

According to the latest Census figures from 2011, 1.77 million people in Ireland claim to speak Irish; compared to the previous Census of 2006, their number increased by 7.1%. A closer look at the figures, however, reveals that not even 80.000 people use Irish on a daily basis outside the education system. Additionally, 30.9% of all Irish students aged 10-19 years admitted that they could not speak Irish at all.

Despite this sort of data collection, the vitality of the Irish language and its role in the everyday lives of people is largely unknown. By virtue of the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030*, the Irish government aims to “increase on an incremental basis the use and knowledge of Irish as a community language”, while at the same time there is a lack of research on both the factors that lead to language use as well as of the settings in which such usage actually takes place.

Several studies show that it is crucial to transmit Irish to the next generation as well as to establish an Irish-speaking surrounding in order to let the language develop and flourish; but the results of these studies also demonstrate that younger age cohorts even in core *Gaeltacht* areas tend to use English very often. In order to assess the strength or weakness of the Irish language in the *Gaeltacht*, it is thus pivotal to find out what the situation of Irish is like among both potential and actual speakers. I will argue that a wide range of parameters have to be taken into account in order to shed light on the linguistic vitality of *Gaeltacht* areas and to come to a better understanding of the dynamics of language maintenance and language shift.

Therefore, a survey among schoolchildren in different places of the Donegal *Gaeltacht* was conducted, investigating the role of the Irish language in their everyday lives. Thereby, not only the degree of language usage in various settings was examined, but also the attitudes of young speakers and their relation to Irish.

This research aims not only to contribute to academic knowledge by providing firsthand, empirically based insights on how language use and attitudes towards the Irish language in *Gaeltacht* areas look like, but also to understand the role of communities and institutions as well as to outline the consequences for the larger political and societal setting.