

IS THE LANGUAGE DYING?

By Pádraig Pearse.

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Is the language dying? Is the tide of vernacular Irish still receding inch by inch, as the waters ebb on the sea-shore? Is Irish, year by year, and month by month, and day by day, the language – the living, familiar, inevitable instrument of speech – of less and less Irish men and women? Are its sounds and idioms native and inborn in a constantly decreasing number of Irish children?

These are questions which no one can answer offhand. They are questions which, even after thought, no-one can answer with confidence. The movement is too complex, the forces pulling either way too various and complicated, the field of action too large, the circumstances of each locality too different, for one to be able easily to pronounce on the fortunes of the movement as a whole. And even when we narrow the issue down to this. Is vernacular Irish holding its own? Has the movement, at any rate, *arrested the decay* of the spoken tongue, if it has not yet fertilised it with the seeds of a new life and caused it to “get up and spread”? – even when we thus narrow down the issue, it is not very easy to give a confident or a general reply. Each will answer in accordance with the facts that have come under his personal observation, or as influenced by the buoyancy or pessimism of his own character. As some see things, decay is going on with as fearful a rapidity as ever; others, equally observant, think that decay has at least ceased if growth has not actually recommenced.

We would set down the following facts which seem to us to confirm the latter and more hopeful view: -

(1). In every district of our acquaintance – and the same testimony is borne by others of other districts – people, with rare exceptions, are no longer *ashamed* to speak Irish.

(2). Speaking generally for the districts which we know – and we know most of Connaught well, and most of Co. Galway intimately – more Irish is now heard than was five years ago.

(3). In a number of purely Irish-speaking districts (that is, districts in which there is no English) literary activity has commenced amongst the younger men; Irish literature is beginning to circulate; and it is becoming “the thing” to collect songs and stories and to write a little Irish for publication.

On the other hand, three great facts which apply to almost every Irish-speaking district in the country make one uneasy for the future:

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(1). It is still the practice (due to ingrained habit rather than the outcome of a conviction) to speak English to children.

(2). Emigration continues to drain the Irish-speaking countrysides of their best blood.

(3). Education (speaking broadly) and the whole tone of public life are still frankly foreign.

It is with the object of directing the attention of Leaguers during their summer sojourns in Irish-speaking districts to the great problem of the position of vernacular Irish that we have written this article. It is essentially the problem of the movement. Though we succeed in convincing the world of the beauty and value of our buried literature, though with infinite striving we build up a modern literature in every way worthy of the race, though we succeed in rearing a generation of Irish students and readers, in our towns, of what avails it all if, in spite of everything, the living language dies in the home?