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'New speakers' on Irish language community radio: new understandings of linguistic variation on Raidió na Life

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of Irish on the community radio station Raidió na Life which has broadcast to Dublin since 1993. By admitting and indirectly valorising a variety of linguistic styles, Raidió na Life can be seen to function as a space for 'new speakers' of Irish, fluent and regular users who were not raised with Irish as their language of primary socialisation in childhood. Based on interviews and focus group research, the article analyses the influence of Raidió na Life on the use of Irish among volunteer broadcasters. Furthermore, it discusses their ideologies in relation to linguistic variation and to how the station uses Irish and other languages. The article concludes that the volunteer broadcasters of Raidió na Life are more relaxed about linguistic prescriptivism than management but still adhere to an ideology of Irish as the backbone of the station. They are accepting of those who have little or no Irish but are adamant that Irish, in some form, must be the working language of Raidió na Life and of its broadcasts. For the broadcasters, diversity and quality of content, particularly underserved musical genres, is more important than ensuring a high linguistic standard of Irish.

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Introduction

Drawing on concepts of 'new speakerness' (e.g. O'Rourke, Pujolar, and Ramallo 2015) and on contributions from the field of minority language media (MLM) studies (e.g. Jones and Jongbloed 2013), this article examines the influence of the Dublin-based Irish language station Raidió na Life on the linguistic practices of volunteer broadcasters and on their use of Irish. It also analyses their discourses about linguistic prescriptivism on air and the linguistic variation to be heard on the station. Raidió na Life went on the air as a full-time community radio station in 1993, broadcasting from a building leased by the language planning agency Bord na Gaeilge (subsequently Foras na Gaeilge). The aim was to provide a comprehensive radio service for Irish speakers in Dublin, to raise awareness of the language throughout the city and to support the development of language use and to build the community of Irish speakers (Raidió na Life 2019). Catering for the 'media imperative' (Cormack 2007) of a scattered community of speakers across the Greater Dublin Area was foremost in the minds of the founders (for a discussion on the aims and development of the station see Day and Walsh 2020).

The station was established due to frustration that Irish speakers in Dublin were not being served either by the national Irish language state broadcaster, RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta, or by the new independent stations that were being rolled out at the time (Cotter 1999; Ó Drisceoil 2007;

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Day 2013). The new stations largely ignored Irish while RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta prioritised the traditional varieties of Irish as spoken in the Gaeltacht (officially designated Irish-speaking districts). In terms of programming content, the focus was strongly on local Gaeltacht speech and programming and there was little material for listeners elsewhere, including in Dublin. Therefore, since its inception, RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta has promoted a native language ideology and an essentialist link between traditional Irish language and culture which was found to be alienating among some listeners in Dublin (Moal, Ó Murchadha, and Walsh 2018). Although Gaeltacht native speakers of Irish have been among Raidió na Life's voluntary broadcasters since the outset, the station has primarily been a site of 'new speakers', many of whom were educated through Irish in Dublin or raised in Irish-speaking or bilingual homes. By giving access to presenters of different levels of fluency and competence in Irish, Raidió na Life has always taken a less prescriptive approach to language than RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta. The linguistic variation ranges from fluent, idiomatic speakers – some with a Gaeltacht background – to more hybridised varieties common among people outside the Gaeltacht.

Theoretical framework

This research has been influenced by MLM studies and work on 'new speakers' of minority languages. Recent examples of research in MLM from a variety of contexts include Zabaleta, et al. (2014) on journalism in European minority languages, Ramallo, (2017) on media in Galician and Chikalpa, and Gunde, (2020) on indigenous languages and community radio in Malawi. Summing up theoretical developments in the field to date, Cormack argues that what distinguishes media studies from MLM studies is that the latter 'is concerned with how media can be used to save languages' (Cormack 2013, 255). However, he adds that we still lack a full understanding of how precisely such media support language maintenance and urges greater consideration of how MLM actually influence language use (Cormack 2013, 262). An important aspect of minority language use among media practitioners is socialisation offered by physical and increasingly virtual spaces where the minority language is promoted. By analysing the practices of volunteer broadcasters in an Irish language community radio station, this paper helps to elucidate how involvement in MLM influences language use and attitudes among media practitioners themselves. Another relevant contribution is Uribe-Jongbloed (2016) who analyses how media practitioners in Colombia and Wales use minority languages in the course of their work and how they negotiate identity in multilingual settings. Although such workers may hold dual roles as media producer and minority advocate, he argues that there have been relatively few studies to date on groups engaging in such cultural production. By examining one such group in the case of Irish, this paper also throws further light on this question.

Another theoretical influence on this paper is a recent European research project on 'new speakers' of endangered languages including Irish in which John Walsh was a leading participant from 2013 to 2017 (for more information see www.nspk.org.uk). In recent decades, a 'language revitalisation' paradigm has crystallised in scholarship around minority languages in Europe and elsewhere, heavily influenced by Fishman's approach to 'reversing language shift' (1991, 2001a), based on the idea of reconstructing the native speaker community. Such an ideological stance accepted uncritically many pillars of historical linguistics including the assumptions of languages as bounded, discrete entities and of speakers as clearly distinguishable into categories such as 'L1' and 'L2'. However, this paradigm has been challenged in recent times in the field of critical sociolinguistics, drawing attention to the messy reality of language revitalisation movements, which by definition have to rely both on speakers and non-speakers beyond the core historical community (O'Rourke, Pujolar, and Ramallo 2015).

A strand of research in this field concentrates on 'new speakers', people who regularly use the minority language socially although they are not historically associated with it, in that they were not raised with it as their primary language of socialisation. The 'new speaker' label is a lens through

which to study the social phenomenon of people who regularly use a language other than that which they acquired in early childhood or for whom it was not the dominant language of their community. The concept is not without its limitations: for instance, does a ‘new speaker’ always remain ‘new’, even if they acquire a traditional variety and ‘pass’ as a native speaker? However, it attempts to move beyond long-standing and deficit-based concepts in linguistics and related strands such as ‘semi-speaker’, ‘non-native speaker’, ‘second-language learner’, ‘last speaker’ etc., which clearly establish a hierarchy with ‘native speaker’ at the pinnacle (for a longer discussion see Walsh and O’Rourke 2018). Research into new speakers of Irish has included studies of the social spaces inhabited or created by such people (e.g. Seoighe, 2018), and the realm of community media represented by Raidió na Life is one such informal space.

Methodology

In order to examine the use of Irish and attitudes towards it among Raidió na Life volunteers, we designed the following methodology. We decided that focus group research would enable a more dynamic probing of issues than a series of individual interviews. With the assistance of the station manager, Muiris Ó Fiannachta, we identified a number of presenters, male and female and ranging in age from the early 20s to the 50s and ensured that we would have a range of programme types represented in the mix (news, current affairs, specialist music etc.). Seven volunteers (three women and four men, representing about seven percent of the total volunteers) attended our focus group meeting in February 2017 and raised a number of issues that they teased out with us in a lengthy session.

Six of our participants were aged between the early 20s and the mid-30s and the seventh was in his 50s. All of the younger cohort were university-educated and some had attended Irish-medium schooling or studied Irish at third-level. Following the focus group, we then conducted interviews with station management to interrogate the findings further.

All fieldwork was conducted in Irish and the material transcribed and coded according to the salient themes emerging from the data. In order to anonymise participants, their real names have not been used and they are given invented first names instead. The extracts below are all translations of relevant sections of the transcription.

Discussion

The discussion uncovered a range of topics that are analysed in turn in this section: language background of volunteers; prior use of Irish before joining Raidió na Life; influence of Raidió na Life on volunteers’ use of Irish; volunteers’ linguistic confidence and competence and volunteers’ attitudes to standards of Irish on Raidió na Life. Both the views expressed in the focus group and by station management are considered here. A table is provided in Appendix 1, which outlines levels of support in the focus group for various positions or alignment with pre-existing categories, as much as is possible in qualitative research such as this.

Language background of volunteers

All participants can be described as ‘new speakers’ in that none was raised in the Gaeltacht with Irish as their home language but they were regular users of Irish at the time of the research. They largely fit the profiles identified in existing research on new speakers of Irish in that most of them had acquired Irish through the education system and did not have strong ties to the Gaeltacht (O’Rourke and Walsh, 2020). None had been raised with Irish as their home language, although two had had some home exposure to Irish in their immediate or extended family. One, a man in his 20s, identified himself explicitly as a ‘new speaker’ (*nuachainteoir*), adding that he spoke *Gaelscoilis*, a somewhat pejorative term used to devalorise the hybridised post-traditional

Irish of those who attend immersion schools known as *Gaelscoileanna* (Ó Duibhir 2018, 113). *Gaelscoilis* (literally ‘Gaelscoil language’) may be used as a negative put-down by those positioning themselves as more idiomatic speakers of Irish but in this case it seemed the participant was using it as a positive, in-group marker to distinguish himself from Gaeltacht speakers. In fact, he was among the most competent speakers of the group and used several native Gaeltacht elements in his speech reflecting a period spent living there.

Four of the seven had attended *Gaelscoileanna*, many of them renowned schools in the immersion sector in Dublin and another had received part of his education through Irish. The other two had attended mainstream English-medium schools where Irish is taught as a subject only. Five of the seven had studied Irish at third-level or had taken a course involving some amount of Irish. Only two of the seven had specific experience of the Gaeltacht having done residential summer courses there while teenagers or university students. Five of the seven participants were functionally fluent and apparently at ease speaking Irish. Two participants had lower levels of competence but all were capable of taking part in the discussion. Four of the seven used Irish extensively or partially in their professional lives which included advocacy, teaching and the educational sector more broadly.

Use of Irish prior to joining Raidió na life

The range of use of Irish reported by participants before joining Raidió na Life is similar to the experiences of new speakers in general in that opportunities to use Irish are severely constrained by the sociolinguistic context of the dominance of English (O’Rourke and Walsh 2020). Many of the broadcasters reported peaks and troughs in their use of Irish over their lifetimes, reflecting how the language can be restricted to specific domains such as education and how language attrition may set in once a speaker moves to a different context. Four of the seven participants reported that they used Irish regularly before joining Raidió na Life. For instance, Roibeárd, who is in his mid-30s, used Irish socially on a regular basis prior to becoming a volunteer, although he had never before been involved formally with Irish language organisations:

When I began working I was always looking for opportunities to use Irish and I was using it socially for years before I came here so it was really central although it wasn’t my home language. I wasn’t involved in the so-called Irish language world, although I was using Irish every day, I didn’t meet any Irish speaking group anyway until I came in here to Raidió na Life. (Roibeárd)

The remaining three participants either reported more limited use of Irish before joining Raidió na Life or said that their competence in Irish was declining due to lack of use. For instance, Doireann, who is in her 20s, had opportunities to use Irish daily at school and in university but her exposure to Irish was more limited after she left full-time education:

I was using it daily when at college and school of course but for maybe two years after I left college I would use it speaking to certain friends and speaking to my father but I wasn’t using it daily, I don’t think so. When I came to Raidió na Life I needed some practice but I think it came back. (Doireann)

Áine, in her 30s, had attended all-Irish schools but felt that she had lost her fluency following a period abroad. Before joining Raidió na Life her Irish had been very limited and she in fact used the station as a means of improving her ability in order to train as a teacher:

When I came back, I wanted to be a primary schoolteacher so I had to get my Irish back because I had attended all-Irish schools, primary and secondary, so I had lost it after years abroad (Áine).

This data illustrates that the prior experience of speaking Irish differs among volunteers as do their opportunities to speak the language. Lack of opportunities of use has been identified by new speakers as an impediment to their progress. Despite Fishman’s controversial description of campaigns for MLM as a ‘fetish’ (1991, 395; 2001b, 482), creating new media domains for minority languages has long been a focus for activists. Irish is no exception, as the campaigns for separate television and radio stations, including Raidió na Life, reveal (Watson 2003; O’Connell, Walsh, and Denvir 2008;

Ó Gairbhí 2017). In the case of Raidió na Life, the establishment of the station was rooted in language revitalisation, using the community radio model as a tool to consolidate and grow Dublin's Irish speaking community (see Day and Walsh 2020 for a full discussion).

Influence of Raidió na Life on use of Irish

All participants agreed strongly that involvement in Raidió na Life had had a positive influence on their use of Irish, even those who were already using the language regularly. The station provided a regular opportunity to speak (more) Irish both within the group of presenters, on the air and in broader Irish speaking networks both for professional and personal reasons. As such, as an alternative public space for new speakers both in terms of broadcasters and listeners, we can usefully apply the concept of linguistic *muda* to Raidió na Life. A *muda* (from the Catalan verb *mudar* meaning to transform) refers to a critical juncture in an individual's life where a significant shift to the target language occurs (Puigdevall et al. 2018). The following example is from Naoise who is in his mid-20s:

I was speaking a good deal of Irish before I started working with Raidió na Life at all. But yeah, I could say it influenced me, I suppose I know a lot more people now who speak Irish so I suppose I have more chances to use Irish and even, like, before I met them in Raidió na Life I heard about events that were happening around the city and so on and I would go along and meet friends and so on. (Naoise)

Roibeárd emphasised how Raidió na Life had strengthened the social networks in which he speaks Irish, thereby expanding his opportunities of use:

Definitely there are far more opportunities to use Irish so my work with Raidió na Life has increased the amount of Irish I speak from one end of the week to the other without a doubt. Before that I had to seek opportunities to use Irish, it's a lot easier now because I have found a new network of Irish speakers and I have opportunities every day. I'd be able to speak the same amount of Irish without Raidió na Life but I'd have to make a far greater effort to find those chances in Dublin. (Roibeárd)

Entry into social networks was also echoed by Alison, in her 30s, who added that further employment opportunities in Irish had arisen as a result of her involvement in Raidió na Life:

It adds to my kind of social networks and also, like, my work it helps you, kind of with new employment opportunities, like I started doing an Irish programme on [a commercial station] which is an English-language station but that was because of working with Raidió na Life so I was speaking Irish in a totally different context. (Alison)

It is clear, therefore, that volunteering on Raidió na Life has given these new speakers of Irish more opportunities to use Irish, not just on the air but also by allowing them access into Irish speaking networks in the city with which many of them were previously unfamiliar.

Linguistic confidence and competence

Volunteering at the radio station also boosted volunteers' linguistic confidence and allowed them to improve their linguistic skills. Áine, who joined Raidió na Life originally in order to assist her retraining as a teacher, said that she had become more comfortable speaking Irish since becoming a presenter. Coming from a position where she had limited social access to Irish, Raidió na Life was one of her few opportunities to speak the language informally:

It was great, just the opportunity and the research, the chance to speak it and the research I did for the show and coming in then and speaking to people and interviewing bands or musicians and just to speak it, but now I am teaching in an English-language school at the moment and I don't have much chance to speak Irish other than coming in here every Friday. (Áine)

While Raidió na Life was identified as an informal realm for using Irish, some volunteers stressed that it assisted them develop their competence in more formal registers of language. The two news

presenters, Doireann and Naoise, pointed out that their grasp of news-related terminology had been strengthened since they became involved:

- Doireann: - I suppose that it helps you to develop your Irish as well, like when you are writing different stories and so on you have to use different vocabulary like-
- Naoise: -technical language and so on-
- Doireann: -because the news is always changing so your vocabulary is always changing.

Therefore, increased linguistic confidence and ability are clearly identified by these volunteers as positive, personal benefits that they gain from participating in Raidió na Life. These chime with the benefits identified by Cormack (2007) in his overview of the advantages of MLM to speakers of the language, in this case speakers directly involved in media production. Interestingly, another advantage mentioned by Cormack – employment opportunities – was mentioned directly by only two participants, giving the impression that the majority of volunteers did not become involved in Raidió na Life for utilitarian reasons. Raidió na Life management welcomed the finding that volunteers reported increased use of Irish due to their involvement, stating that this was among the founding aims of the station (Ó Fiannachta, 2017).

Standard of Irish and attitudes to it

Mainstream media coverage of Raidió na Life in its early days was characterised by the novelty factor of its content and style, ranging from the range of programming to the variable standard of Irish. Irish language radio was no longer associated with local news from the Gaeltacht areas, traditional music and discussions about the language itself but was more unpredictable culturally and linguistically (e.g. White, 1994).

The issue of the standard of Irish broadcast on Raidió na Life has long generated comment and controversy. For instance, in a newspaper article in response to criticism of the linguistic skills of broadcasters, the Irish language scholar Máirín Nic Eoin (a founding member of Raidió na Life) defended the station's linguistic output as an accurate reflection of the variation within the Irish language community which it served. She also rejected the characterisation of the type of Irish used on Raidió na Life as 'pidgin', describing it as an 'attack' (*ionsaí*) on the varieties of Irish spoken by young speakers from the Gaeltacht and the efforts of parents raising children with Irish outside the Gaeltacht (Nic Eoin, 1996). The perception that media contribute to falling linguistic standards is long-established in popular discourse even if the language in question is dominant (see, for instance, the reference to the 'green ink brigade' by a former BBC presenter in Humphrys, 2006, 3–4). Such concerns tend to be more exaggerated when the language is socially weak, such as Irish, so we explored this thorny issue with station volunteers and management.

When asked to comment on the standard of Irish broadcast on Raidió na Life, the participants in the focus group agreed that there was a mixture, ranging from limited and weak to highly accurate and fluent Irish. This was not seen as a negative thing at all, rather it was seen as evidence of the station's willingness to be inclusive of as broad as possible a range of new speakers. However, participants in the focus group agreed with Alison when she claimed that many Irish speakers held Raidió na Life in disdain because of the perceived poor standard of Irish:

- And unfortunately as well I think there is disrespect among – I don't know where they are around the country – but there is disrespect for Raidió na Life among certain groups, among certain people and I hear that, I hear complaints and even when I was at university I remember being with students and they'd say 'oh I wouldn't listen to that, like the Irish is awful', people who were fluent or fairly fluent themselves. So they disrespect the station and therefore decide not to listen to it because of that and they look at it in a different way. (Alison)

Taking a positive view on this question, Naoise commented that although the Irish used on Raidió na Life was often interspersed with English, broadcasters were more loyal to Irish than in the case of

some independent Gaeltacht television production companies where he claimed English was spoken once the recording equipment was switched off:

As everyone else said there is a mix of standards but the thing that stands out for me is that people here are much more supportive of Irish than, for instance like, I don't have much experience of other places but even in places in Connemara [largest Gaeltacht area] you know the building where programmes are made for TG4 [Irish language television], everyone speaks Irish, but they speak English among themselves when, you know, they finish work but in Raidió na Life even if someone is working or just speaking among themselves of course, there will be a few words of English here and there but the speech will be in Irish for the most part. (Naoise)

So Irish, although imperfect and involving codeswitching to English, is nonetheless the backbone of the station and Naoise's comments infer linguistic loyalty among the volunteers.

The Irish on Raidió na Life was seen to be weakest in the case of specialist music programmes, however. In a small number of cases, such programmes are presented by people with limited competence in Irish, those closer to the 'potential new speaker' category identified in previous research (Brennan and O'Rourke 2019). In such cases, on-air talk was limited and usually comprised a few phrases of Irish that were learned in advance by the presenter. Interestingly, the participants did not seem concerned about this and appeared satisfied that it provided yet more evidence of the openness of Raidió na Life to a broader range of speakers than those served by RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta. However, despite the liberal policy towards Irish, English was not a permitted part of the linguistic spectrum. This may reflect monolingual Irish language policies which have long existed in educational settings such as *Gaelscoileanna* (Ó Duibhir 2018) and Gaeltacht summer colleges for learners (Petit, 2020) and which are defended as necessary in order to support Irish as the minoritised language. It may also be due to the understanding of the aims of Raidió na Life to provide a communicative space for Irish in a mediascape where English dominates to the point of saturation.

Roibeárd praised the efforts of one presenter to learn a few phrases in Irish, expressed satisfaction at his avoidance of English but concentrated on the high standard of the musical content rather than any linguistic shortcomings:

There's weak, very weak and weaker but from there up to fluency take for instance tonight, Executive Steve will be on the radio and Executive Steve doesn't speak Irish, he learns a few phrases but he has a brilliant programme. He learns a few phrases every week and he doesn't speak any English on the show. He learns a few phrases, he does the programme, we have a high standard of programmes here. It is a bit better than a lot of the community stations around the country, it's as good as many of the professional stations, the music is brilliant. (Roibeárd)

Clearly, such new speakers were relaxed about standards and unconcerned about linguistic prescriptivism. They were accepting of those whose Irish was more limited than their own, once they adhered to the rule of Irish being the working language of the station both on site and on air. Similarly, participants were overwhelmingly positive about the presence in the schedule of a small number of programmes in other languages minoritised in an Irish context such as Catalan and Portuguese. Although marginal in the schedule, the fact that programmes in other languages were raised spontaneously by participants indicates that they are viewed as salient when the standard of Irish is up for discussion. The impression is given that there is nothing unusual about an Irish language station making space for material in other minoritised languages. This is portrayed by volunteers as part of the liberal linguistic policy of Raidió na Life: not only is there room for those who speak hybridised, more post-traditional forms of Irish but other small language communities in Dublin can also have a voice. As English is explicitly excluded, this discourse seems to favour minoritised languages in general, with Irish as the backbone.

Attitudes of management to prescriptivism

The station management had a more prescriptivist view and the manager appeared uncomfortable with the volunteers' excessive praise for weak standards of Irish. He said that he had attempted to

strike a balance between the sociolinguistic reality of a minority language with the aim of encouraging linguistic correctness on air:

Personally, I suppose I try to keep people away as much as possible if they don't have any Irish. I suppose over the years, however, it happened. The station has earned a certain reputation as an alternative music station and it's clear for a lot of people, they kind of understand that it is through Irish but it's also a home for alternative music in Dublin so 'I can learn a few phrases of Irish and they'll let me on the air'. It took me a long time to make some sort of peace with that aspect of the station, there are people on the staff who would be strongly in favour of that aspect of the station but it isn't the aspect that I liked the most, I have to be honest about that. I would prefer if there were more good Irish speakers to be heard but we're a mirror of the Irish language community in Dublin even so, and I suppose we're also a mirror of the spectrum of Irish that is heard in Dublin. (Ó Fiannachta, 2017)

Ó Fiannachta referred to training manuals for broadcasters emphasising linguistic correctness and mentioned a few occasions where he felt obliged to intervene when presenters made basic grammatical errors. It seems that circumstances have led to an uneasy peace between grammatical correctness and social reality, but tensions over prescriptivism are always present in legacy media even in the less formal community sector of which Raidió na Life is a member. The fact that the manager accepts the existence of variation, albeit reluctantly, is evidence of shifting ideologies about hierarchies of language variation in Irish, a feature of the flux of minority languages in late modernity (Ó Murchadha and Flynn 2018). Although the levels of acceptance of post-traditional Irish differ between management and volunteers, there is no evidence that this caused any difficulties for the volunteers interviewed in their relationship with management, or indeed prevented any one of them from participating in the station. It is clear that they have accepted the centrality of Irish, even if in an attenuated form, to the work of the station and that they have personal loyalty to it.

The manager was surprised that participants paid so much attention to programmes in other languages as these amount to only two percent of the station's output. He said that promoting this genre of programming was never a central aim of the station (Ó Fiannachta, 2017). The inclusion of minoritised languages other than Irish seems to have developed over as the station matured. It was not considered by the original founders but rather, as Ó Fiannachta said, the discourse has emerged over time.

Linguistic variation on Raidió na life

Theoretically, perceptions around the fluid standard of Irish and the inclusion of other languages on air can be interpreted in the context of recent research on minority language variation in late modernity or 'translinguaging'. This concept has been proposed 'as a way to capture the fluid language practices of bilinguals without giving up the social construction of language and bilingualism under which speakers operate' (García and Wei 2014, 5). In their research on the language ideologies of 'new speakers' who become Irish language educators, Ó Murchadha and Flynn show how hierarchies of language variation in Irish are in flux in this period, allowing varieties of Irish seen previously as less prestigious to gain more overt acceptance (Ó Murchadha and Flynn 2018). Writing in 1996 in defence of the linguistic standards (she deliberately used the plural form) on Raidió na Life, Nic Eoin identified three categories of Irish speakers among broadcasters: (1) approximately 20 percent with a Gaeltacht background (2) approximately 50 percent who were either raised with Irish outside the Gaeltacht or attended *Gaelscoileanna* and (3) approximately 30 percent who attained a high level of Irish in the mainstream English-medium education system. The second group showed the greatest variation but the influence of English could be heard across the categories (Nic Eoin 1996).

While it was not the aim of this article to conduct a linguistic analysis of the Irish used on air, it was clear that the focus group participants belonged to categories (2) and (3) and the original Irish version of the transcripts reveal considerable variation and 'errors' in their speech. Some scholars

have questioned the appropriateness of translanguaging as a concept in the case of minority language pedagogy (Cenoz and Gorter 2017) where there is a perceived threat to the weaker language and where ideologies of revitalisation favour a bounded approach that promotes separation of minority and dominant languages. However, others (e.g. Otheguy, García, and Reid 2015) argue that it is not important to emphasise the preservation of lexical or structural features but instead to find ‘translanguaging practices that the community finds valuable’ (Otheguy, García, and Reid 2015 299).

The adjective ‘valuable’ is instructive in this context, as it is clear that the broadcasters of *Raidió na Life* who participated in this study are satisfied with the linguistic variation of Irish and other languages present in the station’s output. In the absence of detailed survey data, it is difficult to assess the opinions of listeners on these questions. While Nic Eoin (1996) felt obliged to defend *Raidió na Life*’s linguistic standards in the face of criticism from a listener, there was no evidence from our discussion with volunteers that listeners to their programmes were dissatisfied with the standard of Irish. Therefore, we can reasonably conclude that broadcasters and listeners of *Raidió na Life* find the translanguaging practices of the station ‘valuable’ and that the volunteers’ defence of linguistic variation is in keeping with emerging new norms of acceptability in the community, as discussed by Ó Murchadha and Flynn (2018).

Conclusions

The reflections of this group of new speakers on their participation in *Raidió na Life* provide some insights into the important question of how speakers’ use of the language has been influenced by media practice. It also sheds light on how they view their own use of Irish and the varieties of it used in *Raidió na Life*.

The volunteers all reported an increase in opportunities to speak Irish both on and off the air and this was welcomed by management. Some had reported finding it difficult to speak the language socially in the overwhelmingly English-dominant context of Dublin prior to joining *Raidió na Life*. They were pleased that the station had provided them with a pre-existing social network of Irish speakers and that other such social networks increased as a result of their participation in the life of the station. There was also a sense among the group as a whole of gaining access to a wider community of Irish speakers in Dublin. As discussed earlier, limited opportunities of use and lack of access to target language networks are challenges often faced by those embarking on journeys toward ‘new speakerness’.

These new speakers were relaxed in their attitudes towards standards and clearly preferred inclusivity over rigidity in the protection of language standards. The volunteers specifically welcomed weaker speakers of Irish and speakers of other languages that are minoritised in English-speaking Ireland. Attitudes towards linguistic variation and prescriptivism vary between station management and the volunteer broadcasters. The presenters were aware of criticisms of *Raidió na Life*’s linguistic standards but were not excessively bothered by them. In fact, they saw tolerance of post-traditional varieties of Irish as one of the station’s most positive attributes, in that there were no barriers to participation, as they saw it. Most of the volunteers said that the station increased their confidence in speaking Irish and allowed them to gain experience of domains of new terminology. We find that these new speakers have a confidence in themselves as speakers of Irish and in the listening competence of their audience that is strongly rooted in and reinforced by their routine participation in the station both on and off the air. This confidence may not be shared or admired by others with a more prescriptivist approach but it is strongly felt by the volunteers and is palpable on air in interactions with their guests. There was a clear consensus that the content being broadcast, in particular music, was more important than the linguistic standard of the Irish being spoken on air. Each one of the volunteers attributed the success of the station to the quality and variety of the music that is played. This seems to represent an appreciation of the communicative function of the language in these new speakers’ lives rather than a more prescriptivist approach to language use in general.

Raidió na Life provides a space for new speakers of Irish to broadcast to the community of Irish speakers in the Dublin area. It further provides them with opportunities to use their Irish, to improve their Irish and to develop and grow relationships and social networks through the medium of Irish. This linguistic space, while not devoid of its own rules prioritising the use of Irish, is marked by a lack of rigidity and a flexibility about standards where perceptions about linguistic correctness take a back seat to the communication of content and the creation of social networks that indirectly promote the Irish language.

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Appendix 1. Schematic presentation of focus group discussion

Topic	Results
Language background of volunteers	None raised with Irish as home language, all fit ‘new speaker’ profile. 4/7 attended Irish-medium education, 5/7 studied (some) Irish at 3rd level.
Prior use of Irish among volunteers	4/7 used Irish regularly. Others reported declining use and competence.
Influence of Raidió na Life on use of Irish by volunteers	All reported increase in use of Irish. All felt they belonged to social network of RnaL volunteers. All gained or deepened access to existing networks of Irish speakers.
Volunteers’ linguistic confidence and competence	Weaker speakers reported more confidence in Irish, exposure to new registers.
Volunteers’ attitudes to standard of Irish on RnaL	All agreed that linguistic standards on air were mixed. Positive valorisation of fluid standards as inclusive and welcoming. All supported Irish language ethos of RnaL even if competence was limited.