An overcoat wrapped around an invisible man? Language legislation and community language revitalisation in Ireland

Dr John Walsh, National University of Ireland, Galway

John.Walsh@nuigalway.ie
Strubell’s Catherine Wheel model

More learning → More informal social use

More motivation to learn and use the language

Perception of greater need for language

More demand for goods and services in language

More supply and consumption of goods and services in language
Background to Irish legislation

- Official but minoritised status of Irish
- Official Languages Act, 2003
- Constitutional status not reflected in legislation
- Language Commissioner
- 650+ public bodies
- 3 types of obligations: statutory, based on regulations, based on language schemes
Language schemes

- Section 11: body required by Minister to prepare scheme
- Measures to enhance services in Irish, ‘means of communication’
- Scheme agreed with DCRGA each 3 years
- 24 schemes agreed (38 bodies) – mid ‘06
- 20 schemes awaiting approval
- 71 requested (almost 20% of total)
Typology of Schemes

A. National bodies without Gaeltacht remit:
   - Arts Council; Courts Service, Dept. Arts, Sports & Tourism; Dept. of Environment; Dept. of Finance; Dept. of Taoiseach; Director of Public Prosecutions; Office of Commission for Public Service Appointments; Offices of Ombudsman & Information Commissioner; Office of Secretary General to President; Public Appointments Service; Referendum Commission; Revenue Commissioners

B. Bodies with specific Gaeltacht remit:
   - Local authorities in Donegal, Galway, Kerry, Waterford; Donegal VEC; Dept. of Community, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs; Dept. of Education; Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology; HSE West; NUI Galway; NUI Maynooth
Characteristics of Schemes

- **Category A relatively weak:**
  - Relatively low impact on local language use
  - Contracting out of translation work
  - Little direct bilingualisation of organisational culture
  - Irish classes: inefficient and costly

- **Category B stronger:**
  - More detailed commitments, particularly in Galway-based bodies, to a lesser extent in other Gaeltacht
  - Attention to sub-offices in Gaeltacht
  - High potential to create Irish language employment
Problems with Schemes

- Front-line staff
  - Minimal improvements to oral communication
  - Lack of unambiguous choice Irish/English

- Oral vs. written communication
  - Weak social status of Irish, poor literacy

- Recruitment
  - Vague commitments to ‘reviewing’ policy
  - Personnel issues

- Stimulation of demand
  - Weak on publicising schemes, ‘active offer’
Conclusion

- Significant for language planning in context of Catherine Wheel
- Several challenges remain although elements of Irish schemes may become future provisions of amended Act
- Need for parallel language awareness campaign
- Development of national language planning framework