

From Home to Here: Stories of Languages Old and New

Outcome

The exhibition and public debate celebrated 2019 as being the UN International Year of Endangered Languages. They inspired collaboration and discussion between those interested in textiles, art, and ethnolinguistics on the island of Ireland and beyond.

The public debate featured experts in the fields of indigenous and community languages as well as practitioners who work with ethnolinguistic minorities in Ireland and South America. They included Dr Sarah Bennison, Research Fellow in Social Anthropology, University of St. Andrews; Dr Ian Collen, Director of NICILT; Dr John Conama, Director of the Centre for Deaf Studies, TCD; Prof. Karen Corrigan, Director of Research in Linguistics, Newcastle University; Michael Johnston, Language Officer, Belfast City Council; Dr Philip McDermott, Institute for Research in Social Sciences, Ulster University; Colm McGuigan, Language Officer, Belfast City Council and Prof. Micheál Ó Mainnín, Director of the Northern Ireland Place-Name Project. Roberta Bacic, who also participated, facilitated the unveiling of a new *arpillera* and artefacts created by the North Belfast Friendship Group who were also in attendance.

The public debate explored the socio-cultural and linguistic impact on language policies and practices in Northern Ireland of global events generated by changes to EU policies, Brexit and the refugee crisis. It was prefaced by a discussion led by Prof. Karen Corrigan of the relationship between the development of the Linen Industry in Northern Ireland and its impact on spreading Mid-Ulster English to communities which were formally speakers of Irish and Ulster Scots. Audience members included students, academics, artists, representatives of arts and cultural institutions, and members of the public.

Fostering engagement with textiles as sources for learning about war, conflict, political violence and their impact on linguistic diversity, the exhibition has generated important tangible outcomes. First, a new network of scholars and practitioners has evolved; Second, members of the public have had the opportunity to better understand research on different aspects of indigenous languages and the relationship between language and cultural practices; Third, public views have changed with respect to the indigenous status of e.g. Irish Sign Language and heritage languages. As one audience member put it: “[I have learned that] sign languages may be considered indigenous....that issues here in N.I. are not dissimilar to language contentions elsewhere in the world.”

Prof. Karen Corrigan, Director of Research in Linguistics, Newcastle University
4th December, 2019