

Maggie McGwin

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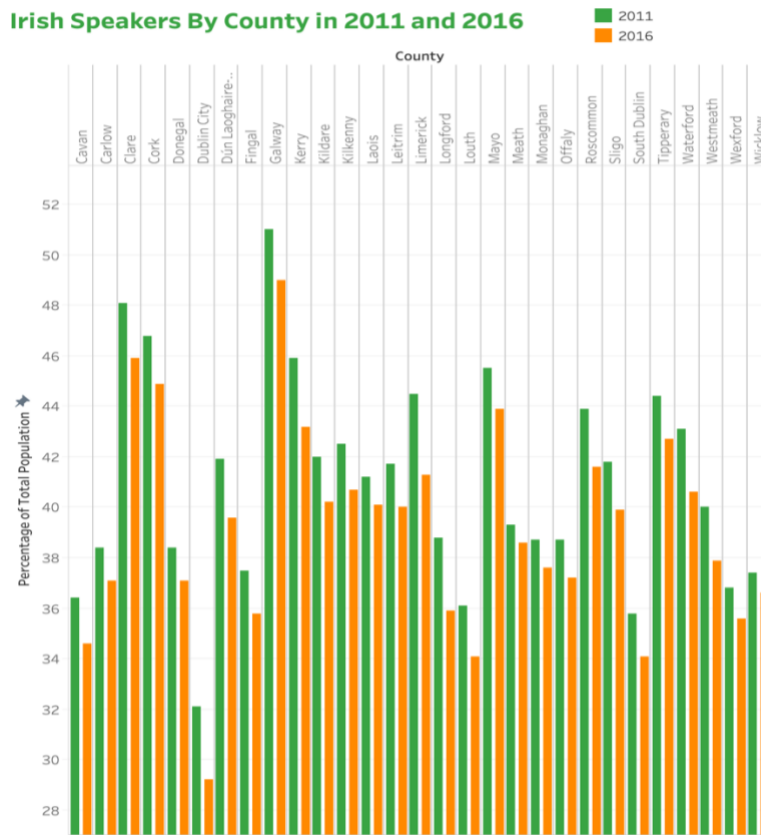
The Loss of Irish Language

In December of 2010, the Government of Ireland released a document presenting a 20-year plan to revitalize and strengthen Irish language usage in the country (Government of Ireland, 2010). As Irish is an official language of Ireland alongside English, the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030* seeks to increase funding of Irish language education, provide support to primarily Irish-speaking communities (called Gaeltachts), and heighten the visibility of Irish in society. The plan intended to span the years from 2010–2030 with measurable phases marking preparation and implementation and areas of action that include education, community, media and technology, and legislation. Despite this government initiative and a seemingly well-planned strategy, the 2016 census showed a decrease in Irish language usage throughout the country.

The first signs of the Irish language trace back as early as the 5th century, earning widespread use in Ireland, Scotland, and parts of Britain by 500AD (Conradh na Gaeilge, n.d.). The language maintained prominence until the 16th century as conflict with British rule took hold of Ireland, rattling Irish culture and forcing English customs and language into the country. Irish remained the language of choice for most of the rural population, but English gained traction very quickly. This decline in Irish usage continued until 1876, with the establishment of the Preservation of the Irish Language and a push for Irish language education in schools. This initiative continued in 1893 and the formation of Conradh na Gaeilge (The Gaelic League), an organization committed to reviving the Irish language and increasing the number of regular speakers. Conradh na Gaeilge remains highly active today. However, recent national census

statistics report the lowest percentage of Irish speakers since 1946 and a decrease in daily usage of those who do know the language (McGee, 2017). Only 73,803 people—4.2 percent of the total population of Ireland—report using Irish daily. This is a drop of 3,382 people since the census reports of 2011 (Donaghy, 2017). As for general knowledge of the Irish language, numbers dropped by over 13,000 people—1,774,437 in 2011 to 1,761,420 in 2016 (Central Statistics Office, 2016). This data is visible in Figures 1–3, presenting a breakdown of the percentage of Irish speakers by county in 2011 and 2016.

Figure 1



Data collected from the Central Statistics Office.

Figure 2

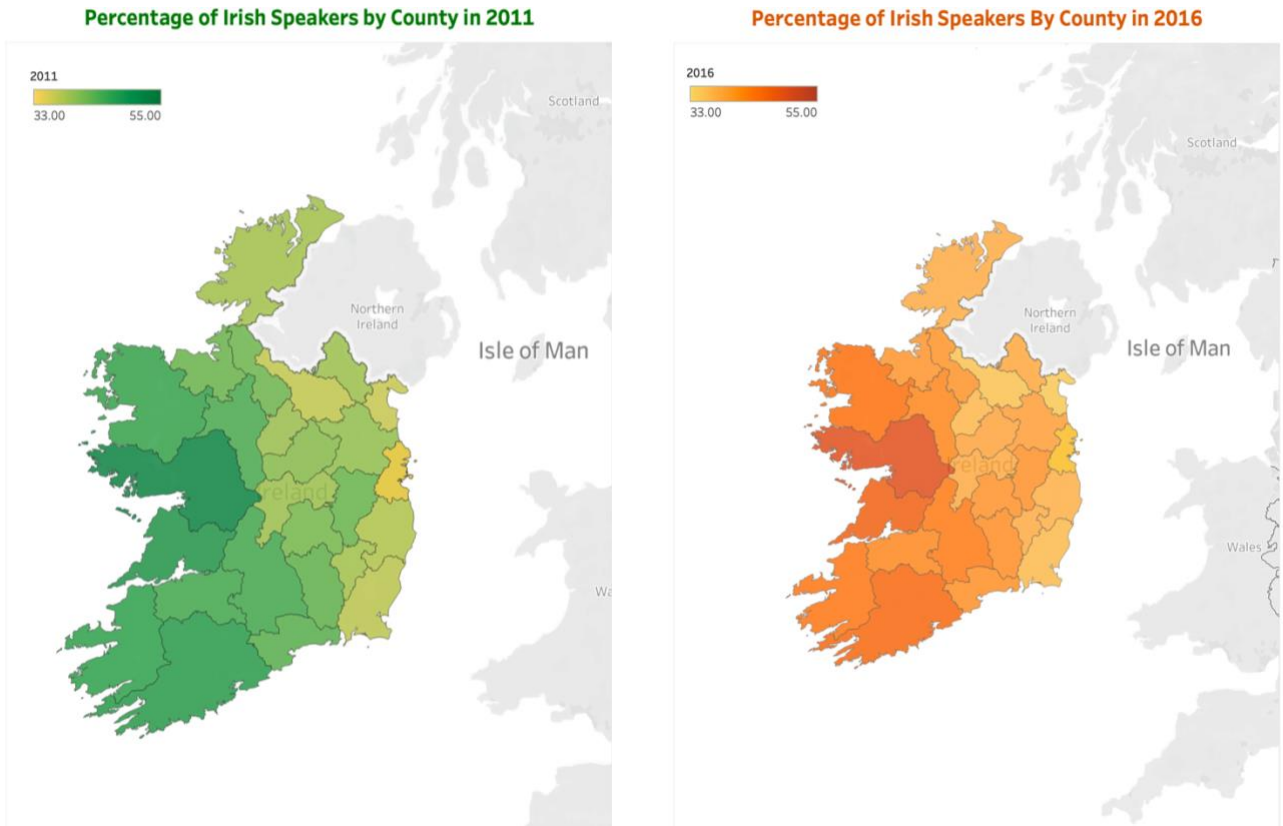


Figure 3

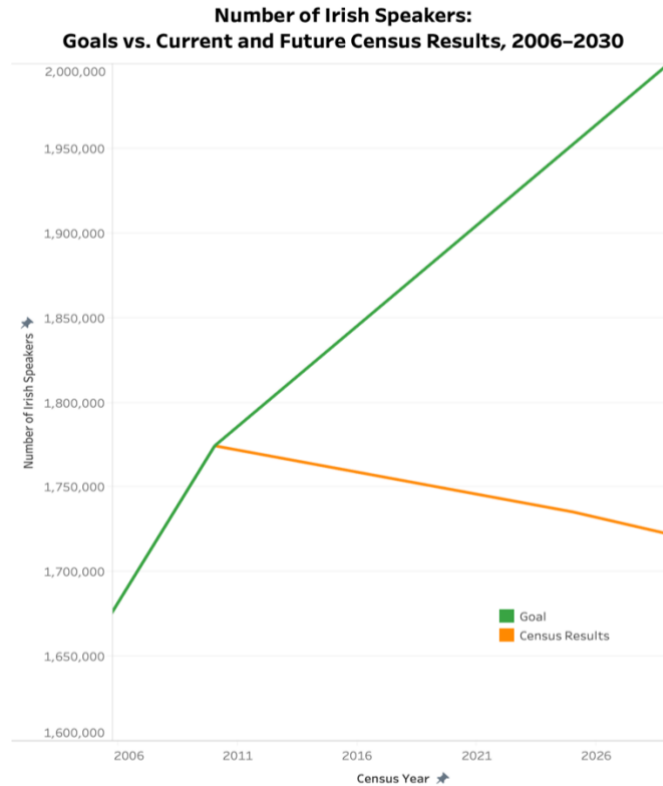
Data collected from the Central Statistics Office.

As written in the *20-Year Strategy*, context for the bold initiative cites the December 2006 *Government Statement on the Irish Language* and the policy objectives set to support and preserve Irish language use. These objectives include recognizing Irish as an official language for use in legislation, supporting the Gaeltacht and its residents as primary users of Irish, upholding the mandatory teaching of the Irish language in schools, and supporting Irish language organizations and media groups (Government of Ireland, 2010, p.4). The 2010 plan builds on these objectives and maps out specific strategies to bring them to life. With multiple phases of planning, implementation, and analysis, the Government of Ireland planned to reach particular metrics to measure an increase of knowledge of the Irish language and daily usage. Specifically,

the strategy set a goal of 2 million people with Irish language knowledge up from 1.66 million and a total of at least 250,000 daily users from about 83,000 (p. 9).

The 2016 census marked six years into the 20-year plan—just under one-third of its entire length. At this point in the phase schedule, the initiative would be in “Implementation Phase II – Expanding and Deepening” (Government of Ireland, 2010, p. 8), marked by the 100th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising and the birth of Irish independence. Results from the census show the opposite of expansion of the Irish language, with declines in both daily usage and overall knowledge of Irish (Central Statistics Office, 2016). This data, reflected in Figure 4 through reported and predicted census records, reveals an apparent contradiction between government initiatives and measurable results. It asks a simple yet deep-seated question. "What went wrong?"

Figure 4



Data collected from the Central Statistics Office and Government of Ireland.

In a 2017 report by *The Irish Times*, various groups and individuals seemed to hold different opinions on the cause of the backward trajectory of the 20-year initiative. Conradh na Gaeilge stated that a lack of any financial investment by the government was to blame for the ineffectiveness of the strategy. At the same time, Dr. John Walsh, from the Department of Irish at the National University of Ireland, Galway believed that the *20-Year Strategy* set “unrealistic targets for increases in speakers” and that the initiative was having “little effect” around the country. Seán Kyne, the Minister of State for the Gaeltacht, argued in favor of the Government. He stated that it had indeed invested in the strategy and that only six years had passed since the plan began. The report did not reveal any details of prior investments or plans to uphold them (McGee, 2017).

Now, in 2020, the 20-year plan is halfway through its course. Though the next census will not take place until 2021, the 2016 numbers do not represent a positive trajectory for the future of the Irish language. Reports following the 2016 census numbers present a picture of uncertainty, ambiguity, and a lack of transparency around fiscal support from the Government that developed the initiative in the first place. It seems clear that if the strategy hopes to create a positive impact in strengthening the Irish language, more work must happen to hold the Government accountable in fulfilling their implementation approaches and meeting their proposed metric goals. Without transparency and significant support, the Irish language risks losing a place in Ireland's modern culture and its future population.

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