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Buntús Gaeilge (1966) and its Aftermath

Introduction

Buntús Gaeilge was a three-year scientific analysis undertaken in 1966, of the daily conversation of adults in Gaeltacht areas of Ireland (Department of Education 1966). Based on this analysis, new Irish language programmes for primary and secondary schools and for adults were developed. The background to Buntús Gaeilge and the subsequent development and implementation of pioneering pedagogical approaches based on the analysis are explored in this chapter, which draws heavily on the personal papers of Tomás Ó Domhnalláin, one of the researchers on the project and author of the highly successful Irish language programme, *Buntús Cainte.*

The Irish language in National Schools before 1922

The national (primary) school system was established in Ireland in 1831. It was an aided system, under which funding was made available to schools which were owned by local patrons and managed locally, but which followed a national curriculum and were subject to regular inspection. For the first fifty years Irish was not a subject of the national school curriculum. In 1872 a payment by results system was introduced whereby teachers were paid on the basis of the results of their pupils at an annual (oral) examination held by the inspectors. While Irish was still not included in the national school curriculum, it could be taught outside school hours as an extra subject for which additional fees were payable to teachers (Hyland and Milne 1992: 128).

In 1904 a bilingual programme was drawn up which could be taught in schools in districts where Irish, or Irish and English were spoken. Although payment by results was discontinued in 1900 for subjects taught within school hours, fees continued to be paid for the teaching of Irish outside school hours (Walsh 2011: 50). By 1921, when Ireland became an independent state, Irish was taught or used within school hours in 240 schools (out of a total of over 5,000 schools) and it was taught as an extra subject outside school hours in 1,890 schools (Ó Domhnalláin 1987).

The Irish Language in National Schools after 1922

The Irish Free State was established in 1922 and one of the first actions of the new Free State government was to decree that:

> In the administration of Irish education, it is the intention of the new government to work with all its might for the strengthening of the national fibre by giving the language, history, music and tradition of Ireland their natural place in the life of Irish schools. (Department of Education, 1922).

The Chief Executive for Education, Pádraig Ó Brolcháin, announced that from St. Patrick's Day 1922, one hour per day would be devoted to the teaching of Irish or to the teaching of subjects through Irish in national schools, provided a teacher in the school was qualified to do so. English was not to be used in infant classes if the teacher had sufficient Irish to use Irish only.

In March 1922 the government adopted a new National Programme, its main provisions being (i) that Irish should be taught in all schools other than schools where the majority of parents objected, (ii) that all teaching in infant classes should be through the Irish language and (iii) that history, geography, singing and physical education should be taught through Irish (The National Programme Conference 1922). Some changes were made in 1926 which recognised that many teachers were not sufficiently fluent in Irish to deliver the full curriculum through the medium of Irish (The National Programme Conference 1926). At that time, in spite of considerable investment by the government in Irish-language summer courses for national teachers between 1922 and 1926, fewer than 20% held a bilingual certificate, which indicated fluency in Irish. By 1932, the proportion had increased to 35% and, under the new Fianna Fáil government, requirements regarding teaching through Irish were strengthened and the Irish language curriculum revised to a higher standard. The following year, detailed guidelines – *Notes for Teachers – Irish* - (1933) - were produced by the Department of Education setting out a methodology for the teaching of Irish in national schools. Surprisingly, these guidelines were issued only in the English language and no Irish language version was ever provided, even though the guidelines were re-issued on a number of occasions between 1933 and the mid-1960s. The guidelines continued to be the bible of Irish teaching throughout that period.

Revised Infant Programme 1948

In 1948, when Fine Gael led a new inter-party government, Minister for Education, General Richard Mulcahy, criticised the infant education pedagogies and methodologies which had been promoted by the Fianna Fáil government. He issued a Revised Programme for Infants (1948) accompanied by *An Naí-Scoil - Notes for Teachers* (1951) which stated that 'If infant

teaching is to be successful, it must be based on the child's urge to play, to talk, to imitate, to manipulate materials, to make and to do things' (Hyland and Milne 1992:115). While the Irish language was to remain as the medium of instruction in the infant classrooms, it was stressed that 'it should be integrated into other activities, including children's games, nature activities, the pictures they draw and paint etc.' The revised programme also allowed for the teaching of the English language for half an hour a day – a concession that had not been allowed since 1922.

In 1960, a more significant change was introduced by Minister for Education, Patrick Hillery, when he decreed that teachers of junior classes (Infants and First class) were no longer compelled to teach through the medium of Irish in schools in English-speaking areas (Hyland and Milne, 1992: 130). According to some inspectors, including Ó Domhnalláin, these concessions marked the beginning of a rapid decline in the amount of time devoted to the teaching of Irish in national schools and in the general standard of Irish in the schools. Seán O'Connor, subsequently appointed Secretary of the Department of Education, wrote that 'By the issuing of the January (1960) circular, Dr. Hillery ensured the disestablishment of the Irish language' (quoted in Walsh 2009:45). However, not all Departmental officials agreed with O'Connor. According to Walsh, 'the senior officials of the department believed with considerable justice that the teaching methods employed to achieve the revival of Irish in the schools had proved ineffective' (Walsh, 2009: 45). Ironically by this stage the vast majority of national teachers (85%) held a bilingual certificate and would have been in a better position than their predecessors to implement a policy of Irish language immersion in the schools.

In 1963, the report of the inspectorate on the teaching of Irish in national schools concluded:

> As to the primary purpose of the teaching (of Irish) i.e. the development of fluency of speech in the pupils, one perceives during recent years a decrease in the use of Irish as the language of communication (in the schools) and one notices a tendency in some cases to use English as a vehicle in the teaching of Irish. When Irish is not used in the ordinary life of the school it is merely a dry uninteresting lesson subject connected in the pupil's mind with laborious and unpleasant work. (Department of Education 1963)

The Commission on the Restoration of the Irish Language 1963

The same year (1963), the report of the Commission on the Restoration of the Irish Language recommended that a linguistic analysis of Irish as a spoken language be carried out with the objective of devising a graded course of instruction in the language (An Coimisiún um Athbheochan na Gaeilge 1963). In 1966 a government White Paper on the Restoration of the Irish language endorsed this recommendation (Government of Ireland 1966.

Around this time, the Department of Education had begun to review the Irish curriculum in national schools and a Franciscan priest, Father Colmán Ó hUallacháin, more commonly known by the Irish version of his name an tAthair Colmán, who had spent some time studying linguistics in Georgetown University, Washington DC, was invited to speak at the annual inspectors' conference. Arising out of his talk, an tAthair Colmán was appointed as linguistic adviser to the Department of Education with a view to undertaking the research recommended by the Commission. In autumn 1963, Tomás Ó Domhnalláin, then a divisional inspector in the Department of Education, was assigned to work in the language laboratory, more frequently referred to as An Teanglann, Gormanston with an tAthair Colmán. And so the research project *Buntús Gaeilge,* was initiated.

Tomás Ó Domhnalláin

Tomás Ó Domhnalláin was born in Delvin, Co. Westmeath in 1913. While he was still an infant the family moved to Kilskyre, Co. Meath where Tomás attended the local national school. At the age of 13 he was awarded one of the first county council scholarships to secondary school and he spent the subsequent five years in St. Finian's College, Mullingar. While the Irish language was not particularly emphasised during his primary and secondary schooldays, he was imbued with a love of the language by his mother who was a member of the Gaelic League from the early 1900s. Before her marriage she had also been a member of one of the first Camogie teams in the country. Tomás remembered her teaching him as a very small boy to say his prayers in Irish. He was awarded an Intermediate scholarship in 1928 and decided at that stage that he would become a national school teacher. He entered St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra in 1931 as a pupil teacher[1] - one of the few students who had not come from the recently established Preparatory Colleges. Irish was the language of communication in the college and the two-year teacher training programme was delivered

[1] There was a specific category of entrants to Teacher Training Colleges in the 1920s – referred to as 'pupil-teachers'. These were students attending secondary schools who achieved high marks in the Intermediate Certificate examination and had decided that they would become national schoolteachers. A small number of places were reserved in the Teacher Training College for these students when they completed the Leaving Certificate.

entirely through the medium of Irish. Tomás was proud of the fact that he was one of the few students who was awarded the Bilingual Certificate (an Teastas Dátheangach)

He taught in Inchicore and Tullamore before being appointed, while still in his twenties, as principal of Athboy National School, Co. Meath. By that stage he had married Peggy O'Brien from Bandon, Co. Cork, and while neither of them had been brought up speaking Irish, they decided that their household would be Irish speaking. Initially they employed a girl from Connemara to work in the home, a *cailín aimsire* who only spoke Irish, and within a short time Irish was the language of the home. Tomás and his wife went on to have thirteen children all of whom were brought up with Irish as their first language. Tomás subsequently became principal teacher in St. Mary's National School in Drogheda, and in 1948 he was appointed as a national school inspector. He served as a District Inspector in Cavan and Ennis between 1949 and 1959 when he was transferred to Dublin. He was promoted to Divisional Inspector and subsequently to Assistant Chief Inspector. In 1972 he was appointed Director of the newly established Irish Institute of Linguistics, or Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann, where he remained until his retirement in 1979.

***Buntús Gaeilge* 1963 - 1966**

Buntús Gaeilge was a three-year scientific analysis of the daily conversation of adults in Gaeltacht areas of Ireland (Department of Education 1966). The members of the research team were An tAthair Colmán Ó hUallacháin, OFM[2], Fr Fidelis MacEnrí, OFM, Gearóid Ó Crualaoich[3] and Tomás Ó Domhnalláin. The team researched the structures and vocabulary of informal spoken Irish by recording the conversations of some 180 native Irish speakers, young and old, in their own environments in the different Gaeltacht areas. A corpus of speech amounting to over 100,000 words in (then) current usage was analysed, focusing particularly on the frequency of occurrence of specific speech structures and specific items of vocabulary. Each speech structure and each item of vocabulary was written on an index card and coded manually.

Computer analysis of the data was to show that 50% of this corpus of the casual conversation of native Irish speakers was made up of speech structure and vocabulary items

[2] An tAthair Colmán was appointed by the Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley, as the first Director of Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann in 1967.
[3] Gearóid Ó Crualaoich was subsequently appointed as Professor of Folklore and Ethnology in University College Cork. During his career there, he was also visiting professor in Cornell University, UCLA, Boston College and Notre Dame.

utilising just 42 words in all, i.e. the first 42 words on the frequency list. A person who knew the top 100 words on the list would, in theory, recognise 65% of the conversation of a native Irish speaker – without reference to the issues of pronunciation and phonology that are a fundamental component of speech. 150 words would enable them to follow 75% of a conversation and 500 words would enable them to follow 90% (Department of Education, 1966).

The research methodology of *Buntús Gaeilge* was similar to that applied in other countries, where research on the usage of other languages in their native contexts had been carried out. Academic references in *Buntús Gaeilge* included references to G. Gougenheim, author of *Le français fundamental*, as well as references to Noam Chomsky's early work on language acquisition. The report, *Buntús Gaeilge*, was published in 1966 and was to have far-reaching consequences for the teaching of Irish. Based on the findings of the research, subsequent work on developing Irish-language programmes for primary school classes I and II and classes III and IV (*Hóra, a Pháid!* and *Dúisigh, a Bhríd!)* was carried out by the primary school inspectorate in the Department of Education, initially led by Tomás Ó Domhnalláin. An tAthair Colmán played little role in the writing of the school programmes. In an article 'Buntús Gaeilge agus Bunú ITÉ' in a book of essays *Dán do Oide: Essays in Memory of Conn Ó Cléirigh,* published in 1997, Ó Domhnalláin wrote:

> Fágadh fúm féin ina dhiaidh sin cúrsa trialach Gaeilge a cheapadh. Ba bheag baint a bhí ag an Athair Colmán le hullmhú na gcúrsaí ná lena gcur i bhfeidhm i scoileanna ina dhiaidh sin. Bhí sé tógtha suas lena ghnó féin mar chomhairleoir teangeolaíochta don Roinn Oideachais. (Ó Domhnalláin 1997: 486)

When Tomás was appointed by the Department as its first Audio-Visual Officer (Oifigeach Closamhairc) in 1966, Seán de Búrca, inspector, took over the leadership role in preparing the *Buntús* school programmes. Courses for post-primary students were subsequently developed by the post-primary inspectorate (*Bunsraith Ghaeilge* and *Téanam Ort*) and the methodology was also used to develop courses in other European languages on the Irish secondary school curriculum - *Écouter et Parler* (French); *Verstehen und Sprechen* (German); and *Entendir y Hablar* (Spanish) (Ó Domhnalláin n.d.).

The work involved in developing the new *Buntús Gaeilge* school courses was considerable. As well as writing the script for the lessons, and preparing audio tapes for each lesson, visual aids in the form of 'deilbhíní' (little statues) – cardboard cut-outs which were

backed with Velcro and stuck onto black felt – were also provided. The idea for the use of 'deilbhíní' came from a visit which An tAthair Colmán had made to Morocco where similar resources were being used to teach the French language to school children (Ó Domhnalláin, 1997: 486). In the case of the *Buntús Gaeilge* courses, more than 600 separate illustrations were developed for each textbook. An alternative to the 'deilbhíní' was provided in the form of filmstrips (stiallscannáin), for teachers who had access to a projector and screen. In addition, material for the written elements of the course also had to be prepared, as well as handbooks for teachers.

In his now famous speech to the National Union of Journalists in Dún Laoghaire of 10 September 1966, where he announced the introduction of free post-primary education, the Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley TD, referred to the development of the *Buntús Gaeilge* school courses (Dáil Éireann 1967). Having reassured his audience that he 'had not come to the post of Minister for Education to preside over the obsequies of the national language', he went on to elaborate on the new method of teaching Irish through the *Buntús Gaeilge* method. All one had to do was to learn 900 words and phrases 'and one can converse widely in Irish'. He explained that a pilot project was under way in 150 primary schools and 50 second-level schools using this method and that further trials would follow shortly.

Following the introduction of the school courses, Seán Mac Gearailt, then Assistant Secretary of the Department of Education, suggested to Tomás Ó Domhnalláin that he should consider developing a course for adult learners. By this stage Tomás was the Audio-Visual Officer in the Department and was no longer involved with his fellow inspectors in developing or implementing language courses. On the other hand, he continued to be very interested in language teaching and learning and the development of a course for adult learners would be a new challenge. During the subsequent months, Tomás immersed himself in this new task, which resulted in the three volumes of *Buntús Cainte.* These volumes were entirely Tomás's work and were conceived and written in his spare time outside office hours. This fact was acknowledged by the Department of Education. Tomás worked with the illustrator, William Bolger, whose unique illustrations, both in the book and on the RTE programme, became national and international favourites. The state broadcaster, Raidió Teilfiís Éireann (RTÉ), expressed an interest in broadcasting *Buntús Cainte* as a television programme and offered to pay Tomás £3 for every script, i.e. one for every viewing (subsequently raised to £5 per script). In total, Tomás was paid about £700 by RTÉ for the

three series of programmes (a series for each volume) which were broadcast in 1967, 1968 and 1969.

In August 1969, Tomás signed over the rights to the three volumes of *Buntús Cainte* to the Minister for Education for the sum of £654. The contract covered all aspects of *Buntús* and read as follows:

> Sannadh chun an Aire ar é sin uile an t-aoncheart chun Leabhair 1, 2 agus 3 den saothar dar teideal Buntús Cainte a chló agus a fhoilsiú i bhfoirm ar bith (lena n-airítear an ceart chun taifeadáin agus téipeanna a dhéanamh agus cearta teilifíse agus craolacháin) ar feadh iarmhar uile an téarma cóipchirt iontu .
>
> (This assigns to the Minister the sole rights to Books 1, 2 and 3 of the work entitled Buntús Cainte, its printing and publication in any form [including recording, the making of tapes, television and broadcasting rights] for the term of its copyright.)

All subsequent editions of the *Buntús Cainte* booklets indicate that the copyright is vested in the Government of Ireland (Rialtas na hÉireann) and Tomás Ó Domhnalláin never received royalties for his work.

When the first edition of *Buntús Cainte* was published in 1967, 185,000 copies were printed. Each volume sold for 1 shilling and sixpence. On 8 November 1967, in a Dáil question to the then Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley, Oliver J. Flanagan, T.D., asked if he (the Minister) 'was satisfied with the national response to the *Buntús Cainte* lessons; if he feels the lessons have been a success to date; and if 185,000 copies of the booklet have in fact been purchased'. Donogh O'Malley replied:

> I am well satisfied with the national response to the *Buntús Cainte* lessons. All the reports which I have received, and they are very many indeed, indicate that this series of lessons and the television programme related to them, have been received with the greatest enthusiasm. The fact that the lessons are scientifically based and provide adults in a pleasant way with the minimum amount of spoken Irish necessary for everyday conversation are two major reasons for their success. The third is the high degree of good will for the language which exists among our people. In order to meet the demand for the booklet it has been necessary to produce five editions of it. To date, 218,000 copies have been sold and the sales are continuing. (Dáil Éireann 1967)

A short debate (in Irish) followed this reply and T.D.s who contributed to the debate included Dr P. J. Hillery, Charles J. Haughey and James Dillon as well as Minister O'Malley and O. J. Flanagan. There seemed to be cross-party praise for the new *Buntús Cainte.*

Today, more than fifty years later, *Buntús Cainte* continues to enjoy unprecedented popularity. It has been reprinted at least twenty times by the Stationery Office – most recently in 2020 – and millions of copies of the book have been sold since its first publication in 1967. In recent years, tapes and CDs have been provided as a back-up to the written text. It is probably the most popular Irish-language course ever produced. With an accompanying CD, each volume now costs €10. It is available for purchase online from the Stationery Office, Dublin, from Amazon and in bookshops throughout the country. At the time of writing this article, it received a five-star rating on the Amazon website with comments as follows:

> 'I would strongly recommend *Buntús Cainte* to anyone starting to learn Irish.'
>
> 'An excellent publication. Easy to follow with excellent quality CDs'
>
> 'A well-conceived approach to learning what can at best be described as a "challenging" language. The inclusion of the CD and the drawings means that the student is able to see and hear the words at the same time, thus enabling what is commonly called the audio-visual approach. Grammar can be imparted visually rather than through endless rules and lists, and vocabulary is learned through situations. It is no surprise that this book has its legendary reputation; it is clearly as good as it gets for students who do not have daily access to a teacher.'

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(This chapter is based largely on articles and papers by Tomás Ó Domhnalláin which are in the possession of the author. Many of these papers are unpublished and uncatalogued and therefore they cannot be referenced).

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