Jaws Ajar
Multilingualism in Contemporary Irish Literature

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A Jaw Ajar

* **cur i gcéill**: hypocrisy, bluff, disguise, sham.

“What you say is mere pretence;
“...a chur i gcéill go bhfuil spéis sa Ghaeilge agat”

to profess oneself to be interested in Irish;
“Níl annach cur i gcéill.”

It is mere acting.
Suppose
you hold a jaw
-bone so old
that the chin has split.

A professor passes samples of bone around, explains:
*remains* — *derelict workhouse* — *Famine-era* — *a mass grave.*

Doireann Ní Ghríofa
He rattles a transparent plastic bag. Inside, a clatter of speechless teeth, a broken grin. He says, *a generous selection of fragments, says incremental dentine collagen analysis, says to pinpoint when starvation set in.*

Suppose you hold the empty jaw bone still, two neat halves, one in each hand, the pale bone cool in your palms, three teeth still tucked into their sockets, snug as heifers working cud in some distant meadow.
Suppose you hold those jaw bones together and see it not as a broken, inanimate object but full, skinned, a stubbled chin, a cheek that lived, that was patted, kissed, hit,

and between those bones, a mouth that only ever knew the spit and speech of one warm, wet tongue. Suppose you hold this split jaw bone to your ear and imagine you hear all he spoke, every sound from his throat.
These bones date to a time and a region where only Irish was spoken. Holding it, you want to return to it some of the words that once resonated through its hollows, but your voice catches in your throat, as though something inside you is broken. Suppose the professor approaches, smiling, as always, says *This is the mandible.*

*What would you call that in Gaelic?*  
You stare at him, bones in hand, your jaw ajar. Suppose you stutter, your mouth fails. You try to say *corrán géill,* but the only sound from your mouth is *cur i gcéill.*
Corpus

- ‘Duine Gorm’,
- *The Colony*, Audrey Magee
- *Thirty-Two Words for a Field*, Manchán Megan
- *Thin Places*, Kerri Ní Dochartaigh
- *This Hostel Life*, Melatu Uche Okorie
- *The King of Planet Earth*, David Wheatley
Eco-linguistics can explore the more general patterns of language that influence how people both think about, and treat, the world. It can investigate the stories we live by – mental models which influence behaviours and lie at the heart of the ecological challenge we live by.

-Allan Stibbe, *Ecolinguistics*, p. 25
Routine patrol off West Mayo; sighting
A rowboat heading unusually far
Beyond the creek, I tacked and hailed the crew
In Gaelic. Their stroke had clearly weakened
As they pulled to, from guilt or bashfulness
I was conjecturing when, O my sweet Christ,
We saw piled in the bottom of their craft
Six grown men with gaping mouths and eyes
Bursting the sockets like spring onions in drills.
Six wrecks of bone and pallid, tautened skin.
"Bia, bia, bia," in whines and snarls their desperation
Rose and fell like a flock of starving gulls.

Seamus Heaney, ‘For the Commander of the Eliza’, 1966
“Underneath common ways of writing and speaking in industrial societies are stories of unlimited economic growth as the main goal of society; of the accumulation of unnecessary goods as a path towards self-improvement; of progress and success defined narrowly in terms of technological innovation and profit; and of nature as something separate from humans, a mere stock of resources to be exploited. “

Stibbe 29-30
The Language Freedom Movement, 1966
One Day for Recreation

- One day for recreation 'S gan éinne beo am' chudeachtain,
- I spied a charming fair maid Ina haonar 'gus í i siopa 'stigh.
- She was singing like an angel 'S mé ag éisteacht len a binne-ghuth,
- I whispered soft and aisy, 'Sé duirt sí: 'Lig dod' radaireacht.
Charlotte Brooke
Published 1789
My comparatively feeble hand aspires only (like the ladies of ancient Rome) to strew flowers in the paths of these laureled champions of my country. The flowers of earth, the terrestrial offspring of Phœbus, were scattered before the steps of victorious war; but for the triumphant genius are reserved the cœlestrial children of the unfading flowers of the Muse. To pluck, and thus to bestow them, is mine, and I hold myself honored in the task.

-Charlotte Brooke
Geamhar, bánóg, biorach, machaire, buaile, ingealtas, domasach, póicín fásach, mainnear, cathairín, réidh, cuibhreann, réidhléan, cluain, mín, tamhnach, buadán, tuar, branar, plás, raon, lóiste, cúilín, réalóg, cabhán, achadh, mothar, plásóg, loscán, páirc, magh.

-Manchán Magan, p. 3
“Irish is a language that developed before humankind decided to limit reality to the parameters of the rational mind – to believe only in a corporeal existence – and it has managed to hold on to some essential attributes of life that we risk overlooking or even forgetting in our civilized and technologically sophisticated lives.”

-MM, p. 33
I watch as the *giolcach* – the reeds – move about in the icy breeze, and I imagine my ancestors watching too, from a place, like the full moon, that I cannot see.” (21)
Unspoken things still dwell in the root of the Irish language, waiting to be unearthed, dissected. Dúlaoisc – a sea-level cave; dúluachair – the depths of mid-winter; and dúléim – a leap in the dark, a violent jump, a plunge. I see these connected with fierce, fine thread. There are stories behind these words, human voices that have known suffering. It comes to me as no shock at all that the Irish word for melancholy is dúlionn.

KnD, p. 99
I heard a voice calling me back, a soft but insistent cry: a call back to my own áiteanna tanaí. A call back to the land that made me; that wounded and broke me, the land that turned out to be the only place that held the power for me to heal. (71).
Summer 1979
The Colony
A second woman, younger with wavy, auburn hair drifting down her chest, offered him bread.
An mbeidh gréim aráin agat?

They nodded back.
Tá fáilte romhat.
*The Colony*, p. 54
Evolution or Demise? The linguistic patterns in the Irish language over four generations. A five-year comparative study of one island family.

-The Colony, p. 172
What are you up to, Séamus?
My name is James. And you know that.
Your Irish name is Séamus.
I use my English one.
I prefer the Irish.
It’s not your choice, J.P.
here you are, Bean Úi Fhloinn, defiant in your presence, in your speech, refusing to modernize, to adapt to this English invasion, refusing to pepper your language with this other language

*The Colony*, p. 163
She set down her pipe and cleared her throat. He turned on the recorder. She began to speak, her Irish more guttural than his.

I’m an old woman now.

p. 161
The Irish here was almost pure, Lloyd, tainted only by the school children learning English [...] and by the mercenaries on linguistic mediation, men like Micheál. (p. 123)
You speak the language, Mr Masson?
Yes, I study Irish. Gaelic, as you prefer to call it.
[...]
How can you help a language that is almost dead?
I suggest that you and your book are fifty years too late.
Yes, that is what the speakers of English like to believe.
And what do the French think, Mr Masson?
That Irish is an ancient and beautiful language worthy of our support.
[...] I dissect the day’s language [...] with only the birds to hear my mutterings.
David Wheatley
Ireland/Scotland: To
the Síneadh Fada/Sìneadh Fada
Over here we drive on this side of
the vowel.

PPE 2017, 275
Inclusion New Irish

- This Hostel Life
- Melatu Uche Okorie
The hedge-hauntin blackbird
an ae fit whyles restin
wad fain heat the tither in
storm-rufflet wing.

James Orr
Means of Production

*Inclusiveness*
Travelling Community

Oein de Bharduin

Why the moon travels