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Opponent's Report on the Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation
"Contemporary Gaelic Language Revival Efforts in the English-Speaking World"
by Levente NAGY

This report aims to facilitate a constructive dialogue during the defence by highlighting both the merits and areas for further refinement to consider for the publication of the dissertation.

Thesis statement

The dissertation investigates the contemporary status of Irish Gaelic by assessing whether the language is undergoing a shift from predominantly symbolic value toward renewed functional use. The study adopts a mixed-methods framework informed by Fishman's 8-level Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) and Spolsky's language-policy model, combining large-scale datasets with the candidate's own questionnaire. The central claim is that contemporary shifts in attitudes, digital engagement, and policy new language-policy instruments signal a potential reconfiguration of Irish as a communicative resource.

1. Overview of the dissertation

The dissertation is structured into six chapters that connect historical inquiry, theoretical reflection, and empirical analysis to explain the current sociolinguistic position of Irish. The introductory chapter establishes the historical evolution of Gaelic languages and the long-term effects of marginalization. The literature review (Chapter 2) synthesizes key revitalization models, language ideology frameworks, and contemporary developments in Irish and Scottish contexts. Chapter 3 presents the methodological framework, followed by the detailed analysis of three datasets (Chapter 4). The final chapters discuss the contemporary significance of the findings and outline practical implications.

The structure is coherent and balanced. The combination of historical depth and contemporary quantitative analysis is a defining strength, providing a solid foundation for evaluating Irish across multiple sociolinguistic domains.

2. Critical evaluation

2.1 Strengths

The dissertation displays a strong command of the historical forces that shaped Irish and Scottish Gaelic. The nuanced discussion of symbolic violence, colonial legacies, and long-term language shift convincingly frames contemporary revitalization challenges. The candidate demonstrates:

- **Comprehensive understanding of the existing literature and effective use of theoretical models:** Fishman's and Spolsky's models are employed systematically. The discussion of intergenerational transmission and the limitations of top-down language policy is thoughtful and aligned with current literature. The comparative reflections on Irish and Scots Gaelic add further analytical depth.
- **Multi-layered methodological design:** The triangulation of the 2014 Irish Language Use Survey, the 2022 Census, and the candidate's questionnaire offers a reliable account of competence, attitudes, and usage tendencies. The inclusion of self-admitted Irish and non-Irish speakers broadens the interpretive scope.
- **Conceptual and empirical delineation:** The interpretation of "latent speakers" – people with passive abilities but lacking confidence or opportunity – is an important conceptual contribution. While the concept has been discussed in broader revitalization literature, the dissertation provides a data-driven operationalization of latent speakers as a distinct sociolinguistic category emerging from Irish-language surveys, Census data, and the candidate's own questionnaire. It also offers a nuanced profile of this group in terms of competence, confidence, and language-use intentions. Moreover, it also brings evidence that this group constitutes a critical yet under-recognized segment whose activation could substantially influence revitalization outcomes.
- **Good empirical interpretation:** The candidate carefully distinguishes positive attitudes, symbolic attachment, and the persistent gap between competence and everyday usage. The conclusions reflect sound sociolinguistic judgment and avoid unwarranted claims.
- **Clear structure:** The revised dissertation includes structural refinements, especially in Chapter 4, which help the reader understand the complex empirical material. The revised version also incorporates richer discussion of digital platforms, online communities, and new media's role in Irish-language visibility, offering a contemporary perspective on usage domains.

2.2 Suggestions to consider for further publication

The revised version of the dissertation incorporates several recommendations from the initial review, particularly regarding digital usage, comparative Celtic perspectives, and structural clarity. Nonetheless, further refinement would strengthen the work for publication.

2.2.1 Comparative dimension

The thesis now develops more sustained comparisons with Welsh, Breton, and Scottish Gaelic, improving contextualization within the Celtic language family. However, comparisons with non-Celtic European revitalization cases (e.g., Basque and Catalan) are still absent. Including a concise comparative subsection that draws out shared mechanisms of domain expansion and speaker activation would significantly enhance generalizability.

2.2.2 Digital and online communication

The revised chapter expands the descriptive account of digital practices, incorporating examples from social media, online content creators, and application-based learning. While this expansion strengthens the discussion, the analysis remains largely qualitative and illustrative. A more systematic digital analysis – supported by a small coded sample or reproducible analytic procedure – would substantiate claims regarding online community formation and language use.

2.2.3 Methodological transparency

The methodology chapter improves clarity on data sources and acknowledges thematic coding of qualitative responses. However, methodological transparency remains limited. The thesis would benefit from an appendix presenting a codebook, coding rules, and sample coded excerpts. Such additions would enhance replicability and analytic reliability.

2.2.4 Policy recommendations

Although the dissertation evaluates policy instruments and their limitations, it does not conclude with a consolidated set of actionable proposals for policymakers. Given the study's applied orientation, a succinct list of evidence-based recommendations – targeting latent speaker engagement, workplace use, digital presence, and local planning – would significantly strengthen its policy relevance.

2.2.5 Narrative structure and concision

Structural improvements are evident, but certain sections remain dense, particularly where historical exposition overlaps with theoretical commentary or where statistical material is repeated. A more concise narrative, possibly reducing repeated statistical explanations, would improve clarity and readability.

3. Assessment of degree objectives achievement

3.1 Knowledge and understanding

The candidate demonstrates a broad and current command of sociolinguistic theory, minority language policy, and endangered language revitalization. The historical and theoretical sections display extensive knowledge and systematic understanding of the field.

3.2 Proficiency and ability

The candidate shows capacity for scientific analysis through the mixed-methods approach and triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data. The empirical component shows the candidate's ability to design a coherent methodological framework and to interpret multi-source data. The integration of theoretical perspectives and empirical findings is convincing and contributes to academic debates on symbolic and functional revitalization.

3.3 Judgment and approach

The dissertation reflects intellectual independence in proposing new concepts, mature critical thinking, and an ability to evaluate language policy and sociolinguistic trends with caution. The candidate avoids simplistic conclusions and explicitly acknowledges limitations, demonstrating scholarly responsibility and independent judgment.

4. Conclusion

The dissertation by Levente NAGY constitutes a solid contribution to research on Gaelic revitalization and minority language policy. It is well structured, conceptually grounded, and empirically supported. Its strengths lie in its clear theoretical framing, the sustained connection between historical marginalization and contemporary revitalization, and the identification of latent speakers as a pivotal group in future language planning.

The work fulfils the requirements for the awarding of the doctoral degree. With minimal refinement – particularly in methodological transparency, comparative breadth, and policy guidance – the dissertation has strong potential for publication in linguistic and sociolinguistic venues.

I fully agree that the candidate, Levente NAGY, be awarded the PhD degree.

December 5, 2025

Prof. Răzvan Săftoiu, PhD



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Questions for the defence

1. How do you account for the discrepancy between positive attitudes toward Irish and the limited frequency of actual use?
2. What specific policy measures could most effectively mobilize latent speakers into active users?
3. How could digital communities be more systematically involved in revitalization strategies?