

Irish vs. Gaelic

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

At the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, Irish was designated the “national language” in the constitution. In 1937, a revised Constitution designated Irish as “the first official language” because it is “the national language” while English was recognized as “a second language.” However, in all practicality, the Ireland of today English is spoken first, Polish second and Irish third. Irish is a Celtic language spoken mainly along the Atlantic west coast of Ireland, primarily in seven counties (Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Kerry, Cork, Waterford, and Meath). Small pockets of communities along the west coast still speak Irish today as their main language. There are television and radio stations dedicated to the Irish language.

There are three main dialects of Irish: Munster, Connacht, and Ulster. Ireland adopted “The Official Standard,” known as “An Caighdeán Oifigiúil,” which makes all three dialects the standard norm which is a compulsory part of the curriculum for primary and secondary school students in Ireland.

Irish is a member of the Indo-European family branch of Celtic languages. Irish is one of six surviving Celtic languages, the others being Welsh, Cornish, Breton, Scottish Gaelic, and Manx. Ancestors came to Ireland from the European mainland with the Celtic tribe known as “The Gaels.” Scholars place the approximate time of the Gaelic migration to Ireland anywhere from 1200 B.C. to 2600 B.C.

The earliest form of written Irish is “Primitive Irish,” can only be found in fragments such as personal names written in the interesting alphabet of lines and slashes known as Ogham. For the most part, the early Gaelic tribes had little interest in writing their language, as their histories, genealogies, and literature were transmitted orally.

The form of written Irish known as “Old Irish” first appeared in Latin manuscripts in the 6th century. The early Christian monks used a specialized form of the Latin alphabet (the same alphabet in which English is written) and produced some of the earliest manuscripts in the Irish language. To give you an idea as to just how ancient this language is, it actually has the oldest vernacular (the language or dialect spoken by ordinary people) literature in Western Europe.

During the “Middle Irish” period (from the 10th through the 12th centuries), The Irish language spread into Scotland and the Isle of Man, as the Gaels continued to migrate. Eventually the “Gaelic” languages of Scotland and the Isle of Man evolved into separate languages, known today as “Gaelic” (in Scotland) and “Manx” (in the Isle of Man).

The Irish language was brutally suppressed by English colonists, who considered it a threat to all things English. Its decline under English rule began in the 17th century. The most serious blow to the language was the Great Famine of the 19th century, in which nearly 25% of the Irish population, almost all of them Irish speakers, died or were forced to emigrate.

To Americans, an Irishman referring to the Irish language as “Irish” might sound a bit peculiar. Americans may ask “Don’t you mean ‘Gaelic’?” The answer is “yes...and no!” Technically, the word “Gaelic” can refer to any of three Celtic languages: Irish Gaelic, Scottish Gaelic, or Manx. They are very similar, and all three are of Gaelic origin, but they are considered to be different languages. What Americans call Gaelic – the Irish call Irish. If you are speaking in the Irish language, you call the language Gaeilge (Gail-gyuh). If you are speaking about people in France, we say in English that they speak French but if you are speaking in the French language you call that language Français. So, we speak about Irish in English, but you speak about Gaeilge (Gail-gyuh), the name of the language in Irish.

On a good day, if you are standing on the coast of Northern Ireland you will see across the sea the tip of Scotland. Many centuries ago, the language of the Gaels, the language of the Irish spread across into Scotland as the Irish moved across the sea. So, at one point, Scotland and

Ireland basically had the same language with different dialects and accents. So down in Kerry the accent is different from Galway. Further north in Donegal it will change from village to village. If we jump the sea to Scotland the language and accents change as well. These are gradual changes over centuries into what today we call a different language. So today we refer to the language as Gaelic in Scotland and the language Irish in Ireland.

When you are speaking in the Gaelic language in Scotland you call the language Gàidhlig (gaa-lik). You see it is very similar to Gaeilge (Gail-gyuh). So, to the Irish the common usage of terms to say is Irish in Ireland and Gaelic in Scotland.

While there is technically nothing wrong with referring to Irish as “Gaelic,” doing so can cause confusion. For example, resource materials (such as dictionaries, web-based maps, etc.) that say “Gaelic” on them will be for Scottish Gaelic. Resource materials for the Irish language will simply say “Irish.” That being said, if you are an American and you come to Ireland and you ask your tour guide about the Gaelic language they would probably be surprised if you called it the Irish language. So, to compensate, what many Irish do when referring to their language (when talking with Americans) is to refer to the Irish language as Irish Gaelic. If you just said Gaelic, it might not be very clear – are you speaking about the language of Scotland or in Ireland or perhaps both?

The Irish will ***not*** use that term Irish Gaelic among themselves because it would not make sense. On the other hand, Scottish people do call their language “Gaelic.”

To be clear, the Irish speak Irish in Ireland as well as English. Irish is a Celtic language. The people of Scotland speak Gaelic, a very similar language. So, for absolute clarity, we can refer to the Irish language as Irish Gaelic and can refer to the Scottish Celtic language as Scots Gaelic. I hope this helps explain the differences with Irish versus Gaelic.

I cannot speak for the average American, but the AOH is an Irish fraternal organization that is comprised of Irish Americans. I think the least we can do as members of the Dooley Division is use ‘Irish’ correct terminology or at least say Irish Gaelic.