unwilling to answer the question. In the tables presented in this report those code as 'Other' religion are included in totals but not shown separately because of the small number in this category. Of those included in the main analyses of the report 3% were coded as 'Other' religion.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams G.B. (1964). The Last Language Census in Northern Ireland. in: Ulster Dialects: An Introductory Symposium. Belfast: Ulster Folk Museum
- Adamson I. (1982). The Identity of Ulster. Belfast: Pretani
- Bord na Gaeilge (1988). The Irish Language in a Changing Society: shaping the future. Dublin: Bord na Gaeilge
- Census of Population of Ireland 1981 (1985). Volume 6 Irish language  
Dublin: Central Statistical Office
- Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research (1975). Report.  
Dublin: Stationery Office
- Conradh na Gaeilge (1986). Twinbrook Irish survey report.  
Belfast: Conradh na Gaeilge.
- Corkery D. (1968). The Fortunes of the Irish Language. Dublin: Mercier.
- De Freine S. (1978). The Great Silence. Dublin: Mecier.
- Edwards J.R. (1977). Ethnic Identity and Bilingual Education. in Giles H., Language, Ethnicity and Intergroup Relations. Eur. Mon. Soc. Psychol. 13.
- Edwards J.R. (1983). The Irish language: an annotated Bibliography of sociolinguistic publications 1772-1982.
- Edwards J.R. (1984) Irish and English in Ireland. in Trudgill P (ed) Language in the British Isles. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fishman J.A. (1977). Language and Ethnicity. in Giles H. Language, Ethnicity and Intergroup Relations. Eur. Mon. Soc. Psychol. 13.
- Glyn Lewis E. (1981) Bilingualism and Bilingual education. Oxford: Pergamon
- Horner, Walsh and Harrington (1987). Population in Ireland : a census atlas  
Dublin: Department of Geography, University College
- O hAdhmaill, F. (1985) Report of a survey of the Irish language in West Belfast.  
Department of Social Administration, University of Ulster.
- O Glaisne R. (1981). Irish and the Protestant tradition. The Crane Bag, 5, pp33-44
- O Murchu M (1985). The Irish Language. Dublin: Stationery Office
- O Riagain P. (ed) (1988a) Language Planning in Ireland. Int'l. J. Soc. Ling., 70, pp. 5-9

- O Riagain P. (1988b). Bilingualism in Ireland 1973-1983: an overview of national sociolinguistic surveys. Int'l. J. Soc. Ling., 70, pp29-51.
- Pritchard R.M. (1982). Modern language teaching in Northern Ireland. Teangeolas, 14, pp6-11.
- Tovey H. (1988) The role of Bord na Gaeilge. Int'l. J. Soc. Ling, 70, p53-68.
- Trudgill P. (Ed.) (1984). Language in the British Isles. London: Cambridge University Press.