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Buntús Cainte – Caoga Bliain ag Fás.

(Article submitted by Áine Hyland for publication in Education Matters).
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1967 was an auspicious year for Irish education. It was the year of the introduction of free post-primary education and of free transport to post-primary schools. It was also the year of the publication of the first edition of *Buntús Cainte,* a graded course in Irish for beginners, written by my father, Tomás Ó Domhnalláin. Fifty years later, *Buntús Cainte* continues to enjoy unprecedented popularity. It has been reprinted regularly – most recently in 2017 – and millions of copies of the book have been sold since its first publication in 1967. It is probably the most popular Irish language course ever produced.

Buntús Cainte is a self-taught language programme for adults – and was broadcast on RTE television from 1967 to the early 1970s. The accompanying books were produced by An Gúm (later the Stationery Office) – eventually in three volumes - and in later years, tapes and CDs were provided as a back-up to the written text.

Buntús Cainte was based on a scientific analysis of the daily conversation of adults in Gaeltacht areas of Ireland. That scientific study had been published a year earlier (in May 1966) under the title *Buntús Gaeilge.* It was the culmination of three years of research carried out in An Teanglann, Gormanston, by An tAthair Colmán Ó hUallacháin, OFM[1], Fr. Fidelis MacEnrí, OFM, Gearóid Ó Crualaoich[2] and my father Tomás Ó Domhnalláin, an inspector in the Department of Education. The research had been initiated by the Department of Education in 1963, following the recommendations of the *Commission on the Restoration of the Irish language* 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. A *White Paper on the Restoration of the Irish language,* published in 1965 during George Colley's period as Minister for Education, endorsed this recommendation.

[1] An tAthair Colmán was appointed by the Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley, as the first Director of An Institiúid Teangeolaíochta in 1967.
[2] 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.

The *Buntús Gaeilge* 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. My younger sisters remember sitting around the table at home with my father, sorting and counting the cards and occasionally being paid a few pennies for their labour!

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 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 him/her to follow 75% of a conversation and 500 words would enable him/her to follow 90%.

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.

While the basic work which resulted in the publication of *Buntús Gaeilge* had been carried out by the team in An Teanglann, subsequent work on developing Irish language programmes for primary 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. 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. Courses for post-primary students were subsequently developed by the post-primary inspectorate (*Bunsraith Gaeilge* and *Téanam Ort*) and the methodology was also used to develop courses in other European languages - Écouter et Parler (French); Verstehen und Sprechen (German); and Entendir y Hablar (Spanish). In an essay which Tomás Ó Domhnalláin subsequently wrote for a collection of essays in memory of Conn O

Cléirigh (who had been chair of An Institiúid Teangeolaíochta), he (Tomás) made the point that he had reservations about using the list of most frequently used words for courses for pupils up to the age of 14 or 15[3]. He felt that there should have been greater progression in the language courses for older pupils to include less frequently used words and phrases.

The work involved in developing the new *Buntús* 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" – cardboard cutouts which were backed with Teflon 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 deilbhíní were being used to teach the French language to school children there. In the case of the *Buntús* 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 20th Sep. 1966, where he announced the introduction of free post-primary education, the Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley referred to the development of the *Buntús* school courses. 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 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

[3] Anders Ahlqvist and Vera Capkova (eds.), *Dán do Oide: Essays in Memory of Conn Ó Cléirigh 1927 – 1999* (Dublin, ITE 1997).

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 of office hours. This fact was acknowledged by the Department. Tomás worked with the illustrator, William Bolger, whose unique illustrations, both in the book and on the RTE programme, became national favourites! RTE 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. (This was subsequently raised to £5 per script). In total, Tomás was paid about £700 by RTE 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 tideal Buntús Cainte a chló agus a fhoilsiú I bhfoirm ar bith (lena airítear an ceart chun taifeadáin agus téipeann a dhéanamh agus cearta teilifíse and 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.

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 8th 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[4]:

[4] Dáil Éireann, vol. 230,8th November 1967.

> "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".

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

Today, fifty years later, *Buntús Cainte* continues to sell well. 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. The popularity of the series continues unabated. At the time of writing this article, it receives 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".

"Exercise are straightforward both for written and spoken Irish. Ideal beginners' book".

"Great cartoons".

THE END.

Note about the author.

Áine Hyland (née Ní Dhomhnalláin) is Emeritus Professor of Education, University College Cork. She is a daughter of the late Tomás Ó Domhnalláin, author of *Buntús Cainte.*