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<AT>**Commercialising the *cúpla focal*: New speakers, language ownership, and the promotion of Irish as a business resource**

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<AB>ABSTRACT

<TX>This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork in two Irish towns to examine the mobilisation of the Irish language as a resource for business by new speakers of Irish. We examine how local community-level Irish language advocacy organisations have implemented initiatives to specifically promote the use of Irish in business, primarily as visual commercial engagement with the language paired with the use of the *cúpla focal*. The article explores how new speakers of Irish understand what might be perceived as the tokenistic mobilisation of Irish and what value they invest in their efforts to use the *cúpla focal*. We explore tensions over language ownership that emerge as more fluent proprietors of ‘bilingual businesses’ position themselves in relation to the ‘newness’ of these speakers. (Irish, commodification, language ownership, language advocacy, language policy, commercialisation, language in business, new speakers)\*

<A>INTRODUCTION

<TX>During a 2015 fieldwork trip to a town in western Ireland, we had the chance to chat with Noel, the owner of an office supply shop that prominently featured Irish-English bilingual signage on the exterior and interior of the premises, as well as on its products. He had overseen the integration of Irish into the shop's visual displays a few months earlier, and his efforts had already been recognised by the local Irish language advocacy organisation during their annual ceremony to celebrate the town's 'bilingual businesses'. This acclaimed integration of Irish had also helped draw in new customers, Noel noted, as the shop had now become the town's go-to supplier for bilingual calendars, planners, and other office supplies. In tracing his own trajectory with Irish, Noel explained that he had studied the language as a school subject growing up but "never took to it", and that his interest in Irish had only been rekindled in recent years after traveling through continental Europe and observing how communities had persisted in speaking their local language varieties, citing the use of "local dialects" in Italy "even though they all have Italian". Having developed this newfound appreciation for Irish, he was now keen to keep driving the visual integration of the language in his business. When it came to speaking Irish, however, Noel professed that he wanted to find the time to take an Irish language course but had so far "only been able to pick up a few phrases here and there". When asked if (potential) customers ever came in and spoke Irish, Noel recounted that some people would indeed come in and "throw a bit of Irish at you", so he would try to "get a few words in" before switching to English for the rest of the interaction. This dynamic, he went on to observe, seemed to satisfy his Irish-speaking customers: as he explained with a cheery laugh, "most people, if they get in a little bit [of Irish], they're happy".

With these references to 'a few words' of Irish being enough to keep the customers of his bilingual business happy, Noel points to the interrelated contemporary phenomena that is the

focus of this article. In positioning Irish speakers as content with the opportunity to use ‘a little bit’ of Irish in his shop, he illuminates the belief that what is widely known in Ireland as the *cúpla focal* (lit. ‘a few words’) is sufficient for engaging with Irish speakers, including in businesses positioned as bilingual (Walsh 2012; Brennan 2018). The encouragement given to Noel’s integration of Irish into his business, meanwhile, can be seen as linked to an on-going shift towards the valorisation of minority languages—including by minority-language advocates—as economic resources under globalised political-economic conditions, processes that are often discussed in sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological literature in terms of the commodification of language (Heller 2010; Duchêne & Heller 2012; Pietikäinen, Kelly-Holmes, Jaffe, & Coupland 2016). Moreover, Noel’s personal background in Irish highlights another key dimension of current engagement with the Irish language in Ireland: as a nonnative speaker of Irish who has tried to relearn and use (at least a little bit) of the language as an adult, Noel could be considered one of the ‘new speakers’ of Irish who now comprise the vast majority of Ireland’s Irish-speaking population. However, he differs from the new speakers of Irish as defined by O’Rourke & Walsh (2015), who use the term more specifically to refer to individuals who report using Irish with fluency, regularity, and commitment. This discussion of the use of the *cúpla focal* by less proficient new speakers of Irish thus extends the scope of the original definition and brings into focus a broader spectrum of social actors beyond the more fluent speakers described in earlier research.

Focusing on the intersection of these three phenomena, this article draws on ethnographic fieldwork in two Irish towns to examine the mobilisation of the Irish language as a resource for business by new speakers who do not in fact speak much of the language. As we discuss in more detail below, in both sites studied, local community-level Irish language advocacy organisations

have implemented initiatives to specifically promote the use of Irish in business, a domain in which English has long dominated; both organisations, moreover, foreground a primarily visual commercial engagement with the language paired with the use of the *cúpla focal*. In delving into the role of new speakers in these efforts to promote the use of Irish in business as an economically valuable commercial resource, this article explores how these speakers understand what might be perceived by other Irish language speakers as their tokenistic mobilisation of the language, and what value they invest in their efforts to use the *cúpla focal*. These discussions also draw out how these new speakers position their engagement with the language in relation to language revitalisation projects, highlighting how their use of Irish in business can be seen as contributing, if only in small ways, to revival efforts. It also explores the tensions over language ownership that emerge as more fluent proprietors of ‘bilingual businesses’ position themselves in relation to the ‘newness’ of these speakers. These discussions then conclude with a consideration of whether or not such initiatives can be seen as actively contributing to the revitalisation of Irish. The next sections thus provide some background to the concepts at the centre of this discussion: the *cúpla focal*, the promotion of minority languages as economic resources, and new speakers.

<A>A FEW WORDS, A MULTITUDE OF DEBATE: QUESTIONING THE *CÚPLA FOCAL* IN IRELAND (AND FURTHER AFIELD)

<TX>As mentioned above, the *cúpla focal* literally means ‘a few words’ in Irish and refers to an emphasis on the symbolic or tokenistic use of a few words or phrases in the Irish language. This expression is commonly used in Ireland to refer to the linguistic competence of people who are

not necessarily able to speak much Irish but still to a greater or lesser extent see themselves as part of Ireland's Irish-speaking community.

Such emphasis on the more symbolic display of a language can be found in many minority-language revitalisation contexts across Europe, and is often subject to criticism from more fluent speakers who see this as mere tokenism. In the Basque Country, for example, Urla (2012:81) has observed that language advocates often lament the tokenistic approach of campaigns ostensibly promoting the use of Basque; Woolard (2016), meanwhile, has similarly noted that the efforts by the Castilian-speaking president of Catalonia (2006–2010) to integrate limited amounts of Catalan into his speech were the object of linguistic parodies, ironic commentary, and criticism in news and digital media. The integration of minority languages in the linguistic landscape, meanwhile, is often subject to similar critique and positioned as tokenistic with little impact on active language use: Hornsby (2008), for instance, has observed that the presence of Breton in the linguistic landscape of public places does not necessarily stimulate the public use of the language.

In Ireland, however, the scope of the use of 'a few words' of Irish may be greater than in other minority-language contexts, as nearly a century of language promotion and policy at the national level has given rise to relatively high and widespread passive knowledge of Irish among the national population. Since independence in 1922, Irish has been the object of a dual language policy centred on efforts to revive the language. On the one hand, the State has pursued policies of maintenance in the *Gaeltacht*, which are the officially defined, geographically delimited areas in which Irish was considered to still function as a community language. This policy has its roots in the Romantic nationalism that contributed to the movement for Irish independence: at end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, cultural and then political nationalists in

Ireland had constructed these peripheral areas in which Irish was still spoken as both a symbol and a repository of the unbroken linguistic heritage and the traditional culture that set the Irish nation apart. The Irish language was exalted by nationalists as representing the distinctiveness of the Irish as a people and thus justifying their right to sovereignty, and the remaining communities of native speakers living in the geographically isolated areas were idealised as the guardians of this key to distinctive Irishness. A legacy of this policy is the enduring conceptualisation of the Gaeltacht as the bounded, territorialised home of the ‘authentic’ Irish language and its ‘true’ native speakers.

In the rest of the country, meanwhile, the State has implemented strategies of revitalisation, which have relied heavily on the compulsory teaching of Irish in the national school system and the promotion of the language within public administration. The compulsory teaching of Irish has left a complicated legacy, particularly among older generations of Irish people who were taught Irish before pedagogical reforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s began to shift the State-guided teaching methodology away from a focus on classical, literary Irish and towards more conversational uses of the language (Coady & Ó Laoire 2002; Kelly 2002). As Tovey, Hannan, & Abramson (1989) suggest, the approach to teaching Irish that was in place for decades in Ireland did little to inspire engagement with the language outside the classroom among several generations of Irish youth:

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[Irish] became associated with a package of cultural and ideological elements which had to be swallowed whole: Irish music, dance, republicanism, particularistic versions of history, conservative Catholicism and general anti-Britishness. Although it did, over time, ensure that few members of the population lacked at least ‘a few words of Irish’, and that

a substantial section today are moderately fluent bilinguals, pride in and love of Irish appears to have survived almost despite the experience of ‘school Irish’. All the evidence suggests that for the majority of the population it takes a few years out of school to recover one’s love for the language, after the drubbing it gets in the formal school process. (see CLAR Report, n. 38; Tovey et al. 1989:20)

<TX>At the same time, however, the compulsory teaching of the language has been instrumental in producing generations of (potential) new speakers (Walsh 2011), with almost 40% of the country reporting themselves as able to speak Irish as of the 2016 census (Central Statistics Office 2017). New speakers of Irish indeed now far outnumber native speakers in Ireland, with the latter category encompassing both speakers from the Gaeltacht and those who were brought up in Irish-speaking homes outside the traditional Gaeltacht areas (Walsh, O’Rourke, & Rowland 2015). Many of the new speakers of Irish who comprise the vast majority of those who classify themselves as Irish speakers, however, have a more passive competence, reflected in the census statistic that less than 2% of the country speaks Irish on a daily basis outside the education system (Central Statistics Office 2017).

With respect to the promotion of Irish in public administration, meanwhile, the early Irish State instituted Irish language competence as a prerequisite in the civil service as part of an effort to position Irish more favourably on the linguistic markets of an independent Ireland (Ó Riagáin 1997). While this requirement was dropped as part of the State’s retreat from spearheading the revival movement in the 1970s, the Official Language Act (OLA) 2003 represented the first piece of legislation to guarantee the linguistic rights of Irish speakers with respect to Irish language service provision in the public sector (Walsh & McLeod 2008; Walsh 2012). The OLA



obliged public bodies to commit to the delivery of services in Irish as well as English through the development of Irish language schemes, and to the use of Irish-only or bilingual signage and stationery.

Critique of the effectiveness of the OLA schemes, however, points to the issue of the *cúpla focal*. As noted by Walsh & McLeod (2008:31), ‘most bodies commit themselves to only minimal increases in oral communication by front-line staff, by ensuring, for example, that receptionists answer the telephone bilingually and familiarise themselves with “basic greetings” in Irish or that staff providing counter service to the public use “simple bilingual greetings” with every customer’; such measures, they argue, do not provide customers with an active offer of Irish or English language service that might encourage sustained interaction through Irish.

This situation would seemingly reflect what Walsh (2012:336) has termed the ideology of ‘the few words (will do)’, which he defines as ‘a widespread if largely undocumented belief in Ireland that a minimal level of Irish suffices in all circumstances’. Noting the pervasiveness of this ideology in the provision of public services, Walsh (2012) observes that this ideology has for decades held notable sway in Irish language policy and promotion, as well as in Irish politics and public speaking more broadly. Historically a mainstay of political speech and official ceremonies (Lysaght 2011:160), the *cúpla focal* has long been mobilised as ‘a badge of Irishness’: ‘In Ireland to be Irish does not mean to speak Irish, but to have the command of a *cúpla focal* [few words]’ (Watson 2016:77–78). Traditionally used at the beginning of a speech and then often peppered throughout the following (otherwise English-only) oration, the *cúpla focal* has been characterised as a way of ‘flavouring one’s speech’ (Hickey 2016:17) that is drawn on in both official and informal speech in Ireland. As Kelly-Holmes (2005) has observed in the case of Aer Lingus, the *cúpla focal* is also a mainstay of the public-facing discourses of certain companies—

though far from all, as highlighted by Aer Lingus competitor Ryanair’s lack of engagement with Irish—based or operating in Ireland:

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Aer Lingus is the Irish national [airline] carrier, and as such has traditionally been seen as having a duty to represent the nation and its symbols, and one of these is, of course, the Irish language. Consequently, air stewards have always said the ‘*cúpla focal*’—literally a few words, used by people to indicate that they will make an effort and say something small and tokenistic in Irish before moving onto the important information (in English)—to welcome the assembled passengers onto the airplane. So, there is an element of tokenistic code-switching involved: the few words in Irish make the group feel cohesive; it makes them feel good about being Irish; and, it emphasizes the product’s difference for tourists and visitors. However, the safety demonstration that follows the ‘*cúpla focal*’ would never be given in Irish, nor would it be given bilingually. So, the effect of this linguistic decoration is, once again, to reinforce the symbolism at the heart of using Irish in many domains in Irish society. (Kelly-Holmes 2005:132)

<TX>Effectively tying together many of the points addressed in this discussion of the *cúpla focal*, Walsh (2012:336) relates the widespread recourse to a few words or phrases in Irish as reflecting ‘the dominance of learners over fluent speakers, the long history of official language promotion and the emotional attachment of Irish people to the notion of a “native language”, even though most of them do not speak it’.

<A>PROMOTING MINORITY LANGUAGES AS ECONOMIC RESOURCES: THE MOBILISATION OF  
COMMODIFICATION DISCOURSES IN MINORITY-LANGUAGE ADVOCACY

<TX>As mentioned in the introduction and discussed further below, this article focuses on two sites in which community-level language advocacy organisations specifically seek to promote the use of Irish in business. In Ireland and many other European minority-language contexts, the private sector has long been heavily dominated by the ‘bigger’ languages—in this case, English—that have come to function as the languages of trade, commerce, and economic development. To address these dynamics, European minority-language advocacy efforts at various levels have increasingly sought to extend their reach into the private sector by encouraging and supporting the use of minority languages in business and enterprise. Recent efforts, ranging from the grassroots to the governmental, to promote Welsh (Welsh Government 2014), Scottish Gaelic (DC Research 2014), and Basque (Basque Government 2015), for example, have highlighted the importance of using these languages in business as an element of both language revitalisation and economic development. As advocacy efforts centred on such languages have in many cases traditionally focused on such domains as education and the public sector, in which government bodies could in theory exercise more direct influence over language policy and practice, these more recent initiatives targeting private enterprise represent a relatively new sphere of minority-language promotion.

In shifting their focus to the commercial domain, moreover, such language-advocacy initiatives have often moved away from their traditional discourses foregrounding questions of cultural heritage, group identity, or linguistic rights, and towards an emphasis on the economic benefits of using a minority language (see, for example, Brennan 2013 and Woolard 2016). This trend within language advocacy can be situated within a much wider on-going shift in the

discursive and material treatment of language(s) worldwide: through processes often discussed in sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological literature as the *commodification of language*, language and multilingualism have increasingly come to be conceptualised, (de)valorised, and exploited as economic resources under globalised political-economic conditions (Heller 2010; Heller & Duchêne 2016; Pietikäinen et al. 2016). Whereas language has since the era of modern nation-state formation primarily been discussed in terms of national belonging, cultural identity, and rootedness in a particular place, this conceptualisation now co-exists and interacts with the emergent framing of language as an economic resource for the globalised economy, in which language and communication are central to the management of inter- and transnational business networks, to the functioning of the knowledge and service industries, and to the achievement of differentiation on saturated global markets (Duchêne & Heller 2012).

Highlighting both the co-existence of these understandings of language, and the possibility that attempts to treat language as a commodity may be challenged, fail, or begin anew in diverse ways, Heller & Duchêne (2016:141, 145) have defined the commodification of language as an on-going, ‘not necessarily linear’ process through which dimensions of ‘the ideological construction of the nation-state’ (such as the conceptualisation of language as a regulatable element of national citizenship or as an index of authentic cultural identity) are integrated ‘more directly into the workings of capitalism than they were before’. Research on the commodification of language has focused on two broad processes through which this more immediate integration of language into economic activity tends to take place (Heller 2010). On the one hand, language can be treated as a standardised work skill, which can be measured and regulated by employers and acquired by any (potential) employee, regardless of identity (Heller 2003; Urciuoli 2008). On the other hand, language can also be treated as a source of added value

thanks to the differentiating authenticity it is presumed to index through its links to specific places and peoples, and thus to the distinction it can lend to products, services, enterprises, and individuals on saturated markets (Cavanaugh & Shankar 2014; Lacoste, Leimgruber, & Breyer 2014).

It is particularly in relation to this latter role that minority languages, which historically have been viewed as lacking economic value compared to more dominant languages, have increasingly come to be seen as economically valuable (Pietikäinen et al. 2016): due to their close association with a specific people in a specific place, minority language ‘can be treated as shortcuts to cultural authenticity’ (Coupland 2010:16). At the same time, the increasing recognition of bilingualism as a source of cognitive benefits has meant that learning and speaking a minority language (as part of a multilingual repertoire) is coming to be more associated with added value rather than with cognitive or cultural deficit, as had previously been the case (Jaffe 2007). As we discuss below in relation to the two sites studied here, it is these ideological constructions of minority languages as marketable resources that have increasingly come to be mobilised in the contemporary discourses and strategies of minority-language advocates across (and beyond) Europe, with the use of minority languages in business being framed in terms of such notions as enhanced customer service, niche market generation, unique selling points, or brand differentiation (e.g. Barakos 2016; Brennan & Costa Wilson 2016; Woolard 2016).

The concept of the commodification of language remains a subject of lively debate, with recent critiques raising questions regarding such issues as whether the market can be understood to underlie all linguistic practice or whether language can actually or entirely be commodified (e.g. McGill 2013; Grin 2014; Holborow 2015), and indeed this article does not seek to argue

that Irish is (or is not) commodified through the promotional and commercial practices studied here. Rather, we examine Irish language advocacy organisations' mobilisation of the market-oriented discourses that have emerged from the on-going discursive and material shift discussed in research on language commodification, focusing on how these organisations' business-focused initiatives strategically foreground visual Irish and the *cúpla focal* in order to promote the language in a domain long dominated by English and left unaddressed by the Irish State's language policies. As the following discussions illuminate, these intertwined shifts in both the worldwide conceptualisation of language and local efforts to spread the use of Irish into new spaces and invest it with new values bring to the fore the role of new speakers in contemporary efforts to revive the language.

<A>BRINGING NEW SPEAKERS OF MINORITY LANGUAGES INTO THE PICTURE OF LANGUAGE  
REVITALISATION

<TX>Within a growing body of sociolinguistic, linguistic, and linguistic anthropological literature, the term 'new speaker' has come to be used as a lens for studying individuals who did not learn a (minority) language through family transmission in the home or through exposure to its use within their local community, but instead acquired it through the education system or as adult learners, often in the context of language revitalisation projects (O'Rourke, Pujolar, & Ramallo 2015). Although the mobilisation of 'new speakers' within English-language research is relatively recent, the term is rooted in minority-language contexts and revitalisation projects in which speakers, academics, and language planners alike have long grappled with the idea of 'newness' in relation to languages and their speakers. For example, the term *euskaldunberri*, (lit.

‘new Basque speaker’) has been widely used in the Basque Country since the 1980s to refer to speakers who acquired Basque through formal education, either as children or adults (Urla 2012; Ortega, Urla, Amorrortu, Goirigolzarri, & Uranga 2015); in Galicia, meanwhile, Galician sociolinguists and language planners adopted the term *neofalante* (lit. ‘neo-speaker’) to describe new speakers of Galician (O’Rourke & Ramallo 2013). In the Irish context, meanwhile, the distinction between ‘old’ and ‘new’ speakers has often been more implicit: the term *Gaeilgeoir* literally means ‘Irish speaker’ but is rarely, if ever, used to describe a native Irish speaker; rather, it is often used as a derogatory label for new speakers (Kabel 2000; O’Rourke 2011).

Beyond serving as a lens for bringing inter- and transdisciplinary researchers together, the concept of new speakers also serves to challenge one of the historically taken-for-granted mainstays of both language revitalisation movements and (socio)linguistic research: the privileging of the native-speaker ideology (O’Rourke & Pujolar 2013). A romanticising ideology of the native speaker has long played a central role in the on-the-ground realisation of language revitalisation movements. Both reacting to and drawing on the connections forged between language, identity, culture, and nationhood by nineteenth-century romantic nationalism (Woolard 1998; Bauman & Briggs 2003), language revitalisation movements across Europe seized on the remaining native-speaker communities of their local indigenous languages as the protectors of their nations’ distinctive linguistic and cultural authenticity and thus as the justifications of their distinctive nationhood. As Woolard (1998) observes, these movements tended to reproduce the ideologies of language, identity, and nation that had led to the minoritisation of European languages now seen as in need of revitalisation, and in doing so the movements emphasised the critical importance of (re)constructing a native-speaker community.

Within the past two decades in particular, sociolinguistic research has increasingly sought to challenge and move past this model for reversing language shift primarily oriented towards the maintenance or revival of native-speaker communities (e.g. King 2001; Romaine 2006). As part of this move away from a primary—or in some cases exclusive—focus on native speakers, research on minoritised languages has come in recent years to engage more actively with the linguistic practices, trajectories, and ideologies of new speakers of these languages. While new speakers of minority languages have always existed, they now often match or even far outnumber native speakers in many indigenous minority-language communities, especially in the European context of language revitalisation (Ó hÍfearnáin 2015; O'Rourke & Ramallo 2015; Ortega et al. 2015; Pujolar & Puigdevall 2015). The emergence of this new profile of speaker has been fuelled by the implementation of more supportive language policies at the regional and national levels, which have paved the way for enhanced provision for minority languages in public domains such as education and the media. As traditional speaker communities have increasingly been eroded by the social, political, and economic processes of globalisation and modernisation, new speakers have emerged as a distinct social category across a range of contexts and are often positioned as notably different from the more traditional speakers, generating tensions over longstanding ideologies of language, identity, and nationhood (O'Rourke et al. 2015; Smith-Christmas, Ó Murchadha, Hornsby, & Moriarty 2018).

Much of the research on new speakers, however, has focused on more proficient speakers of 'new' (minority) languages. In outlining the four key criteria shaping the situated definition of new speakers, though, Jaffe (2015) points to the wide range of speaker profiles that might be encompassed by the term: she identifies the levels or kinds of competence and knowledge in the 'new' language(s), the social milieus in which acquisition has taken place, the patterns of



linguistic practice, and the life stage at which the new speaker learned the language or began using it socially as all being factors in the categorisation of social actors as ‘new speakers’. More recent sociolinguistic and linguistic research has highlighted the importance of studying new speakers ranging from the potential to the fluent (Ramallo & O’Rourke 2014; Smith-Christmas et al. 2018). In focusing on new speakers of Irish who are less proficient in the language, a central contribution of this article is that it examines social actors who may have previously been left out of discussions of both native and new speakers of minority languages.

#### <A>THE FIELDWORK SITES

<TX>In studying the intersection of the *cúpla focal*, the commodification of language, and new speakers, we draw on ethnographic fieldwork completed between December 2013 and October 2015 to focus on two community-level Irish-language advocacy organisations, which is referred to here as *Áth Mór as Gaeilge* ‘Athmore in Irish’ (henceforth *ÁthMórG*) and *Baile Rua le Gaeilge* ‘Ballyroe with Irish’ (henceforth *BaileRuaG*). Each comprising a core team of three staff members, these organisations operate in towns here referred to as Athmore and Ballyroe, respectively, which are both located in the (south)west of the Republic of Ireland. These two towns rank among Ireland’s top twenty largest urban areas, and neither is located within the Gaeltacht, which as mentioned above are the regions geopolitically defined as the areas in which Irish has traditionally functioned as a community language. In seeking to support the use of the language outside Ireland’s officially Irish-speaking regions, *ÁthMórG* and *BaileRuaG* focus on promoting the use of Irish as an economic resource for the business communities of their surrounding urban areas.

More specifically, *ÁthMórG* and *BaileRuaG* both promote Irish as a low- or even no-cost source of authenticating distinction and market differentiation (see Brennan 2018 and Brennan & Costa Wilson 2016 for further discussion). Although the two organisations were founded with the overarching objective of fostering the spoken use of Irish within their surrounding (business) communities, their work centred on the private sector has primarily foregrounded the commercial potential of visually mobilising the language as a marketing and branding resource. Both *ÁthMórG* and *BaileRuaG* draw on discourses of commodification to highlight the added value and differentiating uniqueness of Irish, with the aim of positioning the language as brimming with commercial potential and profitability. Across their promotional materials (including their websites, brochures, and research reports), the organisations highlight the added value of integrating Irish into the visual elements of a business, such as product labels, external and internal signage, menus, and stationery, and emphasise the minimal investment needed to capitalise on the differentiating authenticity of the language. *BaileRuaG*'s brochure, for instance, argues that the 'unique characteristics' of Irish constitute a fruitful 'marketing tool on signage, stationery, packaging and advertisements'. *ÁthMórG*'s website similarly positions the integration of Irish into such elements as 'bilingual signage, stationery, marketing, menus, [and] social media' as a 'simple' and 'cost-effective' approach to 'add[ing] value' and 'attract[ing] business'.

The promotion of spoken Irish does figure into both organisations' efforts to promote the use of Irish within their local business communities, but it is mostly limited to the provision of small cards or booklets setting out Irish greetings, phrases, and words accompanied by their English translations and phonetic transcriptions. These materials provide enough support to encourage both business proprietors and customers or clients with little to no Irish to try the

language out and have fun with it, but they do not necessarily facilitate a full conversation or commercial interaction in Irish. Both *ÁthMórG* and *BaileRuaG* also try to encourage participating businesses to set aside one day of the month or week to use Irish greetings and pleasantries with customers, but again there is not a push for full customer service through Irish. Both the pronunciation materials and the Irish language day initiatives thus effectively promote the use of the *cúpla focal* by the owners, managers, and employees of businesses that seek to position themselves as bilingual.

A key strategic strength of advocating a primarily visual mobilisation of Irish paired with the *cúpla focal* is made clear by the organisations' promotional materials: by emphasising the visual, rather than the spoken, use of Irish, *ÁthMórG* and *BaileRuaG* can promote the language as a commercial asset accessible to any business owner or manager, regardless of linguistic competence in Irish. Both organisations encourage nonfluent speakers of Irish to participate in their business-centred initiatives, highlighting that proficiency in the language is not a prerequisite for successfully (and profitably) rendering a business bilingual. In their informational pamphlet, for example, *BaileRuaG* addresses the potential concerns of less proficient merchants by arguing that 'the Irish language can be a great advantage to every type of business in various ways, even if you don't have fluent Irish!'. *ÁthMórG* adopts a similarly reassuring approach on their website, confirming that 'you don't need to be a fluent speaker to use the language in your business'.

By both foregrounding the visual mobilisation of the language and the use of the *cúpla focal*, and downplaying the need to speak Irish beyond 'a few words', the two organisations effectively seek to position the Irish language as a valuable commercial resource available to any business owner or manager, regardless of linguistic proficiency. In the following sections, we

draw on data from semi-structured interviews and from fieldnotes recording interactions with local merchants in Athmore and Ballyroe to explore the situated reception of these initiatives, drawing out the (contested) role of new speakers in efforts to enhance the presence of the Irish language in Ireland's commercial sphere.

#### <A>VISUAL IRISH AND THE *CÚPLA FOCAL* AS PLATFORMS FOR PROMOTING THE LANGUAGE

<TX>If participation in ÁthMórG's and BaileRuaG's business-centred initiatives is any indication, it would seem that the organisations' emphasis on a mostly visual use of Irish combined with the low-pressure use of the *cúpla focal* did indeed encourage Irish speakers of all levels, even including nonspeakers of Irish, to take part in the promotional efforts. The vast majority of owners and managers of bilingual businesses with whom we spoke were new speakers of Irish who recounted a wide range of linguistic trajectories. A few people described themselves as only remembering the *cúpla focal* from their schooldays, while others now considered themselves fluent after having been introduced to the language through the education system. Some had hated Irish when forced to study it in school and had only come back to the language later in life, generally after attending Irish immersion courses as teens or living abroad as adults, while others shared fond memories of their time spent as children at Irish summer colleges. A few people had grown up outside the Gaeltacht but had spoken Irish at home with their families, and several had attended Irish-immersion primary and secondary schools, with a number going on to complete their university degrees in or through Irish.

The strategic strength of the visual Irish and *cúpla focal* approach to promoting the use of the language in business was made particularly clear in the case of new speaker merchants who

were not comfortable with speaking Irish to their customers but who nonetheless wanted to help support the language. One such merchant was Luke, the owner of a Ballyroe restaurant who frequently hosted events organised by BaileRuaG and who had installed a large display in the dining room featuring common or amusing Irish-language phrases paired with their English translations and phonetic transcriptions. Recalling his experience with Irish as a schoolchild in Ballyroe, he shared his memories of learning Irish as a compulsory school subject and of being physically punished by his teachers when he made mistakes. Corporal punishment was viewed as acceptable practice in the Irish national educational system until the 1980s and was routinely employed across school subjects (Maguire & Ó Cinnéide 2005), and thus Luke would have been part of the generations for whom such punishment was often meted out in various classes. As the below interview excerpt indicates, Luke indeed recalled being “beaten” while learning other subjects, but he particularly associated this punishment with the Irish language:

<EXT>

When I was in school corporal punishment was commonplace, so people were- we got beaten, stuff was pounded unto us, and particularly the Irish language was pounded into us by the [religious order] who taught us at the time.

<TX>Although he had long supported BaileRuaG’s promotion of Irish in business and had recently made an effort to relearn the language, Luke explained that he still experienced what he called “the fear” when he encountered Irish speakers due to these lingering bad memories of punishment, and he did not want to risk inflicting this painful sensation on any customers who might experience similar anxieties when faced with speaking or being spoken to in Irish. For this reason, he did not emphasise Irish-language service provision in his hotel:

<EXT>

I don't want to be the one that puts the fear into somebody else ... I'm not going to start saying "Would you like water?" in Irish to somebody who's then going "Oh my god, he's going to speak to me in fluent Irish" ... I think most businesses would cooperate with any positive initiative for the Irish language, but there is the fear that needs gotten beyond.

<TX>The emphasis that BaileRuaG, like ÁthMórG, placed on welcoming any little bit of Irish that merchants felt comfortable integrating into their businesses, however, seemed to offer business owners such as Luke an avenue for participating in the organisations' initiatives, as the merchants could feature bilingual signage without being compelled to risk generating 'the fear' associated with a policy of addressing customers in Irish. As Luke went on to explain, BaileRuaG had helped him to apply for and receive a grant towards the cost of his large sign displaying Irish-language phrases, and he saw this sign as his way of introducing his international guests to Irish and thus potentially laying the groundwork for their future interest in the language:

<EXT>

... so some of the people who are coming in here, they fly into [the region's airport], it's their first time- possibly their first time out of the US, possibly their first time in Europe, possibly their first time in Ireland, possibly their first time in [Ballyroe's county], and then they come in here and that's their first introduction to the Irish language, so maybe, and I see people taking photographs of it and for some people it's a talking point, for some others discussing it, but maybe one of a 100,000 of those people will turn out to be like you where they'll find some sort of interest in the Irish language and possibly go try

to learn it so that's what, that's I feel that's my purpose in using Irish in my business, is to encourage people or to, at least to introduce Irish to people that are not familiar with it, in whatever level, and for them then it's their own journey whether they decide to go further with it or not, but to encourage it...

<TX>As a new speaker who was hesitant to use even a few words of Irish with his customers, Luke instead displayed the *cúpla focal* and gave his guests the opportunity to see, discuss, and perhaps even try using a few phrases in Irish themselves. Thus even though he did not feel comfortable with the idea of addressing his guests in Irish, Luke felt that he was still able to promote interest in the language and thus potentially contribute to language revitalisation efforts through the bilingual sign that BaileRuaG had helped him to procure.

Down the road from Luke in Ballyroe, stationery shop owner Nicola had also been supported by BaileRuaG in her efforts to integrate Irish visually and use her *cúpla focal*. A new speaker who had learned Irish in school, Nicola explained that she loved the language despite not speaking it very well and that she had always tried to integrate Irish visually into her business “in little ways” since opening decades earlier, putting up bilingual signage inside and outside the shop. She had long known the staff of BaileRuaG as customers and enthusiastically signed onto their Irish-in-business initiative as soon as it began in the early 2010s, eagerly anticipating the organisation's seasonal delivery of bilingual posters with themed greetings for holidays such as St. Patrick's Day and Christmas. Having developed what she described as a “habit” of speaking a few words in Irish to her customers over the years, she now kept a copy of BaileRuaG's pamphlet with Irish greetings and their phonetic transcriptions and English translations behind the counter so that she could easily access it when interacting with customers and build up her

linguistic repertoire in Irish. During our first chat with Nicola in 2014, she mentioned that she had become known in the town for her ready use of the *cúpla focal*, and during a subsequent visit to her shop in 2015, the extent of her reputation became even more evident: an immigrant family new to the area who had enrolled their daughter in the local Irish-language immersion school had sought Nicola out to help with the language, and she was now tutoring the young girl in her shop a few days a week after school. Having embraced the *cúpla focal* as a new speaker and used her commercial interactions as a platform for building up her competence and confidence in Irish, Nicola was thus now taking an active role in language revival efforts by helping a new generation of new speakers to learn, and potentially love, the language.

At the same time, business owners and managers who were more fluent in Irish could mobilise the visual Irish signage promoted by *ÁthMórG* and *BaileRuaG* to indicate that an Irish-language service was available for any customers—including new speakers—who wished to avail of it, without necessarily having to risk making customers uncomfortable by actively addressing them in Irish. A number of merchants in both Athmore and Ballyroe explained that they had displayed bilingual or Irish-language signage in order to alert customers to the possibility of speaking Irish in their shops. One such merchant was Matthew, the owner of a family-run hardware shop in Athmore that was recognised by *ÁthMórG* in 2015 and 2016 for its work with Irish. Matthew came from a family of Irish-speakers and had always spoken Irish with certain customers, following in the footsteps of his father. He had only recently decided to coordinate with *ÁthMórG* in the integration of Irish-language signage, however, in order to alert more (potential) customers to the fact that they offered an Irish-language service; as he explained it, the “whole point” of working with *ÁthMórG* was “putting up signage literally in people’s faces so they know there’s a service through Irish”, which he saw as contributing to the revival



movement's aim of helping Irish remain a community language in Ireland. This plan had seemed to work, as Matthew noted that the new signage and *ÁthMórG*'s publicity promoting it had brought in new, primarily 'new speaker' customers who wanted to practice their Irish. Thus while Matthew himself was not necessarily a new speaker himself, his involvement with *ÁthMórG*'s initiative and his effort to display more Irish-language signage alerted new speaker customers to the fact that Matthew was willing to speak Irish with them and provide either a full customer service through the language or simply an opportunity to practice their *cúpla focal*, thus allowing them to identify a commercial space in Athmore that welcomed their attempts to use even just a few words of Irish.

#### <A>QUESTIONING THE COMMITMENT OF VISUAL IRISH AND THE *CÚPLA FOCAL*

<TX>As mentioned earlier, most participating merchants were new speakers of the language, including those who spoke little to no Irish. While many of the more fluent or regular Irish speakers interviewed discussed the positive impact of increasing the visibility of Irish, particularly as a move towards normalising the language within their local urban areas, some merchants who were more active or fluent speakers of Irish criticised the lack of spoken Irish in 'bilingual businesses' that visually displayed Irish. Their comments indeed seemed to speak to a challenging of the legitimacy or authenticity of the commercial use of Irish in Athmore and Ballyroe.

In Athmore, a degree of scepticism concerning the effective bilingualism of the town's 'bilingual businesses' was expressed by Cillian, a local cheese merchant. Characterising himself as a fluent "but not native" speaker who had learned Irish in school, he explained that he had

chosen to hang one monolingual Irish *oscailte/dúnta* ('open/closed') sign in his shop. For Cillian, the one monolingual sign was enough to indicate the presence of the Irish language in his establishment, and he related how he made an effort to initiate interactions in Irish with customers. However, he questioned the legitimacy of the businesses publicised as 'bilingual' by *ÁthMórG*. He noted disparagingly that a closer investigation of most of the businesses that had been recognised as 'bilingual' by *ÁthMórG* would reveal a large number of signs in Irish but no day-to-day interactions in the language. Through this commentary, he effectively sketched out a contrast between his own practices and those of the purportedly bilingual businesses in Athmore: whereas he displayed only one monolingual Irish sign but actively sought to provide a full Irish-language service to his customers, the other businesses boasted an array of bilingual signage but did not seek to interact with their customers in Irish beyond the occasional *cúpla focal*.

Similar views were shared by the owners of a local family-run bookshop in Ballyroe that featured an Irish name, hand-painted bilingual shelf markers, and a relatively extensive selection of Irish-language books. An active Irish-language advocate, the owner Síle recounted that the integration of Irish into her family's shop derived from their lifestyle: she and her siblings had been brought up bilingually outside the Gaeltacht and the family lived bilingually, so it was natural for the shop to be bilingual in reflection of the way they lived. The bookshop regularly hosted Irish-related events, such as bilingual storytelling sessions for children, and on several occasions we observed various members of Síle's family greet browsers in Irish or point out Irish-language books to customers looking for suggestions. Though very engaged in promoting Irish both within their local area and across Ireland through their creative endeavours, Síle and her mother Mary were decidedly less enthusiastic about efforts to position Irish as a commercial asset in Ballyroe. When asked if they were involved with *BaileRuaG*'s initiative, the mother and

daughter were very quick to say “no”. As Síle went on to explain, the initiative’s ‘bilingual business’ decals were displayed on shops throughout the town, but in so many of these businesses it was “a situation of *níl Gaeilge agam*, ‘there’s no Irish’” when you go inside. As with Cillian, for Síle and her mother the problematic aspect of efforts to promote Irish in business was not necessarily the attempt to position the language as a marketing tool, but the lack of Irish spoken in businesses touted as bilingual. Such positioning may stem in part from their commitment to Irish as active new speakers: while neither Cillian, Síle, nor Mary were from Gaeltacht areas, all three spoke of their commitment to speaking Irish and integrating it into their lives. The use of visual Irish and the basic *cúpla focal* by merchants who were less willing or able to speak much Irish might then have appeared disingenuous to these more active speakers, who integrated Irish into their businesses at least in part as a manifestation of their personal interest in speaking the language.

Cillian and Síle’s comments, moreover, point to the potential tensions over language ownership that might emerge as *ÁthMórG* and *BaileRuaG* support the use of Irish by less proficient new speaker merchants. More actively fluent business owners like Cillian and Síle may also see the language as a resource they too can mobilise in differentiating their commercial enterprises: beyond hanging bilingual signage, they can draw on their linguistic competence in creating a certain Irish-language experience for their customers, whether it be by initiating conversation in Irish as Cillian does or by hosting bilingual storytelling sessions for children as Síle does. The visual integration of Irish by merchants less willing or able to speak the language could thus be seen by more actively Irish-speaking entrepreneurs as crowding the niche market of bilingual businesses and thus potentially cutting into their profits. In this sense, the promotion of a largely visual Irish paired with the *cúpla focal* could effectively challenge the traditional

access to the economic capital associated with the language in Ireland, where access to the economic benefits of the language has historically been linked to having the level of proficiency in Irish required for jobs in such domains as the civil service, the education system, or the Irish-language media. By foregrounding visual Irish and the *cúpla focal*, however, *ÁthMórG* and *BaileRuaG* may effectively lay the foundations for an opening up of access to the economic advantages of Irish, potentially bringing new speaker merchants who master only ‘a few words’ of the language—or even none at all—into competition with the entrepreneurs whose linguistic proficiency may have otherwise given them more exclusive ownership of the added value of commercial Irish.

#### <A>CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

<TX>In promotional initiatives in many parts of the world, the framing of indigenous minority languages such as Irish as economically valuable commercial assets has grown increasingly widespread among language advocates and policymakers alike. These market-oriented discourses can co-exist with, draw on, or confront more traditional valorisations of minority languages rooted in cultural or political notions of identity, place, and authenticity. In seeking to better understand the role of new speakers in efforts to mobilise commodification discourses to promote minority languages as sources of added value for private enterprise, we have examined the situated integration of Irish into businesses in two sites where local language advocacy organisations promote Irish as a commercial resource. In these contexts, new speakers represented the majority of merchants who took part in the organisations’ Irish-in-business initiatives, which foreground both the use of Irish as a primarily visual marketing and branding

tool and the low-pressure use of the *cúpla focal* rather than the provision of a full Irish-language customer service. For many of these merchants, the tokenistic presence of Irish on signage, menus, and so on and efforts to greet customers with the *cúpla focal* were seen as fostering inclusion, accessibility, and interest in the language; others, however, expressed a more cynical view of the use of Irish in business by merchants who were new or even nonspeakers and less, or not at all, proficient in the language. These divergent positionings draw our attention to questions of language ownership and the ‘newness’ of speakers, as well as to the negotiation and contestation of new speakers’ access to Irish as a commercial resource that may emerge from such business-focused advocacy efforts.

Whether or not such initiatives actively contribute to the revitalisation of Irish remains the elephant in the room. The more fluent speakers’ criticism is in some ways valid, as the visual heavy, *cúpla focal*-oriented promotion of Irish does not necessarily immediately lead to full Irish-language interactions in businesses. Such initiatives may, however, set the scene for a more long-term, indirect impact on language use: in both research sites, getting involved in the initiatives seemed in many cases to give business owners and managers with only the *cúpla focal* a source of support and encouragement for further developing their language use, and it gave the organisations a way to connect with such individuals and provide that support and encouragement. There were numerous merchants who only had the *cúpla focal*, or no Irish at all, when they started incorporating Irish into their businesses, but they had since continued trying to build up their competence in the language. Like Nicola, a number of merchants had increasingly spoken Irish with customers to practise, and in some cases they had indeed been taught more Irish by their more proficient customers. In Ballyroe, for example, the American owner of a café with an Irish name kept a notepad of Irish words and phrases and their phonetic pronunciations

so that he could remember and practise the Irish he was taught and jovially quizzed on by a group of regular customers who happened to be retired Irish teachers and activists. The owners and managers of ‘bilingual businesses’ were also in many cases people who sent their children to *gaelscoileanna* (Irish immersion schools) so that even if they themselves were not fluent, the next generation would be. There is thus an element of playing an optimistic long game in the already very long game of Irish language revitalisation, but it did seem that getting involved in the Irish-in-business initiatives and being encouraged to incorporate Irish even when they spoke very little gave some merchants a boost in their efforts to learn, relearn, or use the language.

At the same time, moreover, such efforts to bolster the use of Irish by less confident or competent new speakers within the commercial sphere could also converge with initiatives targeting more active or fluent (new) speakers. The recent Pop-Up Gaeltacht movement, for example, was set up by two friends who had attended Irish-medium schools and wanted to normalise the use of the language in urban public spaces: using social media to spread the word, they organise Irish-speaking gatherings in bars around Dublin that have grown to attract a predominantly young crowd of hundreds of new and native Irish speakers. Rather than booking ahead, the organisers simply have attendees show up en masse, using this ‘guerrilla-style’ approach to position Irish as a natural, unplanned activity in nontraditional settings and to make businesses recognise the consumer power of Irish speakers (Davidson 2017). With more conversant customers becoming more visible through the Pop-Up Gaeltacht movement, and potentially less conversant but still enthusiastic merchants getting involved with the language through the Irish-in-business initiatives, there might be slow, scattered but intensifying signs of a shift towards making Irish more normal in the commercial sphere, with new speakers playing a central role just as they do in the wider revitalisation movement.

Beyond fitting into this bigger picture of the gradual normalisation of Irish in Ireland's private sector, the mobilisation of visual Irish and the *cúpla focal* in business supported by *ÁthMórG* and *BaileRuaG* may also point to a pivotal dimension of future minority-language activism across and beyond Europe: as new speakers come to represent an even more important element of minority-language communities, providing opportunities and safe spaces for them to build their linguistic confidence and competence outside the educational context will represent an increasingly critical undertaking. Encouraging these social actors' use of 'a few words' and supporting their efforts to continue learning and using the language holds the potential to further their linguistic socialisation and help them transition to more active speakers. Particularly since a number of new speaker merchants with varying levels of confidence in speaking Irish linked their commercial engagement with the language to their own efforts to contribute to revitalisation efforts, whether it be by generating interest in the language via bilingual signage like *Luke* or by passing a more advanced *cúpla focal* on to future generations of potential speakers like *Nicola*, fostering spaces in which these new speakers can enhance their own or others' interest and proficiency in the language could, even if only indirectly, play a central role in generating support for and participation in minority-language revival movements. The mobilisation of visual Irish and the *cúpla focal* by new speaker merchants in *Athmore* and *Ballyroe* could thus be seen as bridging a gap between more tokenistic displays of the language and the active use of Irish traditionally promoted by language advocates, effectively creating a space that encourages new speakers to take part in minority-language promotion and to possibly progress at their own pace past 'a few words'.

<Z>NOTE

<NTX>

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