



Neoliberal globalisation and language minoritisation: Lessons from Ireland 2008–18

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ABSTRACT

The propensity for macro-economic developments to affect the vitality of endangered languages is often alluded to in relevant literature, but rarely explicated in any great detail. Attempting to help rectify this, the case of Irish in the wake of the 2008 economic crash and “Great Recession” which followed is discussed. In addition to examining the effects of austerity on Irish-language institutions and policies, ethnographic data from some of the strongest remaining Irish-speaking communities – collectively known as the “Gaeltacht” – are presented, illustrating some micro-level consequences of macro-level developments. The effects of the recession on the Gaeltacht labour market are discussed, as are issues of migration and community resistance. It is argued that neoliberalism fundamentally conflicts with revitalising minoritised languages.

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1. Introduction

The propensity of economic forces to drive language loss and extinction is something frequently alluded to in language planning and policy (LPP) literature. Grenoble and Whaley, for instance, state that economics “may be the single strongest force influencing the fate of endangered languages” (1998, 52), and similar sentiments have been expressed by many others.¹ As Austin and Sallabank (2011, 21) have observed, however, very few authors have explained how precisely macro-level economic developments affect the fate of endangered languages. This article moves towards addressing this deficit by examining the consequences of the 2008 economic crash and subsequent “Great Recession” (Smith et al., 2011) for the Irish language, thereby illustrating the link between economics and language vitality in a way that has rarely been attempted. With the 2008 crash having been a crisis of neoliberalism (Gamble, 2014), this period offers a valuable opportunity to examine how this dominant economic orthodoxy operates as a form of “covert language policy” (Piller and Cho, 2013, 23). Ireland’s widespread adoption of neoliberal policies in recent decades – and the intensification of this process post-2008 (Mercille and Murphy, 2015) – makes it an important case study of the interplay between macro-level economic forces and language vitality at the meso- and micro-levels.

In order to contextualise the policy environment in which Irish-language policy was so rapidly reformed post-2008, this article will initially offer a discussion of neoliberal globalisation and how it has affected Ireland in recent decades. Some of the most significant reforms to both “overt” and “covert” language policy (Shohamy, 2006) will then be examined, and the

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¹ E.g. Baker (2011), 62; Crystal (2000), 175–6; Edwards (1984), 304; Kaplan and Baldauf (1997), 280; McColl Millar (2005), 26; Nelde et al. (1996), 7–11; Nettle and Romaine (2000), 126–47; Ó Murchú (1996), 39; Ó Riagáin (2001), 206; O’Rourke and Pujolar (2013), 54; Phillipson (2008); Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), 436–76; UNESCO et al., 2003, 5; Williams (1991), 4.

disproportionate nature of the cuts which Irish-language support schemes received will be described. This serves to illustrate the “rollback” of state intervention widely understood as a key aspect of neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell, 2002). Ethnographic data gathered between 2014 and 2016 in the language’s heartland communities (collectively known as the “Gaeltacht”) will then be presented to highlight the effects of neoliberal reforms on community and language vitality therein. The article concludes with a discussion of some of the ways in which Gaeltacht communities resisted austerity – both by challenging state policies via political agitation, and also, more unusually, through appealing for aid from “corporate social responsibility grants”. It is argued that this tendency amounts to communities internalising the neoliberal view of state responsibility (or lack thereof) towards peripheral communities, and represents a dangerous precedent unlikely to bode well for the future of the Gaeltacht.

Although constitutionally the first official language of the Republic of Ireland, Irish is categorised as “definitely endangered” by UNESCO (2018). According to the 2016 census, 73,803 people speak Irish daily outside the education system, from a population of 4,757,956 (CSO, 2017a, 8, 66). Unusually for a minoritised language, Irish has received significant state support over the last century or so – a result of the major influence that cultural nationalism had on those who led the anti-colonial struggle, many of whom became leaders when the three quarters of the island gained political independence from Britain in 1922. After 1922, Irish thus enjoyed a level of protection much greater than might be expected considering the size of its speech community. This support was particularly important for Gaeltacht communities, which are overwhelmingly located in poorer, peripheral areas and were therefore in great need of economic support to help reduce outmigration. While state commitment to language revitalisation began to wane from the 1970s onwards (Ó Riagáin, 1997, 23–25), it remained very significant by international standards (Fishman, 1991, 122). As will be demonstrated, however, the 2008–18 period saw the strength of this support greatly weakened. Indeed, as discussed below in section four, capital expenditure on Irish almost a decade after the Great Recession began was less than one seventh of what it had been in 2008, despite the end of “the time of cuts” being announced in 2018 (Irish Times, 2018a).

In exploring why austerity hit the Irish language so severely, this paper argues that there is a fundamental tension between neoliberalism and language revitalisation, leaving threatened language communities in a deeply precarious situation when they are governed by states committed to this hegemonic economic model.

2. Neoliberalism and language planning – fundamental tensions

Neoliberalism is the term typically used to refer to the present phase of capitalism. It was originally developed as an ideology by economists such as Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman, who claimed the state should only intervene in the market in order to support capital (Hayek, 2001 [1944], 18, 2011 [1960], 331; Mirowski, 2013, 40). This favouring of pro-capital intercessions is a point often missed by those who conflate neoliberalism with related-but-distinct economic theories such as free market libertarianism, which argues for a much more total withdrawal of state involvement in the market. While originally theorised between the 1940s and 1960s, it was with the “stagflation” crisis of the 1970s that neoliberalism began to emerge as the global force it is today. In response to this period of turmoil, governments sought an alternative model to the Keynesian social democratic consensus which had dominated in the developed west for some 30 years in the wake of the Second World War (Gamble, 2009). In addition to allowing states to overcome stagflation, neoliberalism was also an expedient ideology for an international capitalist class who felt their power threatened by decades of redistributive social welfare policies, the emergence of a multitude of anti-systemic movements across the globe throughout the 1960s, and a rate of profit that was falling globally (Harvey, 2007, 22).

Although the implementation of neoliberalism on a global scale has been uneven and contested, it is fundamental to the process of globalisation which has occurred in recent decades (Gamble, 2009, 67). As Harvey (2007, 22) notes, it has become “a hegemonic discourse with pervasive effects on ways of thought and political economic practices to the point where it is now part of the common sense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world” (see also Gramsci, 1992).

Crucially for those involved in language revitalisation, neoliberalism claims to stand in opposition to social planning, of which language planning is, of course, a form. Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom*, a foundational neoliberal text, consists almost entirely of a diatribe against economic (and, by extension, social) planning, contending that “planning leads to dictatorship because dictatorship is the most effective instrument of coercion and, as such, essential if central planning on a large scale is to be possible” (2006 [1944], 74). Hayek, however, reserves his greatest ire for those forms of economic planning which are redistributive in nature (2006 [1944], 36). While slightly different from the dynamic often critiqued by neoliberals in which a wealthy minority have their wealth expropriated to support a larger, less well-off group, attempts at reversing language shift require significant investment, and almost by definition, the transfer of resources from dominant to marginalised groups.

Furthermore, as Spolsky has pointed out, “[i]t is changes in society that affect linguistic diversity, so that it is social policy rather than language policy that is needed to maintain it” (2004, 8; see also Cooper, 1989, 1; Crystal, 2000, 154; Fishman, 1991; Romaine, 2006, 456). Neoliberalism, however, is a firmly individualist ideology (cf. Thatcher’s famous “there is no such thing as society” statement, itself based on Hayek, 1988, 112–9) and can therefore be seen as inherently contraindicated to the type of planning required for language revitalisation.

Further to the various other egregious social consequences neoliberalism has been shown to cause (Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2006; Standing, 2014; Verhaeghe, 2014), through opposing state intervention in areas which do not facilitate the needs of capital, the adoption of neoliberal policies thus has “profound implications for the orthodox understanding of language planning” (Williams and Morris, 2000, 180), as will be seen to have been the case in Ireland in recent years.

3. Neoliberal peaks and troughs in the Republic of Ireland

In an attempt to overcome the country's long history of underdevelopment – itself the result of centuries of colonisation (Coakley, 2012) – the Republic of Ireland's ruling class enthusiastically adopted neoliberal policies from the early 1990s onwards. The ensuing period of high economic growth (known as the “Celtic Tiger”) saw Ireland come to be seen internationally as a paragon of the virtues of neoliberal economics (Kirby, 2010).

The 2008 crash saw the onset of the second most severe crisis in the history of industrial capitalism (Gamble, 2014), however, with disastrous consequences for Ireland. Being heavily integrated into the global financial market, the Irish economy was extremely exposed when the international banking system veered towards collapse in autumn 2008. In an excellent example of the sort of pro-capital interventions that neoliberalism favours, the state bailed out the banking system, an action which cost Ireland's inhabitants €70 billion, described by the International Monetary Fund as “the costliest banking crisis in advanced economies since at least the Great Depression” (Laeven and Valencia, 2012, 20). Indeed, so severe was the crisis that between 2010 and 2013 supervision of the Irish economy was taken over by the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the European Commission, collectively known as the “Troika”. A 2016 report for the IMF observed that “[t]he extent and rapidity of Ireland's fiscal deterioration in the latter part of the 2000s was virtually unprecedented among post war industrial country experiences” (Donovan, 2016, 11).

Although the Irish economy returned to growth by 2016, the effects of austerity were still clear a decade after the crash, with state spending remaining 10% below 2008 levels come 2018 (Taft, 2018). Similar to the pattern visible internationally (Crouch, 2011), the post-2008 period saw a rapid intensification of neoliberalisation in Ireland (Mercille and Murphy, 2015), including, as demonstrated below, Irish-language policy.

As a result of the policies of recent decades, Ireland has been consistently ranked one of the most globalised countries in the world. Indeed, it was placed second on the 2017 index of globalisation, which collates economic, political and cultural data for all countries, including cross-border financial transactions and information flows, capital restrictions and international treaties ratified (KOF, 2017). Mufwene's assertion that “[t]he higher the local globalization index, the stronger the tendency toward monolingualism” (2016, 132) is thus most pertinent to the fate of Irish. Accordingly, Romaine has claimed that “Irish warrants our gaze for what it may tell us of the fate that globalization portends for the survival of the world's linguistic diversity” (2008, 13), an opportunity which this article helps explore.

4. Methodology

According with contemporary trends in ethnography (Ortner, 2010, 219), a combination of document analysis (language legislation, government budgets, etc.) and participant observation was used for this study. During over eight months of fieldwork, 52 participants were interviewed in Galway and Donegal (in the mid-west and North-west of Ireland respectively). All research sites are classed as “category A” Gaeltacht communities, wherein over two-thirds of the community speak Irish daily outside the education system. According to this typology, relatively stable category A areas contrast with categories B (where 44–66% of people speak Irish daily, and where language shift is currently taking place) and C, where under 44% of people are daily speakers of Irish, and the language is essentially moribund (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2007).

Interviewees were purposefully sampled in order to gain as broad an overview of social positions within the Gaeltacht as possible. All age cohorts from young adults to pensioners were interviewed, as were people active in a wide range of industries in the private and public sector, from civil and public servants to factory owners and the unemployed.

Participant observation was conducted at community events and in local businesses, and, where instructive, linguistic landscape data were also documented. This multifaceted approach allowed for effective triangulation, detailing both the extent of austerity measures and people's experience thereof.

5. Austerity and Irish-language institutions

With the Irish economy being hit so severely during the crash, the Irish state – like many others – resorted to a punitive programme of austerity, cutting public spending drastically. Along with the Troika's *Memorandum of Understanding* (IMF, 2010), a key document in directing policy at this time was the *Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes* – popularly known as *An Bord Snip Nua* (“The New Snip Board”). Despite its significance for the field, this document has received very little attention in recent discussions of Irish LPP (see, however, Ó Murchú, 2014). The report included drastic recommendations for cost savings relating to the Gaeltacht and a huge number of other areas. While space does not permit a detailed documentation of the full extent of the cuts to Gaeltacht institutions implemented on the recommendation of this report, some particularly striking examples are discussed below.

With its claim that “differential schemes aimed at Gaeltacht areas are not justifiable” (McCarthy et al., 2009b, 41), *An Bord Snip Nua* was unambiguous about the approach the state should take. Accordingly, it recommended the Department of Community, Regional and Gaeltacht Affairs (which also oversees language policy outside the Gaeltacht) “should be closed and its various functions either redistributed to other Government Departments, or discontinued as appropriate”, due to it having “a relatively lower priority in terms of the existing pressures on the public finances” (McCarthy et al., 2009a, 37). This was the only department whose outright closure was recommended.

While not ultimately abolished, the department did have over 70% of its budget cut between 2008 and 2011 (Irish Times, 2016; Ó Murchú, 2014, 210). In stark contrast to the great majority of policies concerning the Gaeltacht which languish unimplemented for years, this enormous cut (from €105m to €30m) was implemented significantly faster than the six years initially proposed (Department of Finance, 2010, 101). This reduction had not been restored by 2018 (Byrne, 2018), and although the 2018 budget saw the department receive €2.5m extra to spend on Irish and the Gaeltacht, this was just half the additional €5m that their pre-budget submission to the Department of Finance claimed was necessary to meet requirements (Tuairisc.ie, 2018). Furthermore, as Byrne (2018) demonstrates, total capital expenditure on the Gaeltacht and islands by 2017 was over seven times lower than in 2008, having fallen from €75.7m to €10.9m during this time.

Another key institution that suffered severe cutbacks was *Údarás na Gaeltachta*. Founded in 1979 as a result of a campaign for a democratic authority for the Gaeltacht, the *Údarás* nowadays oversees economic development and language planning. In 2008 it had a budget of €25.5 million. By 2015, however, this had been cut by 73.7%, to €6.7 million (*Údarás na Gaeltachta*, 2010, 8; 2016, 11). In contrast, comparable institutions that have similar remits, but which operate outside of the Gaeltacht, were not targeted in anything like the same manner. Enterprise Ireland lost just 6.6% of its funding and the Industrial Development Authority received an increase of over 47% during the same period (Enterprise Ireland, 2009, 48, 2016, 42; IDA, 2010, 36, 2016, 33), as might be expected in a recession when the creation of employment is a priority. Furthermore, despite the *Údarás* having been set up in response to calls for a democratic body, the election to appoint members to its board was abolished as a further cost saving measure (Ó Giollagáin, 2014, 112; Ó Ceallaigh, forthcoming).

Although neither the department for the Gaeltacht nor the *Údarás* were ultimately abolished as proposed, so severe were the cuts they received that they amounted to implementation in all but name. While outright closure of these key institutions would have been a very visible attack likely to provoke resistance, by leaving them open, albeit in a drastically weakened form, the state likely pre-emptively prevented a stronger anti-austerity movement forming in the Gaeltacht (see, however, section 8). Following Klein (2007), however, it seems clear that in times of economic turmoil, major rationalisation can be implemented in a way not otherwise possible, as people are simply too engaged with the exigencies of survival to be able to be fully informed about the intricacies of language policy and its funding.

While not emerging as a result of the recommendations of *An Bord Snip Nua*, the rationalisation by funding body *Foras na Gaeilge* of the 19 voluntary sector organisations that promoted Irish pre-2014 was a further blow to the language. Having had their own funding cut by 38% between 2007 and 2018 (Conradh na Gaeilge, 2017, 8-9), in 2014 *Foras na Gaeilge* disbanded 14 of these 19 organisations with immediate effect. While space does not permit a full discussion of this extremely fraught process here, Ó Murchú (2014, 237-96) offers an exhaustive account of the affair (see also Ó Ceallaigh, 2019, 107-12).

The extent of such cuts highlights the importance of examining “covert” language policy in addition to “overt” language policy documents, as Shohamy (2006) reminds us. As Lowi (1964) famously noted, too many assessments of public policy focus on specific policy makers rather than the environment in which they operate, and it is thus imperative that the effects of austerity be understood when Irish-language policy since 2008 is being discussed. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a policy environment more inhospitable to Irish than that of the Great Recession, with massive cuts to state spending inevitably severely impacting a sector almost entirely dependent on public funding.

In addition to these cutbacks, it is important to note that the two most significant developments in Irish-language LPP of the last several decades, the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030* and the *Gaeltacht Act 2012* (Government of Ireland, 2010, 2012), were each introduced while the economy was under the direction of the Troika, a fact which even literature most critical of these policies fails to address (e.g. Ó Giollagáin, 2014). Unsurprisingly, each of these documents is deeply problematic in terms of both content and implementation, with them amounting to a stark neoliberalisation of overt Irish LPP. The *Gaeltacht Act* in particular has been particularly controversial, with it both abolishing the election for *Údarás na Gaeltachta* and requiring under-resourced voluntary committees to prepare language plans in order to maintain official Gaeltacht status (Ó Giollagáin, 2014; Ó Ceallaigh, forthcoming). The Great Recession can thus be seen as having punctuated the generally incrementalist pattern of change that prevailed in Irish LPP pre-2008, and led to the adoption of a significantly more neoliberal language policy regime in the years since 2008.

6. Effects of the crash on the Gaeltacht labour market

In common with Ireland as a whole, the Gaeltacht labour market was hit severely by the increase in unemployment in the years after 2008. As discussed below, this increase was key to driving high levels of emigration. In addition to factors detailed elsewhere (Ó Ceallaigh, forthcoming), several features of this unemployment crisis are of relevance to those interested in language vitality, despite having received little attention so far in the literature.

In November 2017 it was reported that of the 516 buildings *Údarás na Gaeltachta* owns, 106 were empty, with 81 of these having been vacated during the previous decade (Tuairisc.ie, 2017a). 45 such units were in Donegal, where these “white elephants” stand alongside abandoned pubs and hotels, providing a very visible illustration of the effects of the recession on the community.

Interviewees often explicitly told me that this lack of social vitality makes the area less appealing to either live in or visit than it could be. Furthermore, I repeatedly heard that such dereliction has had a detrimental impact on community pride and confidence. This is surely a source of concern in light of Dorian’s arguments about the importance of such sentiments for “withstand[ing] pressures for ancestral language abandonment” and the ability of economic prosperity to foster the development of a middle class with the “social self-confidence to insist on traditional identity and heritage” (1999, 12-3). As a language planner working in Donegal stated:

D: [T]iomáin tríd [an baile ina mbíonn sé ag obair] agus tá dromchla uafásach ar an mbóthar . . . Tá níl 's agam cén céatadán ach tá céatadán maith de na foirgnimh dúnta . . . Déanann sin dochar do mhúinín an phobail agus do bhród an phobail. Bhfuil 's agat ní baile mór atá ann agus leath de na foirgnimh sin dúnta . . . Dá mba rud é go raibh mé in ann spreagadh a dhéanamh agus bród na ndaoine a ardú, sin [an] freagra . . . Ach arís ní, níl an teanga, níl réiteach na faidhbe cineál . . . in a bubble féin ansin . . . Is fáinne fí atá ann, spreagann sé an seanadhearcadh den Ghaeilge, teanga an bhochtanais . . . má chloiseann an páiste seanathair ag rá go bhfuil nasc idir an Ghaeilge agus an bochtanas agus ansin nuair a fheiceann an duine óg suíomh an bhaile . . . Níl daoine óga na linne seo tiubh . . . Feiceann siad an stuif seo agus déanann siad na nascanna idir fíorscéal an bhaile agus an teanga atá ceaptha le bheith anseo.

D: Drive through [the town in which the interviewee works] and there's a terrible surface on the road . . . There's I dunno what percentage but a good percentage of the buildings closed . . . That damages the community's confidence and pride. Y'know it's not a big town, half of those buildings closed up . . . If I could inspire the community and increase their sense of pride, that's the answer . . . But again the, the language isn't, the solution to the problem isn't . . . in its own bubble . . . It's a vicious circle, it encourages the old view of Irish as the language of poverty . . . if a child hears their grandfather saying that there's a link between Irish and poverty and then when the young person sees the state of the town . . . Young people today aren't stupid . . . They see this stuff and they make the links between the true story of the town and the language that's meant to be here.

Having been impoverished and marginalised for many years, community confidence levels were likely quite low in much of the Gaeltacht even pre-2008, with this possibly being a reason why entrepreneurship levels were so low there (Ní Bhrádaigh, 2007). In line with the opinions of the interviewee quoted above, however, it would seem probable that the decline in prosperity post-crash further damaged the “social self-confidence” of those living in such communities, as well as their loyalty to the language.

The sharp decline of the main language-focused industry, the *coláistí samhraidh* (“summer colleges”) likely further contributed to this sense of disempowerment. For over a hundred years these colleges have brought large numbers of secondary school students to Gaeltacht communities, providing a significant source of income particularly to women, who are otherwise marginalised by the traditional economy of rural Ireland (Denvir, 2002, 48). Language promotion body Conradh na Gaeilge (2017, 6–7) claims the industry to be worth some €20 million annually. While the economic benefit of such colleges is most significant, the linguistic consequences are also of immense importance, with such income making the importance of maintaining Irish in the community most apparent.

Unfortunately, however, the recession led to a sharp decline in attendance at these colleges. As an employee of the organisation which oversees the industry told me:

P: Feictear dom go raibh titim thubaisteach, dáiríre. Agus ar bhealach go raibh an earnáil seo i mbaol in áiteachaí éagsúla . . . Nuair a iarann tú is dóigh idir 800 agus €1,000 ar dhuine le freastal ar chúrsaí trí seachtainí, nuair a thit an tóin as an tír b'shin é an chéad rud a thit as pócaí na ndaoine.

P: I saw a catastrophic decline, really. And in a way that the sector was at risk in different areas . . . When you charge I suppose between 800 and €1,000 for a three-week course, when the country collapsed that was the first thing people stopped paying for.

This decrease created much difficulty for communities that had grown largely dependent on this income. The overall reduction of 25% in attendance nationally between 2008 and 14 masks an even greater rate of decline in certain areas – with the drop of 37% in Donegal, for instance, being significantly higher (Tuairisc.ie, 2014). After such a dramatic fall during the worst years of the recession, attendance figures for 2016, while improving on those of previous years, were still, on average, 7% below 2008 levels (Tuairisc.ie, 2017b).

Significantly, the decline in employment opportunities available through the summer colleges and other industries hit by the crash seems to have helped spur a bottom-up Anglicisation of the “linguistic landscape” (Gorter, 2006) of the Gaeltacht. Over the course of my fieldwork I saw several instances both in Galway and Donegal of signs that had been either Irish-only or primarily in Irish being replaced with monolingual or predominantly English ones, including signs on hotels, restaurants and shops. This seemingly occurred as people felt that tourism offered one of the few ways to restore prosperity locally, a belief promoted by the state in various development policies (e.g. Government of Ireland, 2017, 39). As an employee of a language promotion agency told me:

C: Tá sé brónach . . . gur tharla sé de léim . . . taobh istigh de deich mbliana . . . B'fhéidir go bhfuil easpa misnigh nó mórtais nó múinín atá ann agus go gceapann siad go gcaithfidh siad cineál iad féin a dhíol trí Bhéarla. See nuair a thit an tóin ar bhealach as na Gaeilgeoirí a bheith ag goil [go dtí na coláistí samhraidh] . . . bhí an cineál t-athrú seo ag teacht isteach i gcloigeann na ndaoine . . . níl lucht Gaeilge ag teacht chugainn níos mó, níl na postanna. Agus y'know is rud cineál teibí é ach . . . téann sé i bhfeidhm ar dhaoine, cinnte téann sé i bhfeidhm ar dhaoine . . . Tá mé ag ceapadh go bhfuil sé psych-, sa psyche is dóigh ar bhealach. C: It's sad . . . that it happened suddenly . . . within ten years . . . Maybe there's a lack of courage or confidence or pride and that they think they have to sell themselves through English. See when the Irish-learners stopped going [to the summer colleges] . . . there was this kind of change to people's attitudes . . . the Irish-speakers aren't coming anymore, there aren't the jobs. And y'know it's kind of abstract but . . . it affects people, it definitely affects them . . . I think it's psych-, it's in the psyche in a way.

The combination of the dramatic decrease in income from the summer colleges and the decline of the state-supported industrial sector (Ó Ceallaigh, forthcoming) saw the economic basis of many Gaeltacht communities removed. This disruption, it seems, contributed to a sense of Irish not having a significant impact on local economic welfare and therefore prompted, at least in part, this turn away from the promotion of the language in such clearly visible ways.

While these factors are clearly detrimental for the vitality of Irish, as the following section describes, the deleterious consequences of widespread unemployment in the Gaeltacht were most clearly seen in the dramatic increase in emigration which occurred during this period.

7. Migration

With population mobility being a fundamental trait of globalisation (Appadurai, 2005, 3) and economic disruptions known to intensify this mobility, it is unsurprising that Ireland saw extremely high rates of outmigration in the wake of the crash. Examining national patterns, Glynn and O’Connell state that “[w]hereas 245,900 people left the country in the eight years between 2000 and 2007, nearly 610,000 departed between 2008 and 2015” (2017, 299). Furthermore, as Glynn et al. noted (2013, 54), it was in those communities counted as the most rural – such as the Gaeltacht – where emigration was most pronounced after 2008. When one considers that the demographic submersion of minority language speakers as a result of migration is often cited as contributing to language shift (e.g. Krauss, 1992, 6), the potential for this to negatively impact the vitality of Irish becomes apparent. While emigration has clearly weakened the social fabric of the Gaeltacht, as will be seen, the sociolinguistics risks posed by such emigrants eventually returning are also of concern.

With rural Ireland having seen many waves of mass migration throughout the 20th century, old patterns were quickly reawakened. As is well attested, previous emigration tends to be a key cause of current emigration (Brody, 1974, 7), and many of my informants confirmed the continuation of such “chain migration” post-2008.

While a great many emigrants went to the US or Britain – each frequent destinations for previous generations of Irish emigrants – the 2008 crash saw many go further afield to destinations not previously common for Irish workers. This is perhaps unsurprising in light of the “space-time compression” which is fundamental to globalisation, whereby international travel and communication are now much faster than previously (Cairncross, 2001), developments which had not yet fully emerged when other cohorts emigrated. “[*Tá siad*] in Abu Dhabi, go New Zealand, sa Ghearmáin, sa Fhrainc, Sasain, Albain, Stáit Aontaithe. Agus there’s no doubt dá mbeadh obair ar an ghealach bheadh siad fán ghealach fosta” – “[they’re] in Abu Dhabi, to New Zealand, in Germany, France, England, Scotland, the US. And there’s no doubt that if there was work on the moon they’d be on the moon too”, as one Donegal man told me.

In addition to the obvious link between unemployment and greater levels of emigration – a link which I have discussed at length elsewhere (Ó Ceallaigh, forthcoming) – it must also be noted that a further important factor contributing to emigration is the changing of aspirations that accompanies globalised modernity. As observed by Deprez (2000, 464), television – and the internet, one must now add – bombards people in peripheral locations with (often exaggerated) images of all that they are missing out on in urban life, thereby luring them away from their home communities. As Brody explained, these increased aspirations can have very detrimental consequences for rural communities, ultimately meaning that “life in Inishkillane can no longer provide what the Inishkillane people want” (1974, 15). Emigration, then, becomes the natural choice for individuals living in communities which they have “lost faith in”, to use Brody’s terminology (1974, 16). The increased information flows which are responsible for such expanded conceptions of success are, of course, themselves a fundamental characteristic of globalisation (Castells, 2000; Giddens, 2002), as too is the trend towards urbanisation which is depopulating rural areas worldwide (OECD, 2015).

Unfortunately for the continued intergenerational transmission of Irish, the vast majority of emigrants were in the “young adult” category, aged 18–34. Nationally, research by Glynn et al. (2013, 34) reported that over 70% of emigrants were in their twenties, a pattern which would seem to have been replicated in the Gaeltacht, with this cohort being very noticeably absent at community events I attended. Viewing census data diachronically over the decade that included the extremes of Ireland’s economic development – both growth and decline – would suggest that this is indeed the case. While there were 10,972 in the 20–34 age group in the Galway Gaeltacht in 2006, this fell to 10,724 in 2011 and 9,339 in 2016 (–15% in the span of a decade) (CSO, 2007a, 2012a; 2017b). This trend was also visible in Donegal, where the equivalent numbers fell from 3,805 in 2006 to 3,672 in 2011 and then further to 2,833 in 2016 (–25.5% in total) (CSO, 2007b, 2012b; 2017c). The decline of this cohort is, of course, of immense significance for the future of the language, with those in their 20s and 30s being the most likely to have children and thus continue the intergenerational transmission of Irish.

I also was told on many occasions of the tendency for the primary breadwinner in a family to migrate (either in a conventional sense or as “commuter migrants” who spend extended periods working in cities), with partners often being left at home to raise their children alone:

A: [T]á muid ag feiceáil freisin go leor baintrí, baintrí déine go bhféadfaí a rá leob. Mná atá fanta anseo agus a gcuid gasúr, agus na fir imithe ag obair in áiteachaí eile. Bhí col ceathar liom féin ar an mbunú sin, go raibh sí féin fanta anseo . . . agus gur imigh a fear go New Zealand ar feadh bliana mar gheall nach raibh aon obair eile aigesan le coinneáil ag imeacht. Agus bhí sé féin ag cur an t-airgead abhaile . . . Tá roinnt daoine atá ag commutáil, atá ag dul anonn is anall go Sasana, agus go dtí an Eoraip fiú, agus beidheadar ag fanacht cúpla seachtain thall agus ag teacht ar ais ansin.

A: We're also seeing a lot of widows, austerity widows you could call them. Women that are left here with their children while the men are gone away to work in other places. I had a cousin like that, she was left here . . . and her husband went to New Zealand for a year because he had no other work to keep him going. And he was sending the money home . . . There are some people commuting, going back and forth to England and to Europe even, and they'll stay a couple of weeks over there and then come back.

While seasonal emigration of male workers is a long-established phenomenon in the Gaeltacht, long distance commuting is more recent, having increased greatly after 2008 (Western Development Commission, 2018). As well as the obvious reduction in language input resulting from one parent being absent, parents who remain at home are likely to have less time to spend with their children as they attend to daily chores on their own. In contrast to previous generations when relatives were likely to help with child minding (thereby ensuring Irish-language input was maintained), the proliferation of tele-communications and information technology means such parents or those who work overtime and/or with reduced holidays – as many of my informants were forced to do to get by – are more likely to delegate childminding duties to the television or internet. This tendency, well attested in sociological research (e.g. Warren, 2005), is, of course, an understandable response to the pressures of daily life. Significantly for language reproduction, however, these same technologies were often described by informants as being central to the propagation of English amongst Gaeltacht children (Ó Ceallaigh, forthcoming).

A further way in which emigration, and the damage caused to linguistic vitality by such disruption, is intrinsically linked to neoliberalism is via mortgage peonage. While literature on emigration post-2008 invariably mentions employment as having been a key factor in prompting an individual to migrate (e.g. Glynn and O'Connell, 2017), the issue of debt repayment is rarely addressed. On many occasions, however, I was told of people having to emigrate to ensure they could service debts, as the following quote describes:

A: D'fhicefeá teach a bhí nua as a bpíosa agus dúnta agus geata glasáilte agus nuair a chuirfeá ceist cé a bhí anseo is dream óg a thóg an teach b'fhéidir agus a bhfuil riaráistí morgáiste orthu nó a thuig gurb é an t-aon bhealach a bhí acu le morgáiste a íoc ná imeacht agus goil ag obair in áit éicint agus tá siad ag íoc as teach atá folamh.

A: You'd see a house that was brand new and closed and the gate locked and when you'd ask who was there, it was young people who built the house maybe and had mortgage repayments to make and who knew that the only way they had to pay the mortgage was by going and working somewhere and paying for a house that is empty.

As Harvey (2012, 30–4) details, property bubbles are a fundamental feature of neoliberal economics, as are ever-increasing levels of indebtedness, with debt being used to compensate for the low and stagnant wages that neoliberalism offers the majority of the population (Graeber, 2014, 361–93). The enormous mortgages which prompted such emigration are therefore themselves intimately connected to the macro-economic forces that brought about the 2008 crash, forces which ultimately left people with no choice but to emigrate in order to keep their homes from being repossessed by recently bailed-out banks.

While the interconnected effects of emigration for the Gaeltacht were thus profound, the consequences of in- or return migration (much of which is itself a product of the Great Recession) for these communities have not yet received attention. While existing on a much smaller scale than emigration, in the absence of strong policies to help immigrants learn Irish, in-migration to the Gaeltacht also creates significant challenges for language vitality.

As many of my informants told me, a key reason for someone to move to the Gaeltacht is exogamy, which itself is often a consequence of economic restructuring (Nelde et al., 1996, 6). As Holmes states, however, “[m]arriage to a majority group member is the quickest way of ensuring shift to the majority group language for the children” (2013, 65). With so many of those who emigrated from the Gaeltacht having begun relationships while abroad, the likelihood of returning emigrants’ partners being Irish speakers is extremely slim. As is well documented, emigrants who returned during previous periods of prosperity and brought English-speaking families contributed significantly to the Anglicisation of the Gaeltacht (Hindley, 1990, 183–4). Nonetheless, many of the children of migrants who returned in previous decades and who found themselves living in an Irish-dominant community ultimately became Irish speakers themselves. Were a similar phenomenon to occur again, however, it is unlikely that there is any community where Irish is strong enough to be able to assimilate incomers in this fashion.

Rather than being able to linguistically integrate the families of returned immigrants, it would seem likely that without significant provision to address this issue, such an influx will spur a further shift away from Irish in the Gaeltacht. Despite the relative strength of the economy prior to the Covid crisis, there had been no public discourse about this issue, or attempts to plan for the eventuality of large numbers of emigrants possibly returning home in coming years. Although a significant risk, none of those language plans which have thus far been completed in accordance with the *Gaeltacht Act 2012* make any

provisions for dealing with such a possibility – for instance by recommending an integration model similar to that in use in Wales (Ní Thuairisg, 2012).

Despite there being some provision of Irish classes for incomers in many areas, in accordance with other recent research I often heard that very few of those who moved to the Gaeltacht ever attain fluency in Irish – in one category A area the figure is just 20% (Fóram Chois Fharráige um Pleanáil Teanga, 2016, 6, 27). In this way, in-migration creates a steadily increasing pool of non-Irish speakers in even the strongest remaining Gaeltacht areas.

The distorted nature of the Gaeltacht housing market is a further way in which economic disruption and in-migration has contributed to the minoritisation of Irish in its heartland communities. As has been widely discussed in recent years, unemployment in much of the Gaeltacht is significantly higher than the national average, and has endured even while the national economy recovered from the 2008 shock (Irish Times, 2018b; Ó Catháin, 2018). This fact, when combined with both the low incomes of many of those who *are* employed and the overinflated price of housing throughout Ireland (which, as noted above, is very typical of neoliberal economies), means that locals are often effectively priced out of the property market, leaving houses to be bought by well-off individuals from outside the community who wish to move to a quiet rural area for lifestyle reasons. A similar pattern is described in Scotland by Smith-Christmas (2014), and has also been observed in Wales (Williams, 2014, 244). The following extract from an interview with a businessman in Galway explains this phenomenon, and how it leads to a form of class-based demographic replacement:

P: Tá teach ansin thiar . . . Agus bhí mo dhuine ag ceapadh, an auctioneer, go bhfaigheadh sé 145,000–150,000 ar an teach . . . Agus dúirt [an t-úinéir] cuir isteach 170,000, tá mé ag iarraidh 170,000. Dioladh é ar 270,000. Agus daoine áitiúla ní raibh an t-airgead acub lena cheannacht. 'Sé a cheannaigh é ná beirt as Gaillimh, cé go raibh dhá theach acub agus dhíol siad an dá theach . . . [m]ar gheall gur mhéadaigh luachannaí tithe sa gcathair i nGaillimh chomh méid sin, má tá teach a'd i nGaillimh, agus go háirid má cheannaigh tú ag an am ceart é . . .

B: Déanfaidh tú meall.

P: Déanfaidh tú . . . exactly! Agus ciallaíonn sé go bhfuil na daoine áitiúla, go leor acub atá as obair cheana féin, diabhal mórán seans acub.

B: Tá siad ag fágáil dá bharr?

P: Bhuel níl aon rogha acub. Níl siad ag iarraidh fágáil. Tá mise breá compordach le daoine atá ag iarraidh imeacht ar feadh roinnt blianta agus cheapfaim gur rud maith é sin . . . Ach má tá siad ag iarraidh teacht ar ais go mbeadh deis acub sin a dhéanamh. Agus má tá siad ag iarraidh fanacht sa gcéad áit gan imeacht thar sáile go mbeadh sin acub chomh maith.

P: There's a house back there . . . and your man, the auctioneer, was thinking they'd get 145,000–150,000 for the house. And the owner said ask for 170,000, I want 170,000. It was sold for 270,000. And local people didn't have the money to buy it. It was two people from Galway [city] who bought it, although they had two houses and they sold both of them . . . [B]ecause house prices in the city increased so much, if you have a house in Galway, and especially if you bought it at the right time . . .

B: You'll make a fortune.

P: You'll make . . . exactly! And that means that local people, many of whom are out of work already, well they have no chance.

B: And so they're leaving?

P: Well they have no choice. They don't want to leave. I'm very comfortable with people who want to leave for a few years and I think it's a good thing . . . But if they want to come back [they should] have that chance too. And if they want to stay in the first place and not go abroad, they should equally be able to do that.

Through this process the structural issues that militate against the creation of well-paid employment in the Gaeltacht mean that what available housing there is often comes to be owned by well-off urbanites who are unlikely to speak Irish.

This is not, of course, to argue for any form of “closed border” policy with regards to minoritised language communities, but to highlight the need for stronger policies for facilitating the learning of local languages by incomers, in addition to addressing the structural issues which see those born and raised in these areas forced to emigrate, and their communities risking eventually becoming demographically dominated by wealthy retirees.

The disruption caused by the crisis and broader trends in the global economy can thus be seen to have profound effects for the demographic composition of Irish-speaking communities. While experiencing very detrimental consequences due to the 2008 crash, Gaeltacht communities did not simply acquiesce to their fate, instead exercising their agency in various ways, as the final section discusses.

8. Community responses

Although the forces destabilising the “home-family-neighbourhood-community” nexus that is so important to language vitality (Fishman, 1991) in the Gaeltacht after 2008 were undoubtedly very significant, resistance to austerity and its consequences was manifold.

Perhaps the most important of these efforts was the *Guth na Gaeltachta* (“Voice of the Gaeltacht”) group founded in Donegal in 2009 in response to the recommendations of *An Bord Snip Nua* (see section 5). In addition to resisting these recommendations, the group campaigned on various other language-related issues. Members regularly appeared in the Irish-language media and organised information stalls, meetings and lobbying, and many of my interviewees regarded the campaign with great esteem.

In their anxiousness to declare themselves a “non-political campaign” to avoid the influence of party politics, however, Guth na Gaeltachta eschewed links with comparable non-electoral organisations which could have aided in building a broad-based campaign of resistance to austerity in general. This sectionalism is typical of civil society in Ireland, with there being few instances of groups that attempted to draw links between the multitude of single-issue campaigns each expressing individual grievances (Allen and O’Boyle, 2013, 128). One former participant explained his frustration with this position as follows:

M: [C]hroid mé go mór i nGuth na Gaeltachta. Ach ag cúpla cruinniú d’ardaigh mé an cheist, bhí siadsan in éadan ciorraithe in sa Ghaeltacht, right . . . Ach . . . thóg mise an rud gur chóir do Ghuth na Gaeltachta fanacht mar Ghuth na Gaeltachta ach a bheith páirteach sa rud níos leithne in éadan cúrsaí déine . . . [B]hí mórshuíl mór i Sligeach . . . [A]gus ag an chruinniú dúirt mé gur chóir go mbeadh ionadaí ó Ghuth na Gaeltachta i láthair ag an mhórshuíl. Agus dúirt siad “ó no, no, nil baint aige sin leis an Ghaeltacht, nil baint aige sin leis an Ghaeilg”. Agus dúirt mé no but tá baint aige le – Y’know tá lucht na Gaeilge iontach maith ag rá caithfidh daoine seasamh linn, agus aontaím leo, ba chóir go seasfadh daoine leis an teanga, ach nuair nach bhfuil lucht na teangan sásta seasamh le daoine eile, then tuigim do na daoine eile fosta: “caidé a rinn lucht na Gaeilg dúinn?” So an rud a bhí mise ag rá just bíodh bratach linn agus siúlfaidh muid agus look tá mise ag dul go Sligeach anyway, an bhfuil cead agam duine inteacht eile a fháil agus iompróidh an bheirt an bratach? No.

M: I really believed in Guth na Gaeltachta. But at a couple of meetings I raised the question, they were against cuts in the Gaeltacht, right . . . But . . . I raised the point that Guth na Gaeltachta should stay as Guth na Gaeltachta but be part of the wider thing against austerity . . . There was a big march in Sligo . . . And at a meeting I said that there should be a representative from Guth na Gaeltachta at the march. And they said “oh no, no, that isn’t to do with the Gaeltacht, it’s not to do with Irish”. And I said no but it has to do with – Y’know Irish speakers are very good saying people have to stand with us, and I agree with them, people should stand with the language, but when the Irish-language community isn’t willing to stand with other people, then I can see how they’d feel too: “what did the Irish speakers ever do for us?” So what I was saying was just let’s bring the banner and we’ll march and look I’m going to Sligo anyway, can I get someone else and we’ll carry the banner together? No.

Despite their sectional approach and very moderate tactics, Guth na Gaeltachta was nonetheless clearly seen as a threat by the state. One outspoken member, a gardener in a national park which is under the management of a state body, received a letter from the department responsible for the Gaeltacht threatening him with dismissal from his job if he did not refrain from publicly criticising state policy. This threat proved effective, leading him to resign his role with the organisation. Furthermore, an organisation spokesperson employed in a university was subsequently also threatened into silence.

Despite these threats being reported in both English- and Irish-language national media and raised by an opposition politician in parliament, (Gaelpoort.com, 2012; Gaelscéal, 2013, 2; Oireachtas Éireann, 2012), they provoked no opposition from either the wider Irish-language or trade union movements. This lack of solidarity from other Irish-language organisations highlights the apprehensiveness of state-funded language groups to take a confrontational position at a time when they too were facing extreme rationalisation measures (see section 5) and ensured the state was easily able to control a key opposition movement in the Gaeltacht during the recession.

Such fearfulness of those with careers and incomes at risk is, of course, far from unique to the Irish-language sector. The precarious nature of the employment market and the “atypical” labour conditions that exist under neoliberalism, coupled with a social safety net which has been greatly reduced in recent years, make it much less likely that people will risk their livelihoods by challenging state policies (Grasso and Giugni, 2016). Of course, many of those employed by the civil service to deal with language policy are likely themselves committed to the survival of Irish and possibly even personally sympathetic to the demands of Guth na Gaeltachta. In a period of capitalist crisis, however, and at a time when many government departments had Troika officials embedded to oversee decisions (Hardiman and Regan, 2012, 9), the agency of these individuals was severely curtailed, meaning they had little choice but to suppress such movements and enact deleterious policy for the greater goal of shoring up the economy. Further to being fundamental to the emergence of nation-states and capitalism more generally (Thompson, 1991), the suppression of dissent has been a central requirement of neoliberalism since its inception as a political project (Klein, 2007), and was notably intensified post-2008 (Bruff, 2016), including in the Gaeltacht and elsewhere in Irish society.

The fact that many of those involved in Irish-language campaigning are employed by state-funded institutions made it particularly straightforward to limit Guth na Gaeltachta’s efforts. While it is from the ranks of the middle classes often employed in the public sector that the impetus for language revitalisation has typically come (Wright, 1996, 43), such individuals – teachers, for instance – are also easily silenced when their demands come into conflict with state policies. The fact that the implementation of neoliberal measures requires the suppression of dissent therefore sees it inflict a double blow on areas such as the Gaeltacht: it both weakens the supports on which marginal communities so often depend and punishes attempts to resist this attrition.

It is ironic that at the same time as the state was threatening members of Guth na Gaeltachta, an autonomous initiative to maintain Gaeltacht communities, the *Gaeltacht Act 2012*, which is predicated on voluntary community activism, was being enacted (Ó Giollagáin, 2014, 109; Ó Ceallaigh, forthcoming). As a former member of Guth na Gaeltachta told me:

A: An teachtaireacht atá muid ag fáil ná déanaí ná rudaí seo [leis an bpleanáil teanga] ach ná bígí ag súil le aon cheannasaíocht nó aon rud uainne. In fact, b'fhéidir gur bagairt a bhfaighfeá. Sin teachtaireacht iontach láidir mar léiríonn sé do dhaoine níl an stát dul a sheasamh leat . . . Cén incentive atá ann do ghrúpaí pobail, nó do dhaoine aonara seasamh suas don teanga?

A: The message we're getting is do this stuff [with language planning] but don't expect anything or any leadership from us. In fact, maybe you'll get threatened. That's a very strong message as it shows people that the state isn't going to stand with you . . . What incentive are you giving to community groups, or to individuals to stand up for the language?

While the bitterness engendered by the suppression of Guth na Gaeltachta was clearly far from conducive to promoting the voluntarism the state claims to want, and was yet one further example of the contradictory and cynical nature of the state's approach to language revitalisation in the Gaeltacht, it did not succeed in totally disempowering Gaeltacht residents. While remaining locally-focused and failing to draw links with wider campaigns either against austerity or rural depopulation nationally, several communities mobilised to resist government proposals. The inhabitants of the Oileáin Árann in Galway, for instance, successfully resisted proposals to replace the aeroplane service to their islands with what was widely derided as a far less suitable helicopter service, organising various protests and large-scale meetings about the issue. The inhabitants of Toraigh island in Donegal – one of the strongest remaining Irish-speaking communities – similarly mobilised against the replacement of their ferry service with an older and far less sea-worthy vessel, although they were ultimately unsuccessful in their efforts. Similar to the air service in Galway, this was deemed to be the result of fair competition in the call for tender issued in accordance with EU regulations – regulations which, as [Kunzlik \(2013\)](#) argues, are themselves deeply neoliberal. In contrast to the Oileáin Árann which see huge numbers of tourists visiting the three islands each year, Toraigh is much more remote and less well known. Despite receiving some support from Irish speakers and groups elsewhere in the country, the failure of their campaign is therefore less than surprising, particularly when one considers that the island's population of less than 150 people does not amount to a force likely to cause concern for the political class.

Such single-issue campaigns therefore met with only mixed success, and – while itself highly sectional – Guth na Gaeltachta, the one effort at collectivising these individual communities' struggles, was effectively suppressed. In addition to the immediate damage of reducing services, the struggle to negotiate the social implications of neoliberal rationalisation results in much divisiveness and tension within these communities. As [Harvey \(2014\)](#) notes, a great number of other community groups throughout Ireland that opposed state policy were also suppressed during this period, particularly those in the “community sector” which received some form of state subsidy. Once again the degree to which the Irish state's response to the 2008 crisis adhered to the model of “disaster capitalism” famously described by [Klein \(2007\)](#) is apparent, the suppression of dissent and the furtherance of neoliberal policy solutions being two sides of the same coin (see also [Krugman, 2015](#); [Mirowski, 2013](#)).

8.1. “Corporate social responsibility” and the Gaeltacht – fighting neoliberalism with neoliberalism?

In light of the chequered success of protest movements in the Gaeltacht, it is unsurprising that people sought other ways to overcome the difficulties caused by decreased state subventions. During my fieldwork I noted several instances of communities attempting to do so via recourse to unorthodox means, including turning to non-state actors and corporate sources of funding to finance infrastructure.

During my stay in one Donegal community I was told that a new pre-school was to be opened in the following months. Shortly after I left the area, an online crowdfunding campaign was started to fund this initiative. Being in some ways a 21st century variation of the long-established tradition of Gaeltacht residents getting aid from those who have emigrated, this effort could be seen as having significant cultural precedent ([Brody, 1974, 84](#)).

As opposed to aiding family members, however, this crowdfunding campaign attempted to finance important infrastructure for the whole community, a service which one would expect to have been eligible for state funding. Nonetheless, this approach indicates that those who started the campaign have an awareness that it is, to a degree, up to themselves to seek out unorthodox funding methods in light of the greatly reduced Gaeltacht budget. It is also, I believe, indicative of the extent to which the neoliberal understanding of state functions has been internalised by these populations. Despite garnering attention on both social and traditional media, six months after the campaign was launched only a little over a sixth of the target had been reached, €645 of a €3,000 goal.

Similarly, several schools resorted to asking parents to pay for the recruitment of an additional teacher to ensure a new Gaeltacht education policy can be effectively implemented, a process made particularly challenging due to the cuts to staff numbers in small rural schools since 2008 ([Tuairisc.ie, 2017c](#)).

An even more striking example of the neoliberalisation of the financing of public infrastructure occurred in 2015 in Inis Meáin in Galway. A change in the Department of Education's policy regarding student-staff ratios – itself allowing for expenditure on rural schools to be cut ([Irish Times, 2011](#)) – left Inis Meáin's school, with under twenty pupils, no longer eligible for a second teacher. This decision led to a community campaign to have this second teacher re-instated, involving public meetings and lobbying in Dublin ([Irish Times, 2015](#)). The issue was ultimately resolved when Zurich Insurance Group, which as of 2017 was the 91st largest company in the world ([Forbes, 2017](#)), committed to funding the second teacher's

position for two years. As part of their “investing in communities” programme, Zurich claimed they wanted to fund the school due to the fact that “Inis Meáin is a stronghold of the Irish language. The language, and the very sustainability of the island, is under threat if families there cannot avail of a good level of education for their children” ([Irish Times, 2015](#)). In light of their involvement in the hedge fund scandals ([Reuters, 2007](#)) that ultimately helped precipitate the global crash which led the Irish state to cut funding for small rural schools, it is not without irony that Zurich seized on the Inis Meáin case for PR purposes. Fortunately, however, an increase in pupil numbers after this two-year period of sponsorship concluded saw the Department of Education begin funding the second teacher’s position once more.

Relatedly, in a language school in Galway I heard management discuss applying for grants from corporations such as Google under their corporate social responsibility schemes. While there was also discussion of applying for support from Údarás na Gaeltachta, it was observed that the cuts meant they had very little left to give small businesses.

The fact that corporate and other unorthodox funding was being discussed so widely illustrates not only the extent of the cutbacks but also the success with which neoliberalism has framed the concerns of peripheral communities as an issue for charitable schemes by corporations seeking good publicity, rather than the responsibility of the state which governs these areas. While such measures undoubtedly offer potential for short-term gain for Gaeltacht communities, as Watson has observed, it is the policy legacy of the earlier protectionist and liberal eras (c. 1922–1980) that continues to support Irish. The neoliberal era that has emerged since the 1980s, however, has seen this support steadily dismantled ([Watson, 2016, 71](#)). As such, by engaging with the neoliberal project on its own terms and conceding, perhaps, that it is not necessarily the responsibility of the state to provide important community infrastructure, minoritised language communities potentially sow the seeds of their own destruction. Such actions normalise the neoliberal vision of society at the micro-level, with states largely absolved of their previously existing responsibilities to the periphery.

9. Conclusion

As this article has attempted to demonstrate, such is the totalising nature of capitalism in the 21st century that the actions of a relatively small number of individuals in the boardrooms of various banking conglomerates and the offices of Wall Street can have profound consequences for language vitality in remote communities thousands of miles away. By highlighting some of the causal pathways through which this occurs, this article has added empirical weight to the great many allusions in LPP literature to the centrality of economic forces in driving language loss and extinction.

Through weakening the all-important home-family-neighbourhood-community nexus ([Fishman, 1991, 95](#)) in which Irish survives, the Great Recession clearly contributed to the decline of Irish in the Gaeltacht. The 2016 census results illustrated this starkly, with the 11.2% decrease in the number of daily speakers of Irish outside the education system in the Gaeltacht being in dramatic contrast with the modest growth seen for the same category during the Celtic Tiger ([CSO, 2007c, 2012c; 2017d](#)). While significant reductions in coming years were predicted by research published in 2007 ([Ó Giollagáin et al., 2007](#)), the period of economic disruption that began the following year exacerbated these trends by removing or diminishing much of the support on which the Gaeltacht had come to depend.

The extent to which Irish-language provision was cut starkly illustrates the contraindicated nature of efforts to reverse language shift and neoliberal policy imperatives. With neoliberalism opposing policies which serve to redistribute wealth to less well-off groups (as language revitalisation policies almost invariably do), and seeing little place for state intervention in areas not of significant market value, the Irish state’s rollback from this area was all but inevitable during the most severe economic crisis in its history. The extent of the ensuing rationalisation is reminiscent of Klein’s concept of “disaster capitalism”, whereby periods of crisis are used to implement reforms that would be impossible during periods of relative stasis ([Klein, 2007](#)).

Commenting on the difficulties of creating environments suitable for the maintenance of threatened languages such as Irish, Mufwene has observed that

[L]inguists and language teachers have no control over the conditions that sustain a language, despite their expertise. That is, revitalisation efforts should also address the nonlinguistic factors that produced the socioeconomic ecologies that are disadvantageous to the relevant languages. Just think how unproductive it would be if environmentalists only provided food to an endangered species while keeping it in the same deleterious ecosystem ([Mufwene, 2017, e308](#)).

Although greatly improved by being informed by the expertise of linguists of various types, as has been shown, language revitalisation policies (like most public policy) are ultimately subservient to the requirements of international capital. This article has explored how the tension between these interests and minoritised language promotion has recently played out in a country which is supposedly committed to revitalising its “first national language”, but which has readily adapted itself to become a prototypical “competition state” which serves the needs of capital above those of its inhabitants ([Kirby and Murphy, 2011](#)). It is hoped that by drawing attention to the mutually constitutive nature of the local and global factors affecting language vitality, it has helped provide evidence for the position expressed by Mufwene and others, and illustrated some of the mechanisms through which the neoliberal hegemony that is enacted by competition states impacts threatened language

communities like the Gaeltacht. In doing so it has hopefully served as a reminder to those involved in minoritised language advocacy of the need for an intersectional understanding of language loss and revitalisation as we deal with the precarious state of the world at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century.

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