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Language, Typography and Place-Making: Walking the Irish and Ulster-Scots

Linguistic Landscape

by Bharain Mac an Bhreithiún and Anne Burke

This article focuses on the presence of the Irish and Ulster-Scots languages in both urban and rural environments in the historic province of Ulster and examines the impact of signage in these languages upon the region's sense of place or *genius loci*. For the purposes of this study we place particular emphasis on the contentious issue of minority language presence in road and street signage, considering a range of linguistic territorial markers that reference and help to define specific locales. The key questions of this research address issues such as the ways in which minority language signage can be viewed as part of a wider semiotics of place, in which the typography and other designed elements of place name signage interact with their surroundings, altering and intervening in the *genius loci*. Another key point of interest is the management of the linguistic landscape and the role of design in creating political messages around language use and, more specifically, the relationship between the Irish and Ulster-Scots languages and territory. Geographical terminology **can** be politically contentious, so it is important to signal at this point that all references to Ulster as a region refer to the historic nine county province which incorporates the six counties of Northern Ireland and three counties within the Republic of Ireland. Differences between Northern Ireland and the Republic, as well as divergence within Northern Ireland are investigated, with ideas of segregation, composite or hybridized identities, and the promotion of minority languages as living vernaculars and/or aspects of heritage being brought to the fore.

While the provision of signage in a minority language can be seen as a vital measure in support of the normalization of the language within a particular territory, there are often collateral political and cultural implications to the alteration of the linguistic landscape. The

making visible of long marginalized languages in ways that emphasize their connection to the physical landscape of a particular geographical area is sometimes contested and controversial. Where place names are drawn into this process, local people can find their relationship with places over which they have a sense of guardianship somehow disturbed by a rival interpretive framework. It is for such reasons that the manipulation of the linguistic landscape can never be viewed as purely related to language. It is also a political practice that is often highly contested, particularly within the operational contexts of Northern Ireland and the border areas of the Republic of Ireland.

In this article, the changing linguistic landscape of Ulster is presented as an integral part of a wider system of cultural symbolism that we might label a semiotics of place. According to the Quebec-based researchers Rodrigue Landry and Richard Y. Bourhis, “the linguistic landscape refers to the way in which a language is visually present in the public space of a given territory via advertising, billboards, the signage of commercial and public buildings, street names, official notices, posters and so forth” (qtd. in Urla 134). Across both Northern Ireland and the Republic, the road and street signs that are the principle visual expressions of place names in the environment operate in conjunction with other signifiers of place, including landscape, architecture, and urban planning. They also operate within a well-established system and tradition of visual political symbolism that includes elements such as mural painting, flags, and graffiti.¹ This article will pay close attention to these relationships but will privilege the language choices and typography of the signs themselves, investigating how, through their visual forms, they connote particular interpretations of the region as a place. The effect upon the linguistic landscape of introducing and, indeed, excluding minority languages, and its relationship to the wider notion of *place* developed within cultural geography, is the main focus in this tour of Ulster’s contested signage. Covering a range of cultural and linguistic landscapes in Northern Ireland (Ards and Lecale Peninsulas and

Belfast) and the Republic (Fanad), our tour aims to provide an overview of the current state of play across the province of Ulster at a time when the role of linguistic landscape and its relationship to both place identities and language maintenance policies is being debated in both jurisdictions.

These areas were chosen as case studies because they provide examples of distinct types of linguistic landscape in which the minority language is publicly displayed within a particular discourse framework, both in terms of the historical trajectory of minority language use by the local population and the particular ethno-symbolic landscape in which the minority language signage is presented. In Ards and Lecale, we traverse a rural territory in which the sparse minority language signage that exists is a relatively recent phenomenon and in which sectarian geographies tend to dictate the choice of either Irish or Ulster-Scots in signage. In Belfast, the Gaeltacht Quarter provides an example of signage that has grown up around a grass-roots urban movement that successfully founded a Gaeltacht Irish-speaking community, thereby redefining the notion of the Gaeltacht, which has traditionally been seen as a rural phenomenon confined chiefly to areas of the west coast. The third case study, the Fanad Gaeltacht in County Donegal, belongs within this category of a traditional rural Gaeltacht in the Republic. All three areas offer up typographic and linguistic examples that emphasize the variation that exists within the linguistic landscapes of Irish and Ulster-Scots.

An Introduction to Linguistic Landscape

Academic interest in the linguistic landscape has grown considerably since Landry and Bourhis published their 1997 study of attitudes to French-language signage in Montreal. Using the phrase *paysage linguistique* to describe language displayed in the public spaces of the city, the researchers used questionnaires to gauge the reactions of grade eleven and twelve Francophone students in Quebec and other parts of Canada to the language of public signage.

One of their aims was to establish whether the perception of these signs had an effect on the language choices of the teenagers, particularly in regard to their use of French as the hegemonic language of public life. In 2002, Landry and Bourhis followed this study with a more in-depth look at the effects of Quebec's application of the province's language planning law, Bill 101. Article 58 of this law insists on the unilingual French-only presentation of information on signage, a measure that encompasses street and road signs, as well as commercial façade signage, advertising, and the public notices of the provincial administration. This *francisation* (making French) of the linguistic landscape is presented as an important factor in reversing the dynamics of the relationship between French and English in Quebec in favour of establishing the hegemonic use of the French language. Despite the Francophone majorities in both the province of Quebec and the city of Montreal, English dominated the linguistic landscape in the 1950s and 1960s, testifying to its status as the language of prestige and economic domination within Canada. Landry and Bourhis trace the implementation of a series of laws aimed at reinforcing French by insisting on its dominant visual presence in public life. An initial law favouring bilingualism (Bill 22, 1974) was deemed ineffective in that it sanctioned an ambiguous attitude towards the adoption of French as the dominant vernacular. Quebec premier René Lévesque summed up the problem, emphasizing the effect of bilingual advertising on the allophone and Anglophone populations:

À sa manière en effet, chaque affiche bilingue dit à l'immigrant: "Il y a deux langues ici, l'anglais et le français; on choisit celle qu'on veut." Elle dit à l'anglophone: "Pas besoin d'apprendre le français, tout est traduit." Ce n'est pas là le message que nous voulons faire passer. Il nous apparaît vital que tous prennent conscience du caractère de notre société. (In its own way, in fact, every bilingual poster says to the immigrant: "There are two languages here, English and French; you can choose the one you

want.” It says to the English speaker: “No need to learn French, everything is translated.” This isn’t the message we want to pass on. It appears vital to us that everybody should be aware of the character of our society.) (Lévesque qtd. in Landry and Bourhis, “La Loi 101,” 108-109; author’s translation)

While Landry and Bourhis’s research focused on the effect of the linguistic landscape on perceptions and behaviours, their work has served as a catalyst for a wide range of studies with a rich variety of methodological approaches, including a subgenre of the field devoted to the visibility of minority languages.

The example of Quebec points to the role of signage in the re-establishment of French as the chosen vehicle for the conduct of public discourse, a process that in the context of autonomous communities in the Spanish state became known as linguistic normalization (Pujolràs 2). This restoration of historical linguistic norms within a given territory often favours unilingual over bilingual models for signage and is exemplified by the approach followed in Catalonia, Euskadi (Basque Country), and the Baltic States of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Languages such as French in Quebec, Catalan, Basque, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian, while forming the majority vernacular in their own autonomous or recently-independent territories, have all known long periods of marginalization within larger multilingual states such as Canada, Spain, and the USSR, in which their status was that of a minority tongue. In each of these political entities marked by policies of linguistic normalization, street and road signs, the principle markers of place identity within the linguistic landscape, have come to be presented solely in the vernacular language, such as Catalan in Barcelona or Estonian in Tallinn. Any signage in Spanish or Russian is a residual trace of the former linguistic regime, during which the local language was marginalized by the more dominant vernacular.

In territories where the restoration of the minority language as the first language is not considered a serious option, multilingual approaches tend to predominate. These are often encountered as cases in which the percentage of native speakers has fallen to a low level, where the political will to implement such a policy is lacking, or where perceptions exist that a unilingual approach might lead to serious inter-communal conflict. The multilingual approach is dominant to varying degrees in different parts of Ireland, both in the Republic, where official bilingual signage dominates in areas outside the Gaeltacht, and in Northern Ireland, where an expansion of the currently sparse offering of minority language signage alongside English is under review by the local Assembly at Stormont. Only in the Gaeltacht is there anything resembling the unilingual approach to signage that characterizes territories in which policies of linguistic normalization are being followed.

Linguistic Landscape and Sense of Place

Linguistic landscape in its fullest sense embraces the full range of words occurring in the environment, from the commercial language of the advertising poster and the shop façade to the official regulatory signage erected by municipal and national authorities. It also encompasses the unofficial informal language of graffiti, fly posters, small ads, stickers, and tags. All of these examples can be considered to have an impact on the sense of place of a particular locale, operating together to build a composite place identity based on a symphony of visual linguistic elements. While globalization means that different locales often share a number of common linguistic markers (brand names and logos being a prime example), different combinations of these elements produce a sense of place that remains individual. It should be stressed however, that the management of the linguistic environment is often necessary in order to avoid the destruction of local and vernacular elements in the linguistic landscape. This is particularly pertinent in cases of minority language maintenance, in which

place identities can be occluded by the actions of colonial policy or indeed the neoliberal uncontrolled open economy that has dominated the latest phase of globalization since 1989.

The notion of *genius loci* or sense of place is a key area of research within Cultural Geography, and one that lends itself well to our consideration of the ways in which markers of place are represented within the linguistic landscape of the north of Ireland. The human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan developed his theory of place in the books *Topophilia* (1974) and *Space and Place* (1977), arguing that “through human experience and perception, we get to know the world through places” (Cresswell 20). He coined the term *topophilia* to represent “the affective bond between people and place” (Tuan, *Topophilia* 4), emphasizing that the attachment to and involvement in place was what differentiated it as a category from the open arena of action known as space. Place is about stopping and putting down roots, whereas space implies movement and detachment. Place therefore involves a sense of belonging and an identification with a particular locale on the part of the human actor (Cresswell 20).

Place names are one of the ways in which human beings express this sense of belonging to a particular locale through culture. To give a place a name implies pausing for long enough to form an attachment, providing a contrast with the anonymous and unnamed zones of space. The naming of places, attaching a linguistic sign to a locale, can be considered part of this attachment-forming process. As Tim Cresswell notes, “Tuan has described the role of language in the making of place as a fundamental but neglected aspect of place construction—as important as the material process of building the landscape” (97). Tuan also underlines the ideological implications of place naming when he states that “naming is power—the creative power to call something into being, to render the invisible visible, to impart a certain character to things” (Tuan, “Language” 688). To give a locale a name is to emphasize certain features and ignore others. It is a highly subjective practice that marks the landscape with the cultural bias of the protagonist, something that becomes highly

politicized in the charged circumstances of colonial and postcolonial naming and renaming. In Ireland, the coining of anglicized equivalents of Irish-language place names by the Ordnance Survey in the nineteenth century has been highlighted by Brian Friel's play *Translations* (1980). Less attention has been paid to the manner in which place names, both settlement and street names, have been visually represented and integrated into the wider linguistic landscape. Choices of language, and its visual vehicle, typography, form the basis of the present study.

Many studies that situate minority languages within their linguistic landscape have, at some point, looked at the human actors responsible for the regulation of the linguistic landscape and the provision of signage, pointing out that this has a major influence upon the visibility of languages and their hierarchization in public space. For example, Elana Shohamy and Marwan Abu Ghazaleh-Mahajney's examination of the visibility of Arabic in Israel includes some examination of the role of Supreme Court judges and university administrators in both promoting and denying the visibility of Arabic in different locations within the city of Haifa. Michael Hornsby and Dick Vigers examine the role of local authorities and the Scottish Executive in the provision of Gaelic signage across different parts of Scotland, a study that occasionally highlights differences of opinion with regard to where Gaelic should and should not be seen. Actors, whether local authorities or language activists, are susceptible to the influence of discourses that shape how they believe a language should be displayed, sometimes with disadvantageous consequences for the minority vernacular which often has to struggle hard to be seen. The relegation of a minority language to a marginalized status within the linguistic landscape often points to the belief that its value is as a marker of "heritage" rather than as a vital facilitator of communal everyday life. Other contexts reveal the use of a minority language as a vehicle for the production of touristic charm, or as a

symbol of ethno-cultural identity, self-consciously separated from its role as a medium of everyday communication.



Many of these approaches are evident in the Irish context and have been explored by contributors to an ever-expanding field of linguistic landscape research. In Ireland, the conflict between discourses of linguistic normalization and the economic imperatives of tourism is explored by Mairéad Moriarty in an article examining the controversy that erupted in 2005 over the removal of the place name Dingle from signage and its replacement with the Irish-only version An Daingean. The Official Languages Act (2003), with its subsection of the Place Names Order (2004), enabled the government to change all bilingual place names and signage to Irish only. Moriarty explains how this monolingual policy was applied in Gaeltacht areas as part of an attempt by language planners to ensure the survival and hegemony of the Irish language within regions wherein Irish remains the first language of everyday communication. Similar to the normalization policies in Quebec and Catalonia, the use of Irish language place names is imagined as an important element in creating a supportive environment for the use of the target language or as a means of fixing its hegemonic status as the first language of communication in the minds of residents and visitors alike. The policy is limited to the officially designated Gaeltacht regions, with the rest of the state requiring both Irish and anglicized versions of place names. Such differentiation in terms of policy has left the authorities open to charges of unfairness with many in An Daingean supporting a campaign for the establishment of the bilingual name Dingle/Daingean Uí Chúis, an initiative borne up by the idea that the anglicized place name Dingle represents a widely recognizable brand, the retention of which is vital to the health of a local economy that relies heavily on tourism. Local residents, including many native speakers of Irish, created a community wall in the town, covered with letters of support from well-wishers, as a means of voicing their disapproval of what they saw as a top-down

imposition of policy from Dublin, specifically the Department of the Gaeltacht and Rural Affairs. Here we have a conflict between discourses of language maintenance and economic imperative, with the linguistic landscape caught in the vortex.

Other writers have focused on the role of the linguistic landscape in Ireland in the production of place identities for the tourist gaze. Using two examples in the Republic (Galway and Ballinasloe) and two in Northern Ireland (Newry and Bangor), Jeffrey Kallen reveals how the inclusion and absence of Irish in the linguistic landscape is relevant to the way the towns in question relate to their tourist audiences. His assessment of the way the signs in Irish may be read by visitors with no knowledge of the language begins to address the complexities of this issue, not only in terms of the choice of language in the linguistic landscape, but of the typographic presentation of Irish and the semiotic codes exploited by the sign providers (271).

The Contemporary Politics of Linguistic Landscape in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

These studies point to how debates and discourses around place identities are central to the way in which linguistic landscapes are situated within public discourses across the island of Ireland. The focus on the public display of, and engagement with, language is particularly pertinent in the context of minority languages, which often face hostility to their dissemination and the erection of legislative barriers to their presence in public space. “Being visible may be as important for minority languages as being heard” (Marten et al. 1), a sentiment reflected in the efforts of language activists and advocacy groups in Ireland and elsewhere to ensure and increase the presence of Irish, and to a lesser degree Ulster-Scots, in the linguistic landscape.

Our own focus on the visual representation of place through road and street signs necessitates a brief consideration of how place names are displayed in the linguistic landscapes of the Republic and Northern Ireland. All street and road signs in the Republic are bilingual, apart from in the Gaeltacht, where, as we have previously discussed, the norm is for monolingual Irish signs and place names. As the example of the Dingle/An Daingean naming controversy outlined by Moriarty shows, this apparent consensus is not uniformly accepted and local attitudes to place naming and bilingual or minority language signage can sometimes lead to bitter disagreement and protest. In Northern Ireland the situation with regard to the use of minority languages in signage is more uneven and the potential for political disagreement more acute than in the Republic. Street signage and signs bearing the names of settlements on the edge of towns and villages are the responsibility of local authorities. There are differing practices in the twenty-six Borough Councils, depending on the political make-up of the area, with some councils implementing bilingualism in either Irish or Ulster-Scots, alongside English. Belfast City Council's provision is patchy, with Irish bilingual street signage in many areas of West Belfast (which includes the officially designated Gaeltacht quarter) and a number of isolated bilingual Ulster-Scots signs. Road signs in Northern Ireland are the responsibility of the Department of the Environment and are in English only. The situation with regard to both road and street signage is, however, dynamic and a political process aimed at extending the presence of minority languages in signage is ongoing.

Historically, Northern Ireland as an entity has been hostile to the presence of the Irish language in public space and the display of Ulster-Scots did not enter public debate until the mid-1990s. The current debate is informed by the recognition of both languages in the text of the Belfast Agreement of 1998, the document that forms the basis of the Northern Ireland Peace Process and the political settlement that followed the cessation of political violence and

the establishment of devolved government at Stormont. The Agreement states: “All participants recognize the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland” (The Agreement, Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity, Economic, Social and Cultural Issues, paragraph 3). The Agreement’s recognition of the cultural value of Irish and Ulster-Scots was reinforced when the Council of Europe’s European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML) came into force across the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, in 2001. The Charter committed the UK to introducing a range of provisions and safeguards within the territories in which the languages were used. The signatories of the Charter undertook “to eliminate, if they have not yet done so, any unjustified distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference relating to the use of a regional or minority language and intended to discourage or endanger the maintenance or development of it” (ECRML, Part II, 7.2). This anti-discriminatory sentiment is accompanied by a commitment “to promote, by appropriate measures, mutual understanding between all the linguistic groups of the country and in particular the inclusion of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to regional or minority languages” (Part II, 7.3), an assurance that displays a clear correlation with the text of the Belfast Agreement in relation to Irish and Ulster-Scots. The ECRML also committed its signatories to several obligations related more specifically to the provision of written forms of minority language versions of place names within the linguistic landscape. It stresses “the facilitation and/or encouragement of the use of regional or minority languages, in speech and writing, in public and private life” (Part II, 7.1.d) and, significantly, “the use or adoption, if necessary in conjunction with the name in the official language(s), of traditional and correct forms of place-names in regional or minority languages” (Part II, 10.2.g). In addition to this commitment, the St. Andrew’s

Agreement (2006), negotiated by local politicians and the British and Irish governments in order to re-establish devolved government in Northern Ireland, included a clause that promised the introduction of a significant legislative framework for the development of Irish. Belfast-based Irish Language Advocacy group POBAL has monitored the lack of progress in implementing the promised legislation and in June 2012 launched its *Strategic Framework for the Irish Language*. In this document POBAL makes a number of recommendations in relation to the introduction of Irish into the linguistic landscape, arguing for the importance of visibility and even commenting on the role of graphic design in terms of the typographic presentation of the language:

Across Ireland the vast majority of place names are derived from the Irish Language. This is the case both north and south. Of course, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities place specific duties on the state in relation to the use of traditional forms of place names, and in relation to street and public signage. The visibility of the Irish language is particularly important, not only as part of the fulfillment of these duties, but also as a positive sign of language diversity in the north, and as a sign of the value we place on the heritage that springs from the Irish language. Because of this, and because Irish has been spoken traditionally in every part of Ireland, it is strongly recommended that Irish be seen everywhere. The language, culture and heritage of Irish belong to all. Of course, the use of Irish in signage does not necessarily preclude the use of other languages, where they have been spoken traditionally in those areas as well. (SFFTIL, 2012, 10)

The report goes on to condemn the lack of consistency in the design and implementation of minority language signs, pointing out that “there is no single coherent approach at present” and citing this as a matter of “frustration and confusion for the public” (SFFTIL, 2012, 10),

before making specific recommendations about sign design, including the use of a uniform typography and font size for Irish and English and a consistent approach in terms of the implementation of bilingual signage by government departments, local councils, etc.

Although no specific mention is made of Ulster-Scots, the above extract concludes in a way that appears to support the additional use of Ulster-Scots in areas of traditional Scots settlement, that is, in parts of counties Antrim, Derry, and Down. Ulster-Scots has also been traditionally spoken in the Lagan area of east County Donegal, in the Republic.

While bilingual street signs in Irish and English are standard practice in the Republic, in Northern Ireland they can be initiated by the local council or by a resident of the street in question. A request by an individual is submitted to the council for consideration, together with a petition containing the signatures of the majority of residents on the street. The entire street is then informed of the request by writing and an announcement is placed in the local newspaper and responses invited within a defined period. The council will then consider the responses, taking into account any view expressed by the majority of eligible voters on the street (Coleraine Borough Council, appendix 1, 18). Such a policy makes it rather unlikely that bilingual signs in Irish would be erected in areas with a strongly Unionist population. It also makes it more likely for the signs in Irish or Ulster-Scots to become part of a politicized semiotic system that includes mural and kerbstone painting, the erection of flags on telegraph posts, and even the use of strongly nationally-identified typographic choices for the minority language component of the signage.

POBAL's recommendations for both the visibility and visual presentation of minority languages attempt to remedy this situation to some extent by favouring a uniform and neutral typographic presentation across languages and a more general application of Irish in place signage, as well as the additional use of Ulster-Scots in areas of Scots usage. The proposals contrast with the Bi-lingual Traffic Signs Consultation paper issued by the Department of

Regional Development, Northern Ireland (DRDNI) in 2011. These proposals referred to the use of minority languages within certain categories of road sign, such as the signs alerting drivers to the presence of a school or the welcome signs encountered at the edge of towns and cities. Rather than the maximalist approach to Irish advocated by POBAL, these proposals suggested that only some signs be considered appropriate for the inclusion of minority languages, discounting their use on principal highway signs from the beginning, despite this being commonly accepted practice in Wales and in many parts of Scotland. While recognizing that the Department had obligations under the ECRML, the approach is apologetic and low key. Article 3.4 of the consultation paper states “The types of sign have been carefully chosen so that they can be employed in discrete localised areas to minimise their impact and to go some way to ensuring that they will get as much local support as possible” (DRDNI 5). The inclusion of minority languages was not proposed on main road signage. Irish or Ulster-Scots could only be incorporated into town/village place name signs, supplementary plates to standard warning signs such as those announcing the presence of a school, and to certain tourist signs. The minority language was to be displayed in italics and at eighty percent the size of the English component. English would always be given precedence and, crucially, only one language other than English was to be allowed on any sign, “as drivers must be fully able to assimilate the message displayed on the sign” (DRDNI 5-6).

It is worth pointing out that such restrictions on the typographical presentation tend to reinforce the hegemony of English and underline the marginalized nature of the minority language. In terms of place identities, the document fails to meet the aspirations of previous declarations that point to the role of Irish and Ulster-Scots as cultural assets shared by the entire population. Article 3.10 suggests that the signs would have to be requested by a promoter through their local council (DRDNI 6). The politically polarized geography of

Northern Ireland and the refusal to consider trilingual signage, as well as the reliance on the discretion of local councils, points to a ghettoization of place identities with predominantly unionist areas opting for Ulster-Scots signage and nationalist areas choosing Irish. The DRDNI document, rather than attempting to depart from this binary, only serves to reinforce the sense that Northern Ireland consists of a patchwork of discrete bounded places with identities that do not overlap.

Indeed, such an approach works against efforts to move the language issue away from an “essentialist two-traditions paradigm” (Nic Craith 12), an approach which has proven difficult to erode despite attempts by writers such as Pádraig Ó Snodaigh, the work of Ultach Trust, and more recently by language activists such as Linda Ervine to reconnect Ulster Protestants with their Irish language heritage. Reinforced by the work of bodies such as the Community Relations Council, the binary that reinforces a strictly policed correlation that connects language, territory, and political and religious identities remains in the ascendant.

The proposals were in any case rejected by the Minister for Regional Development, Danny Kennedy (Ulster Unionist Party), who stated that “the judgment I have had to make is based on a relatively small feedback in terms of the public consultation as to whether or not it justifies in the current economic climate that somehow we would choose to spend very valuable resources on an issue like bilingual signs where there is not clear community agreement for it” (“Minister”). Despite two-thirds of respondents favouring the signs and many feeling the proposals did not go far enough, the issue was once again buried. Whilst an economic reason was cited, the failure of this initiative is connected to a more long-term ongoing reluctance on the part of the unionist parties, and in particular the Democratic Unionist Party, to admit any move towards the adoption of an Irish Language Act or the inclusion of the Irish language in the official life of Northern Ireland (Williams 243).

With the development of further proposals in 2012 and the mounting obligation to act with regard to its minority languages, Northern Ireland still has yet to decide on measures that will have a significant effect upon the way it represents itself as a place, through its management of the linguistic landscape. The current situation clearly positions Irish within a nationalist perspective and Ulster-Scots as its unionist counterpart, limiting their use to discretely bounded territories which rarely overlap to create hybridized or shared linguistic identities. This binary is then mapped onto the physical territory, itself marked by a high degree of separation, through the use of place name or street signage in English and either Irish or Ulster-Scots. Our survey evaluates how this minority language signage, the result of *ad hoc* local council application of existing legislation and unofficial activism, forms part of a wider visual symbolic landscape and how it might be incorporated into a new vision of a shared future in terms of language and its relationship with place.

Methodology

The approach followed in our survey of minority language street and road signage across the north of Ireland was inspired by phenomenological approaches to field research in human geography, as well as by established methods for assessing the linguistic landscape in Catalonia and the Basque Country. Choosing to explore the territories by walking them, we attempted to strike a balance between the *dérive*, “an experimental and critical drift through urban terrain” (Pinder 150, drawing on Guy Debord) and a more focused concentration on the main thoroughfares of the settlements studied. While we chose to walk the towns and villages included in the study, the distances between settlements necessitated driving across much of the terrain. This mix of pedestrian and vehicular travel allowed us to experience both road signs and street signs.

Walking the street is the methodology followed by sociologists engaged in a survey that aims to gauge the amount of Basque being spoken in the public spaces of the Basque Country. From 1989, the *Kale Neurketa* (street-measure) has been simultaneously conducted in towns across the seven provinces of Euskal Herria, the Basque provinces under both French and Spanish jurisdiction. Repeated every four years to build up a picture of Basque's spoken presence in the public sphere, on a given day and hour hundreds of recruits "walk down the primary streets of their towns recording the language(s) they hear being spoken" (Urla 132). The *Kale Neurketa* did not assess the visual linguistic landscape, but a method for measuring the visual supply of a language was developed in Catalonia and later adopted in the Basque Country. *Ofercat* appeared in 1999 and was adapted for Basque use as *Euskaini*, "a tool through which town halls and organizations of all kinds could systematically measure and track the presence of Basque in the linguistic landscape" (Urla 134). In 2001, *Ofercat*'s observation of the visual supply of Catalan gave Barcelona a score of sixty-four, with Girona scoring a higher seventy-five, indicating a greater presence of Catalan in the linguistic landscape there. The methodology adopted for the collection of the data includes *rutes aleatòries* or random itineraries, a method that owes something to the *dérive* or urban drifting (Ofercat 12).

While our concern in this study of the Irish linguistic landscape was not to obtain a quantitative, statistical measure of the visual supply of Irish and Ulster-Scots, our approach has taken on a similar methodology. On arriving in a settlement we would undertake a walk that took in the main street, with a number of random detours in order to sample the back lanes or side streets, in the hope of finding signage with a minority language component. By following this methodology, we were able to experience at first hand the sense of place and to gauge how the signage meshed with the broader symbolic universe we were traversing. Our goal was not to measure the supply of the languages in purely quantitative terms, but to

identify how the minority language signage, particularly place name signs, is embedded within a wider semiotics of place. By this, we mean how the typography and other design elements, such as background colours, form part of a visual environment that creates the sense of place of a particular locale. Typography sits within a symbolic field that includes the surrounding landscape and other markers of cultural identity such as flags, painted murals, and the built environment. By walking through the semiosphere on a local level, we were able to experience the way the signage interplayed with other sign systems and to attempt an analysis of these semantic relationships, drawing on the cultural histories of the selected areas.

The three areas chosen were selected on the basis of their distinctive relationships with the Irish and Ulster-Scots languages and because they tell different stories about the relationship between these languages and the cultural and political histories of the island. Lecale and the Ards presents a rural case study in which both Irish and Ulster-Scots are present but are segregated into discrete, touching, but rarely overlapping linguistic reserves. The Gaeltacht Quarter of West Belfast is an urban area in which a history of community-based language activism often at loggerheads with state policy is being gradually drawn into the official discourse of the city authorities and the private sector to create a place identity that draws upon the discourses and practices of city branding. The third case study, the Fanad Gaeltacht in the Republic, presents a counterbalance to the heterogeneous local patchwork of approaches being followed in Northern Ireland in the absence of an official language act for Irish or Ulster-Scots. The Fanad Gaeltacht provides an example of the tensions between a centralized state language policy with its homogenously prescribed solutions being applied by a local council, and the application of signage at townland level by state agencies such as Údarás na Gaeltachta.

Region 1: Lecale and the Ards

Our first sample of the linguistic landscape entailed a journey along a section of the eastern seaboard of County Down, from the town of Strangford on the Lecale Peninsula to Portavogie located on the Ards Peninsula. The trajectory included the small towns of Strangford, Portaferry, and Portavogie and involved taking a ferry across the narrow stretch of water that separates the two peninsulas. This area also straddles two borough councils: Down District Council in Lecale and Ards Borough Council on the Ards Peninsula. Census data from 2011 indicates that 10.78% of the population of South Down had a knowledge of Irish and 5.47% had a knowledge of Ulster-Scots, while Ards belonged to one of the constituencies with the lowest rates of knowledge of the Irish language, returning a figure of 3.09% while 13.27% had some knowledge of Ulster-Scots, a fairly high statistic that might be expected given the area's history of concentrated Scots settlement.

Our trajectory took us from a predominantly Roman Catholic to a predominantly Protestant area of settlement, crossing an invisible border somewhere between Portaferry and Portavogie. The knowledge of Irish in the population follows the contours of religious settlement, given the widespread teaching of the language within the Catholic-maintained school sector. The crossing of this "frontier" was part of our motivation for choosing this route, the other being our awareness of signage in Ulster-Scots in certain villages on the Ards Peninsula. While we concentrated on signs that included place name elements, that is, the names of streets or villages, we also noted the typographical elements within the wider linguistic landscape of the area. Strangford lies close to the site of Saint Patrick's first church in Ireland at Saul (Irish: *Sabhal*), where a large commemorative statue of the saint forms the centrepiece of an annual pilgrimage. The base of the statue, which was erected in 1932, carries an inscription of the saint's name in Irish, Pádraig, and is written there in the *Cló*

Gaelach script, a type form based on the uncial calligraphy of medieval Irish manuscript. This script has a long tradition and was used as the typeface for the great majority of books printed in Irish until 1964. It continues to be used as a display typeface and is particularly well represented in commemorative inscriptions and memorials, but it can also be found in place name signage across Ireland as the typographic vehicle for the Irish language forms of place names.

An Cló Gaelach or uncial has gathered a wealth of political connotations as a result of its history. Many of the early typeforms developed for the printing of books in Irish were forged in a politicized context. The *Leuven* uncial typeface, for example, was named after the Flemish city in which it was designed, Leuven being a centre of Irish language book production due to the founding of a printing press in 1614 at the Irish College there. At this time the printing of Irish language books was restricted in Ireland and this restriction inevitably led to a certain politicization of the language and of the typeface used to print it. The frequent use of *An Cló Gaelach* by the government of the Irish Free State from 1922 and then by the Republic from 1949, created a strong association between the uncial typeform and the institutions of the independent Irish state. One such example is the overprinting of British stamps with Irish language text in uncial, prior to the issue of the state's own stamp designs. *An Cló Gaelach* and the use of the Irish language helped to create a distinct national identity from 1922, differentiating the new state from Britain in semiotic as well as political terms. This necessarily altered the connotations surrounding the typeform in Northern Ireland, where the political context radicalized the population's reading of typography and indeed, the public use of the Irish language (Mac an Bhreithiún, "An Cló Gaelach" 5).

In Lecale and the Ards, we encountered *an Cló Gaelach* at sites of religious significance, particularly those connected with the Catholic Church. At St. Cooley's Wells near Portaferry, a version of this script was used to label the various pools of holy water

where pilgrims were invited to bathe their eyes and their feet (fig. 1). At the Naomh Pádraig Port an Phéire GAA club grounds north of Portaferry, a stylized version of *an Cló Gaelach* has been incorporated into a painted sign attached to the side of the club house (fig. 2). Further north in the Ards, this typeface becomes decoupled from the Irish language and is occasionally encountered in the names of pubs and inns where it becomes a vague indicator of Irish heritage entirely devoid of any connection with the Irish language. While the occasional presence of this typeform punctuated our journey, it did not make its way onto the street signs of the area, which are entirely dominated by standardized forms found elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

The starting point of our journey was the village of Strangford (Irish: *Baile Loch Cuan*) in Lecale, chosen as a point of departure because of our knowledge of the existence of a bilingual sign in English and Irish on a small green in the centre of the village, directly adjacent to the departure point of the Strangford–Portaferry ferry. The freestanding sign reads The Slip / An Fánán, with English on top and Irish below (fig. 3). The typeface used is the work of the Cambridge stone-cutter David Kindersley, who was an apprentice of Eric Gill, the master typographer responsible for a number of typefaces that have become icons of Britishness, including the eponymous *Gill*, currently used in the visual identity of the BBC. The Kindersley MOT streetname alphabet was developed in the late 1940s after Kindersley woke up one morning in 1947 to find that street signs in the centre of Cambridge were being removed and replaced with “a particularly bad sample of ministry of Transport lettering” that was poorly spaced but supposedly more legible than its cast iron predecessor (Kindersley n.p.). Based on Roman engraved letterforms, the Kindersley MOT streetname alphabet is now in use in street signs across the United Kingdom and, as such, can be viewed as a signifier of the British state, imbuing the names of local places with a Britishness inherent in the style of the letters. The traditionalist serifs of the street signage have been recognized as

representing a concept of national identity that, after the Suez Crisis of 1956, would be replaced by a Britishness more open to ideas from the European mainland. The new national spirit was reflected by the public appearance of typography that embraced continental modernism in graphic design. Kindersley's streetname alphabet represents a different approach to Kinneir and Calvert's *Transport* typeface, first adopted for use on British motorway signs in 1958 and in 1963 applied to the entire UK road network (fig. 4). Simon Loxley points out that while Kindersley's typefaces conjure up a sense of tradition, *Transport* created a Britain less alien to visitors from mainland Europe, a place that felt a little more like home (200).

Designed in the wake of World War II, Kindersley's street signage appeared just after the publication of *The Book of Road Signs* by Dudley Noble, commissioned by the British Road Federation in 1946. Jeremy Aynesley points out the connection between road signage and national identity and stresses Noble's view that signage "instilled identity across a colonial Empire at that time, thereby also working ideologically" (Aynesley 7). The gradual introduction of the Kindersley typeface to street signage across the United Kingdom in the 1950s was about more than legibility and practical wayfinding: it was a part of a project in national identity construction.

The bilingual sign in Strangford (fig. 3) therefore presents the reader with a dichotomy typical of Northern Ireland. It suggests that the Irish language can sit comfortably within a wider British identity, or, at least, that it can be incorporated within the identity of the United Kingdom. While for many Irish nationalists this hybridization of identity markers is a matter of discomfort, for others it may not be of immediate concern. The Britishness of the typography may not even register on a conscious level and may indeed be regarded as trivial given the presence of Irish on the sign. While the use of equal type sizes implies a degree of commitment to equality in terms of language policy, the visual hierarchy of

languages on the sign is revealing. In contrast to bilingual signage in the Republic, where Irish, the first national language according to the Constitution, always sits atop the English version, in this case, the Irish place name hovers below its English counterpart. While the very presence of Irish on the sign can be read as an advance for the public visibility of the Irish language, the visual framework, both in terms of layout and typography, points to a design approach that does not seek to challenge the hegemony of English in the linguistic landscape, simply incorporating Irish within a British frame of reference. That the sign displays the marks of vandalism where someone has tried to set fire to it, is indicative, perhaps, of the difficulties inherent in erecting minority language signs in a divided region in which language has been used as one of the markers of ethnic and political identity. Having noted this, vandalism of signage is also known in the Republic, where objection to the particular linguistic make-up of a sign sometimes results in direct action and the daubing of paint over the linguistic element to which the vandal or activist objects.

As we travel across the narrow straits where Strangford Lough (Irish: *Loch Cuan*) opens out into the Irish Sea, through Portaferry (Irish: *Port an Phéire*) and along the road towards Portavogie, we cross from a majority Catholic to a majority Protestant area and this transition is marked by a change in the dominant ethno-symbolism encountered. In Portavogie there are many outward signs of identification with the symbols of Britishness and Protestantism. In the midst of painted kerbstones, we come across another set of the familiar Kindersley street signs. On this occasion, however, there are differences, both in terms of the language choice and in the visual presentation. The sign consists of two coloured bands, the upper section in English and the lower in Ulster-Scots (fig. 5). There is no Irish language element—indeed, Irish is absent from all signs encountered in the village. The upper band consists of black lettering on the white field and reads Bog Road, a designation that connects the street to the name of the town itself, in that Portavogie's original Irish language name

Port an Bhogaigh means *port* or *place of the bog* (Joyce 47). The lower band of the sign has white Kindersley type on a brown background and reads *Heathery Rig Raa*. This is the Ulster-Scots street name and it sits beneath the words *lang syne* which are written in much smaller italic minuscule.

Once again, on this sign the English name takes precedence given its superior ranking in the visual hierarchy, but there is something remarkable happening in terms of the presentation of the Ulster-Scots form. *Lang syne* is Scots for long ago or formerly and on other bilingual signs in Portavogie the word *formerly* is also recorded in italics. The brown background is the default choice for signage related to tourism and heritage and was adopted in the UK in the 1980s after a successful pilot along the *autoroutes* of France, where Jean Widmer's pictograms on a brown field provided a sense of place that referenced the cultural heritage of the regions beyond the motorway. It is telling that Ulster-Scots is being presented as part of the region's cultural heritage and a feature of potential interest to tourists, rather than a living cultural asset to be enjoyed by the community. The visual presentation suggests that we are in a museum of language rather than a living speech community, a notion reinforced by the use of the words *lang syne*. Rather than a graphic design of linguistic normalization that supports the everyday use of the target language, the signs promote Ulster-Scots as a curiosity, part of the local colour of the peninsula. This is despite the influence of Scots on the speech of the local population and the vitality of the language in terms of place name usage.

The absence of Irish is also significant as many of the local names derive directly from the Irish language. The Gaelic linguistic layer is entirely denied in favour of the promotion of Ulster-Scots, if only as a heritage language, safely relegated to the past. This cleansing of Irish from the area is connected to a politics of cultural segregation that denies the underlying hybridity of Northern Ireland's culture. The Ulster-Scots signs of Portavogie

sit within a wider symbolic universe that ties them into a semiotics of British identity, or at least, a local interpretation of Britishness. This includes the painting of kerbstones and bollards and the decoration of streets and open spaces with bunting in the red, white, and blue of the Union flag, as well as the painting of murals and the decoration of Orange Halls. In Portavogie, the Bog Road sign sits adjacent to a painted kerbstone and in the vicinity of a private garden, in which orange lilies and a small blue and orange handcart had been arranged in a horticultural reference to the Orange Order (fig. 6).

In a sense, this politicization of place tends to overwhelm the more subtle play of place naming and landscape that allows the insertion of minority language culture into the physical geography of the area. Strangford village is devoid of the visual ethno-symbolism that we encountered in Portavogie. Its sense of place relies on a gentler interaction of place names and environmental factors. The sign that reads *The Slip / An Fánán* is an indexical sign that announces the presence of the ferry launch, and as we walked along the road in question the old black and white ferry came into view, ploughing its way through the heavy current of the narrows between Strangford and its sister town of Portaferry. While Portavogie's signs are drawn into a maelstrom of sectarian symbolism that locks language into a binary that masks a certain level of cross-community usage of Irish and Ulster-Scots, the bilingual sign in Strangford achieves to some extent the decoupling of language and the ethno-political background of potential speakers. While a framework of Britishness is provided by the Kindersley typeface, this is not overstated by the presence of a surrounding symbolism and the place name is allowed to interact with the surrounding signifiers of place identity, the landscape and architecture of the region.

Region 2: Gaeltacht Quarter, Belfast

Our second walk was focused on the Falls Road area of West Belfast, a neighbourhood in which use of the Irish language is particularly strong. Census data from 2011 indicate that 24.62% of the Beechmount ward's residents had knowledge of Irish, while 2.05% had some knowledge of Ulster-Scots. In recent years this section of West Belfast has been rebranded as the Gaeltacht Quarter, or *An Cheathrú Gaeltachta*, as part of a city branding exercise that has, according to one more cynically inclined commentator, created "a post-Troubles Belfast ... sliced and diced for consumer convenience" (O'Connor). While the branding of urban villages might be presented as an exercise in marketing, the notion of an *urban* Gaeltacht, unusual in the Irish linguistic context, has deep roots in a history of community activism going back to the founding of the Shaw's Road Gaeltacht community in the 1960s.

Siún Carden outlines the process whereby the city has been, in the words of a local property developer, "transformed from a city of two halves to a city of seven quarters" (qtd in Carden 4). This quartering of the urban space has been framed as part of the effort to re-imagine the city and its neighbourhoods, to deterritorialize an urban space divided along the fault lines of religious and nation identity, bypassing both the recent past and its symbols of ethno-national division. Most of the new quarters are located close to the commercial centre of the city, with the exception of the Titanic Quarter, situated on a re-landscaped brownfield site formerly given over to shipbuilding. Only the Gaeltacht Quarter attempts an engagement with what has been termed "Troubles Belfast," those parts of the city with a visible legacy of conflict, that have in recent years become the focus for a local brand of war tourism, centred on the political murals. The choice of the Irish language as the focus for one of these quarters is interesting in that it "engages with a place, a theme and a residential population that have long featured in public discourse about Northern Ireland's divisions" (Carden 11).

While other quarters such as the Queen's Quarter in the University district make specific use of street signage as a means of branding space by incorporating the quarter's

logo into the street sign, this is not as yet the case in the Gaeltacht quarter. However, it would be incorrect to assume that the street signage of the Falls Road and its side streets have only a minor role to play in the branding process. The bilingual signs are one of the principal points in which the place identity of the Gaeltacht Quarter is made visible. Place names, particularly the names of streets, are a key element within the linguistic landscape of an area in which many small shops, businesses, bus stops, and taxi stands display signage in Irish.

During our walk up the Falls Roads, we were able to recognize a certain degree of variety in the application of bilingual signage. In terms of the place identity of the Gaeltacht Quarter, these subtle differences are significant—they reveal various strategies employed in making the Irish language visible, all of which have now been incorporated into the official rebranding of place represented by the quarterization of Belfast. At Clondara Street / *Sráid an Chluain Dara*, (fig. 7), we noted the presence of an official street sign in the Kindersley streetname alphabet font—only the anglicized version of the name appears on this sign, but directly underneath another sign has been fixed to the wall, this time displaying the Irish version of the street name. The hand-painted font is a version of the *Cló Gaelach* typical of an older generation of street signs in the Republic, quite different from the official British typeface. This supplementary activity reveals the hand of language activists in influencing the linguistic landscape of the locality. Far from being a top-down exercise in language planning or place branding, the Irish signage of what was to become the Gaeltacht Quarter has been part of a lengthy process of community activism with its roots in such projects as the Shaw's Road Gaeltacht, founded by a group of Irish speaking families in the 1960s. While Irish is now clearly being drawn into the official signage of the City Council for this part of the city, the variations in bilingual signs suggest that this is still somewhat in flux, bringing to mind POBAL's aforementioned recommendations for a neutral uniform approach. An exploration of how to make the Kindersley typeface work for bilingual street signs is evident in the street

sign for Thames Street / *Sráid na Tamaisc*, where mixed upper and lower cases have been used in place of the usual full upper case, in a way that offers a closer accommodation of Irish grammar (fig. 8).

In addition to Council signage and language activism, Irish is visually integrated into the linguistic landscape of the Falls Road area through a range of advertising billboards, commercial signage, official notices, and public transport companies. The latter is something of a tokenistic gesture, as the absence of the Irish language on bus stops and signs in other parts of the city would appear to go against the promise of mobility which transport offers. In June 2011 the public artwork *Teanga* was unveiled on the Falls Road in celebration of the Irish language and its foundational role in the place names of Belfast (“Culture Minister”). Functioning as a form of recreational place monument and referencing the St. Brigid’s Cross as symbol of peace at its centre, the artwork incorporates a stone seated area into which the Irish townland/village names of Belfast have been carved. These include those of overtly unionist areas such as Shankill / *an Seanchill* (fig. 9), where ironically such a sign would be unlikely to survive, finding refuge here on the Falls Road. Significantly, the monument eschews use of *An Cló Gaelach*—the combination of Irish language and uncial type having become a sign of republicanism in the urban semiotics of Belfast’s heavily segregated ghetto areas, as is evidenced through its use on graves in Milltown Cemetery (fig. 10), an example of the grafting of the political onto the aesthetic.

Region 3: Fanad Gaeltacht, County Donegal

Our third sample takes us to the Fanad peninsula of County Donegal in the Republic. Road signs are one of the ways in which the geographical transition from one political entity to another is signalled; crossing into County Donegal, we encounter a new type of signage (fig. 11). All the main road signs are now bilingual Irish/English, as are all street signs. This is a

major shift in practice in relation to Northern Ireland, where, despite the heavy emphasis on minority language place markers, bilingual or multilingual signs remain a rarity and the vast majority of signage is monolingual English. The road signs of the Republic share the Kinneir & Calvert *Transport* typeface used in the UK but apply it very differently. The statutory requirement that all place names be displayed in both official languages has led to a policy of visually differentiating the two versions—in road signs, English is in upper case *Transport*, while Irish sits above in italics at fifteen degrees to the vertical, using upper case only in the initial letter of each word. The italics are not used in the UK and thereby fulfil the function of differentiating the road signs from those on the other side of the Irish border. The Irish text is further differentiated from the English by a series of idiosyncratic manipulations of the typeface that reference an Irish calligraphic tradition associated with cultural treasures such as the Book of Kells. Both upper and lower case A is rendered in a manner derived from the illuminated manuscript tradition, with a rounded, closed form in both cases. Upper case M and N are also given this curved treatment reminiscent of their appearance in manuscript. Although not the case in this particular sign, the i used in Irish language signage in the Republic is often dotless, resembling the Turkish letter ı. This usage has been carried over from the era of *An Cló Gaelach* when a dot was used above letters affected by the grammatical lenition—in modern Irish this function is achieved with the addition of an h after the lenited letter. Its retention in a modern typeface on road signage is indicative of a discomfort at fully aligning the Irish language with modernity, a reluctance that reaches back to debates within Conradh na Gaeilge (The Gaelic League) in the early twentieth century, when Antiqua Roman typefaces were branded English imports unsuited to the display of Irish texts (Staunton 6). As was the case with the use of *lang syne* on signage in Portavogie, here we have another case of heritage thinking in terms of the visual representation of a minority language within the linguistic landscape. The temptation to have Irish language signage play

the role of a vehicle for national identity relegates it from information provision to decorative identity marker. In the bilingual context, the italicization and use of this hybridized typeface in rendering the Irish version of the place name is a marginalizing practice that makes it more difficult to read and somehow more disposable than its English language counterpart. Indeed, this typographic practice on Irish road signs has been severely critiqued, a position supported by the findings of a recent study commissioned by Conradh na Gaeilge (“Green Light”). The study has put forward a proposal, welcomed by the Ministry of Transport, Tourism and Sport, for a new road sign using identical typeforms for both languages, with the differentiation signalled through the use of different colours, as is the current practice in the design of Scottish Gaelic signage. In differentiation to the cultural connotations of *Transport*, the sign proposed would be *Turas* test typeface, thereby both foregrounding Irish and retaining a distinct identity in relation to the signage of other countries.

As we travel into the Fanad peninsula, several kilometres north of the small town of Rathmullan / *Ráth Maoláin*, we encounter a boundary sign that reads *An Ghaeltacht* (fig. 12), indicating that we are now inside a territory with a high concentration of Irish speakers.

Unlike the Belfast Gaeltacht, with a network of speakers, the bulk of which has acquired Irish through schooling or adult education, the Gaeltachtaí (plural form of Gaeltacht) of County Donegal remain areas in which Irish is spoken as the first mother tongue language of the community, although this status is continually under revision as the language is subject to pressure from English. In terms of signage, the Gaeltacht offers yet another semiotic system in terms of representing place names in the linguistic landscape.

Signs follow the typographic rules of the previous example in using a manipulated version of *Transport*, with one major recognizable difference: the complete absence of any English version of the place name. Thus, we start to encounter signs in Irish only. These are all road signs, both directional signage and plaques at the edge of small settlements; we did

not encounter street signs in this predominantly rural area. On the edge of the small settlement of *Baile Uí Fhuaruisce*, we find one of these official signs and note the absence of the dotted i and the use of the open letter a derived from manuscript forms (fig. 13).

Curiously, we immediately recognize another sign which appears to be in competition with the official one. The second sign has avoided typographic modernism and instead opts for a contemporary version of the *Cló Gaelach* uncial script. We note the same undotted i and script a, but this time the lettering is much closer to manuscript forms. It is curious that the practice of erecting alternative signage in a conservative typography exists in the context of this community of Irish speakers. The discourses of linguistic normalization that have created the legislative framework for a monolingual and protectionist linguistic landscape in the Gaeltacht do not remove the desire to represent place as a marker of heritage and tradition stretching back to the pre-modern era. While some signs suggest Irish is a contemporary living linguistic force in the area, others foreground its connection with the past. In this case the place name itself is not regarded as a sufficient mark of this continuity, and the temptation to emphasize the antiquity of the language within the territory is rendered by the uncial lettering. Is this visual conservatism, perhaps, a reaction to the endangered status of the language in the area?

As we travel through the Fanad Gaeltacht, we come across many examples of these alternative signs referencing the names of individual townlands along our route. The townland or *baile fearainn* is the smallest geographical unit of land in Ireland and the rich toponymy of the townland system continues to be used in addresses across the island. As Patrick J. Duffy states:

The names of our townlands are an important part of their signature function in the landscape as well. The names encapsulate the soul of the place—sounds, accents and dialects of ancestors, and in their meaning often reflect aspects of local landscape,

topography, land quality or ownership. There is a poetry in placenames everywhere in Ireland that rhymes with a local identity and sense of belonging: like a popular song or piece of music, the sound of the townland evokes local memories and reminders of home. (n.p.)

The townland signs of the Fanad Gaeltacht consist of inscriptions on angular granite slabs, placed within the landscape of *machair* and bogland, often with privileged vantage points of the peninsula's deeply indented coastline. The signs appear to be attempting a discreet fusion with the landscape but have the unfortunate appearance of gravestones and risk connoting a funereal, rather than any connection between land and language. A variation on this genre of signage can be encountered in the Connemara Gaeltacht of County Galway, where the place name inscriptions, in a more hand-made, less digitized version of uncial, are hewn into rougher masses of rock that blend into the surrounding bogscape. This aesthetic signals a relationship to place that confirms the notion of the Gaeltacht as a source of pre-industrial authenticity, as represented in texts such as Douglas Hyde's *The Necessity of De-Anglicising Ireland* of 1892. The erection of this alternative form of folk signage in Fanad by Údarás na Gaeltachta in competition with the official road signs put up by Donegal County Council, suggests the existence of a diversity of opinion in regard to the way place is evoked in the linguistic landscape of the Gaeltacht, a theme previously encountered in the debate over the removal of English in An Daingean, County Kerry.

These signs also testify to the continued importance of place and its representation at even the most local level within the Irish rural environment. The continued use of townland names throughout the island of Ireland is to some extent connected to the Gaelic tradition of *Dinnseanchas*, the lore of place, a practice whereby a poet of high local standing would act as the guardian of the locality's founding myths, often giving account of how an area acquired its name.² Sometimes this would connect a place to figures from the pre-Christian

pantheon, or make the connection with the land and landscape explicit, while at other times “pseudo-etymological or fictitious stories are invented to explain names” (Denvir 108).

Walking through the connected system of townlands in Fanad, with their signage on the micro level of land division, a knowledge of the Irish language helps one to read the landscape like a book, while those with an acquaintance of local place lore and the subtleties of the local topography have access to an even more sophisticated appreciation of the interplay of land and language. Gaeltacht signage exploits the wealth of the *Dinnseanchas* tradition and reinscribes the landscape with semantically rich evocations of place that are eroded by monolingual English signage. The County Tyrone poet John Montague expresses this neatly in his poem *A Lost Tradition* when he writes about the semantic alienation associated with language shift from Irish to English with the landscape becoming a manuscript “we had lost the skill to read” (qtd. in Denvir 108). This is, perhaps, one of the best arguments in favour of the extension of minority language signage to those areas of Northern Ireland where monolingual English place name signage prevails; as well as offering a territorially rooted support structure for the use of minority languages, it opens up new vistas of meaning to the residents of the area and creates the conditions for the greater appreciation of the nuances of place that characterize what Tuan calls topophilia.

Conclusions

The three case studies present a wide range of results in terms of the key points identified at the beginning of the article, raising wider issues in terms of political developments surrounding language visibility in both Northern Ireland and the Republic. It is clear that the design of place name signage, and indeed the occurrence of minority languages within the wider environment, can be said to impact on what we have identified as the semiotics of

place. The management of the semiotics of place is a political act and represents prevailing attitudes and discourses.

In Northern Ireland there is currently a tension between two views of minority language signage in terms of its territorial distribution and positioning. As the examples we encountered in County Down and Belfast testify, signage in Irish tends to be restricted to areas in which the Catholic and/or nationalist population live. Ulster-Scots signs appear in some areas of seventeenth-century Scots settlement, which today tend to have a Protestant and unionist majority. Minority language signage sits within a wider set of symbols, many of which tend to reinforce belonging to one of two competing cultural identities. This pattern is based very much upon what Nic Craith calls the “essentialist two-traditions paradigm” (12), a strengthening of the association of one community’s claim to particular discrete territories, forming a sectarian patchwork of identity tied to land ownership and residency across Northern Ireland. This policy of placing signs within their semiotic comfort zones does little to promote the idea of Northern Ireland as a shared space or of the Irish and Ulster-Scots languages as part of a shared cultural heritage, a notion enshrined in the Belfast Agreement. It is also a rather bizarre interpretation of territory and language use in an era of high mobility, making greater sense at walking pace than when driving in a vehicle, when the fragmented identity of the wider territory becomes more apparent.

This binary, is, however, being challenged by a number of initiatives that have yet to make an impact on the ground but which have the potential to decouple language from political and religious identities and to untangle the mythology of which languages are appropriate within a given territory. On one hand there are interesting developments taking place that break the taboo on Protestant uptake of the Irish language. In 2012, following the efforts of Ultach Trust to widen the appeal of Irish across the entire community, Linda Ervine, sister-in-law of the late David Ervine, former leader of the Progressive Unionist

Party, opened the Irish language centre *Turas (Journey)* in the Skainos Centre on the predominantly loyalist/unionist Newtownards Road. Despite having come under attack by a representative of the Orange Order, who warned Protestants against learning Irish (“Orangeman”), the centre advocates exactly this and does not see language and political unionism or a British identity as mutually exclusive. Interestingly, one of the images used in their promotional material is a bilingual street sign of Newtownards Road / *Bóthar Bhaile Nua na hArda*, an aspirational expression of a non-sectarian approach to language that defies the dominant binary evident thus far in terms of signage, such as that encountered on our tour.

As well as this and other related initiatives to teach Irish across the community, there is continued pressure on the Northern Ireland Assembly from groups such as POBAL to legislate for an Irish Language Act that would push for Irish signage across Northern Ireland in line with the UK Government’s commitments in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. In 2014, the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which periodically assesses implementation of the Charter, found that problems raised in their previous report of 2009 continued: “the difficulties regarding the promotion of Irish and Ulster Scots observed in the previous monitoring round have continued, especially in the case of Irish. There is still no legislative basis for the use of Irish due to the lack of political support. Unjustified restrictions on the use of Irish in some fields covered by the Charter, including in courts, still persist” (Application of the Charter 4.D). One of the areas particularly signalled out with reference to the proceedings of the Assembly itself was “a persisting hostile climate concerning the use of the Irish language” in Northern Ireland (Application of the Charter, paragraph 236). There remains extreme reluctance on the part of the Democratic Unionist Party, the main unionist party in the power-sharing government structures, which continues in 2015 to veto the introduction of the Irish

Language Act, although the publication of draft proposals for such an act were finally announced in February 2015 by Northern Ireland's Culture Minister Carál Ní Chuilín (Sinn Féin). There exists a cultural hostility to the Irish language within the ranks of the Democratic Unionist Party, which occasionally finds expression on the floor of the Assembly, as in 2014 when Gregory Campbell MLA parodied the language and later went on to state that earlier commitments to introduce an Irish Language Act were "written on toilet paper" ("Gregory Campbell"). Campbell's comments were challenged by a cross-community group of activists including Linda Ervine and Janet Müller of POBAL, which marched to Stormont to demand respect for the Irish language. Whilst challenges to the binary exist within Northern Ireland, they are still being held in place by a political superstructure reluctant to dismantle the politics of the two-traditions paradigm, a set of beliefs that still inform most of the language management decisions in respect to the display of Irish and Ulster-Scots. With Northern Ireland politics in a familiar deadlock, community initiatives appear to be leading the way at eroding the binary. The trilingual sculptural sign in the centre of the village of Dunloy, County Antrim, where three rocks or "stones" bear the Irish *Fáilte*, the Ulster-Scots *Fair faa ye*, and the English *Welcome* ("Village of Dunloy"), is a rare but hopeful local example of a perhaps increasing appreciation of the shared cultural resource of Northern Ireland's minority languages and their right to co-existence within the same territory.

In Northern Ireland the debate around the management of the linguistic landscape has focused on the presence or absence of signage in minority languages, and the design of that signage remains non-standardized and subject to the prevailing attitudes of local actors. In the Republic, there is also an ongoing debate around the management of the linguistic landscape with regard to the position of the Irish language in the public sphere. In 2012 the Minister for Transport gave an encouraging response to Conradh na Gaeilge's proposals that the design of

road signs be changed to give greater priority to the Irish language version of place names (Melia). A tendency to see minority language place name signage through the prism of heritage or as a vector for a traditional expression of national identity appears to be being eroded in the Republic by a desire to see the two official languages placed on a more equal footing or even for more emphasis to be given to the Irish version of a name within signage design. In the proposed design, both languages would be displayed in the same type size in a sans serif typeface, with Irish above in white and English below. This would end the marginalizing practice of italicizing Irish versions of place names and would mean “that road signs will be compliant with the Official Languages Act for the first time” (Melia). It is not yet clear how this proposed design change would impact upon Gaeltacht signage but as the dual signage system in operation in Fanad demonstrates, not all actors are convinced of the ability of a national standardized system to convey the nuances of place at the level of the townland.

The management of the linguistic landscape with regard to minority languages and the actors responsible are a key theme of this research. The case studies have shown that in Northern Ireland and the Republic a range of different approaches exist. The situation in the Republic is more homogenous with standard national solutions being occasionally challenged at local level with additional signage initiatives. Proposed changes in signage design emphasize the promotion of Irish as a vernacular, with the influence of *An Cló Gaelach* a diminishing, although still present, feature of place name signs in the Gaeltacht and in the street signage of many towns. In Northern Ireland, we must keep in mind that in 2015 there remains no minority language signage on the national road system and the signs that exist are almost all street signs. Their distribution is guided by the principles of the two-community binary and they stand as part of a sectarian semiotics of place that does little to develop the notion of these languages as shared cultural assets within a shared space. Despite this rather

depressing assessment it is clear that there exists an enormous potential for a reconfiguration of the linguistic landscape which would honour the spirit of the Belfast Agreement and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The creation of an Irish Language Act would revolutionize the situation and offer an opportunity for the reimagining of Northern Ireland as a shared linguistic and cultural space with a hybridized place identity.

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¹ The Institute of Irish Studies at Queen's University Belfast has undertaken several studies of political symbolism in the public spaces of Northern Ireland. Neil Jarman's work on murals and the symbolic construction of urban space can be accessed at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/bibdb/murals/jarman.htm>

² The reader may wish to explore the work of scholars such as Gearóid Denvir, Eamonn Wall, and Kevin Whelan on the *Dinnseanchas* tradition. The theme is also explored in the work of the poets Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Thomas Kinsella.