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## “The Vocative Case on People’s Mouths”: The Irish Folklore Commission and Illiterate Linguistics

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**Abstract.** Seán Mac Criomhthain (1875 – 1955) is not to be confused with Seán Ó Criomhthain, author of *Lá Dár Saol* and son of Tomás Ó Criomhthain whose famous chronicle of life on the Great Blasket Island was published under the title *An tOileánach*. Mac Criomhthain’s importance stems rather from his mastery of the oral tradition which led Seosamh Ó Dálaigh to place him on a par with Peig Sayers as two of the best informants he had encountered. Ó Dálaigh himself was one of the most prolific collectors of the Irish Folklore Commission whose contribution to what is now the National Folklore Collection must be considered as one of the great cultural achievements of Irish history. Nonetheless, the institutional frames influencing the collection process meant that ultimately the IFC lacked what Ó Giolláin calls an “reflexive ethnology” (141), and this issue therefore merits some discussion. The present paper is intended to advance the discussion with reference to the presence, or not, of linguistic essentialism on the part of the Irish state as well of other sectors of society, taking as central texts Seán Ó Riada’s famous poem “Fill Arís” as well as a recently completed critical edition of Seán Mac Criomhthain’s folkloric repertoire.

**Key Words.** Dialectology, Irish Folklore Commission, Cultural Nationalism, Irish Language, Transcription, Lexicography, Irish-Medium Education.

**Resumen.** Seán Mac Criomhthain (1875 – 1955) no se debe confundir con Seán Ó Criomhthain, que fue el autor de *Lá Dár Saol* e hijo de Tomás Ó Criomhthain, a su vez el autor de unas famosas crónicas de la vida en la isla de Great Blasket publicadas bajo el título de *An tOileánach*. La importancia de Mac Criomhthain reside en su maestría de la tradición oral, lo que llevó a Seosamh Ó Dálaigh a situarlo al mismo nivel que Peig Sayers al definir a ambos como los mejores testimonios con los que se había encontrado. Ó Dálaigh era uno de los más prolíficos recopiladores de información de la Irish Folklore Commission. La aportación de esta comisión a lo que hoy constituye la National Folklore Collection es sin duda uno de los más grandes logros culturales en la historia de Irlanda. Sin embargo, el marco institucional que guió el proceso de recopilación de información en la IFC tuvo como contrapartida la ausencia de una “reflexión etnológica”, en palabras de Ó Giolláin (141), un aspecto que merece un análisis detallado. En este artículo se pretende continuar con el debate

sobre la presencia, o no, de un esencialismo lingüístico por parte del estado irlandés, al igual que por parte de otros segmentos sociales, y se tomará como texto de referencia el famoso poema de Seán Ó Riada “Fill Arís”, así como una recopilación del repertorio de Seán Mac Criomhthain en una edición crítica que ha sido recientemente publicada.

**Palabras clave.** Dialectología, Irish Folklore Commission, nacionalismo cultural, idioma irlandés, transcripción, lexicografía, educación en gaélico.

## 1. Introduction

Seán Mac Criomhthain (1875 – 1955) is not to be confused with Seán Ó Criomhthain, author of *Lá Dár Saol* and son of Tomás Ó Criomhthain whose famous chronicle of life on the Great Blasket Island was published under the title *An tOileánach*. Mac Criomhthain’s importance stems rather from his mastery of the oral tradition which led IFC collector Seosamh Ó Dálaigh to place him on a par with Peig Sayers as one of the two best informants he had encountered during a career in which he had provided the great bulk of transcriptions available for both West Kerry storytellers (Tyers 82).

An ethnographical approach of the kind proposed by Henry Glassie in his call to “begin with the words of the people we study” (4) must be tempered in turn by Thelen’s reminder that collecting oral history is itself a cultural act involving construction of history (ix). It can be shown, for example, that the oral culture of Irish speaking regions was institutionally prioritised by the Irish Free State within a nation of similarly rural yet monolingually anglophone regions. As Phillip O’Leary has demonstrated in his discussion of rural life in Gaelic prose, “the idea that the life of such rural parishes in the Gaeltacht was the most – if not the only – appropriate subject for literature in what was at the time still very much a rural language had, therefore, strong appeal on both practical and ideological grounds” (103).

With extensive reference to evidence presented in a recently completed PhD thesis which involved the creation of a critical edition of Mac Criomhthain’s folkloric repertoire as well as of his particular Irish dialect (Mac an tSionnaigh 8), the perspective offered in the present discussion benefits from a hybridity of Irish Studies subdisciplines in its allignment of literary, folkloric, journalistic, historical, and linguistic sources. Initially discussing forms of linguistic expectation as explored in Seán Ó Riordáin’s poem “Fill Arís”, this paper turns its focus thereafter to the paradoxical idea that although Seán Mac Criomhthain and elements of his repertoire as well as of his particular dialect of Irish represented an ideal of the kind also sought elsewhere by the Irish Folklore Commission, other elements represented a challenge to the linguistic essentialism of the state that was archiving his material. In light of such evidence, this paper will attempt to adjudicate to what extent linguistic expectations became detrimental to the cultivation of the Irish language.

## 2. Linguistic expectations

Trips to Gaeltacht regions on the part of members of majoritarily anglophone Ireland predate the foundation of the Irish Free State, stemming back to the foundation in 1893 of the Gaelic League whose language classes contributed to the development of linguistic tourism in the west. One such visitor, explains Angela Bourke, was Pádraig Pearse who “would have a huge influence on what was later called the Gaeltacht”:

His plan was to found a school in Dublin that would educate boys bilingually ... in 1908, he opened St. Enda's school in Cullenswood House, Ranelagh, two miles south of Dublin city center. The following years saw the completion of a small thatched house in vernacular style, above the lake in Rosmuc; over the following summers, Pearse brought several groups of boys from St. Enda's to stay there. A number of the young men who fought alongside him in 1916 or went on to hold leading positions in government and administration were his former pupils. (87)

The linguistic expectations of a certain section of Free State citizens visiting official Gaeltacht regions were nicely summarised in Seán Ó Riordáin's famous 1964 poem "Fill Arís" from his collection entitled *Brosna*. Although Ó Riordáin's Baile Mhúirne had itself been conferred official Gaeltacht status, it had by his own estimation become "very patchy" in comparison with "the living Gaeltacht of Dún Chaoin" with the result that the poet was "not 'at home' with Irish" (McCrea 78-80), and eventually chose to undertake his "pilgrimage to the Gaeltacht to improve his Irish and absorb the spirit of the living language" (McCrea 118):

"Fill Arís"

Fág Gleann na nGealt thoir,  
Is a bhfuil d'aois seo ár dTiarna i d'fhuil,  
Dún d'intinn ar ar tharla  
Ó buaileadh Cath Chionn tSáile,  
Is ón uair go bhfuil an t-ualach trom  
Is an bóthar fada, bain ded mheabhair  
Srathar shibhialtacht an Bhéarla,  
Shelley, Keats is Shakespeare:  
Fill arís ar do chuid,  
Nigh d'intinn is nigh  
Do theanga a chuaigh ceangailte i gcomhréiribh  
'Bhí bunoscionn le d'éirim:  
Dein d'fhaoistin is dein  
Síocháin led ghiniúin féinig  
Is led thigh-se féin is ná tréig iad,  
Ní dual do neach a thigh ná a threabh a thréigean.  
Téir faobhar na faille siar tráthnóna gréine go Corca Dhuibhne,  
Is chífir thiar ag bun na spéire ag ráthaíocht ann  
An Uimhir Dhé, is an Modh Foshuiteach,  
Is an tuiséal gairmeach ar bhéalaibh daoine:  
Sin é do dhoras,  
Dún Chaoin fé sholas an tráthnóna,  
Buail is osclófar  
D'intinn féin is do chló ceart. (Ó Riordáin 162-163)

Ó Riordáin's westward journey towards the Gaeltacht peninsula of Corca Dhuibhne allowed him to more precisely outline in poetry some of the factors that to this day have enticed visitors such as himself to return again and again with hopes of encountering ideal speakers of the kind represented by Seán Mac Criomhthain. The anticipation of encountering what Barry McCrea has translated as "the Dual Number, and the Subjunctive Mood" as well as the eponymous "vocative case on people's mouths" seems to be accorded an importance superior to the region's much celebrated natural beauty. "Fill Arís", or "Return Again", in this sense

represents a poetic reproduction of the assumptions associated with the state brand of linguistic essentialism central to the prevailing ideology of the Irish Folklore Society and later the Irish Folklore Commission. Fitting, then, that Ó Riordáin's poem would in 2014 receive the honour of becoming a nominee for the state broadcaster's "Poem for Ireland" award which invited the Irish people to choose one of ten "stand-out Irish poems of the past 100 years".

### 3. "Our Irish Ways"

The Free State government of the 1920s had embarked in the immediate aftermath of its inception on an ethnological project whereby the oral traditions of rural citizens were to be compiled and studied. Such a study was to provide the state with a national corpus of linguistico-politico-religious data, recovering as much as possible of the "Irish ways" as Michael Collins had put it in *A Path to Freedom*, a text echoing Douglas Hyde's "Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland" and yet whose completion was to be interrupted by the author's assassination:

We only succeeded after we had begun to get back our Irish ways; after we had made a serious effort to speak our own language; after we had striven again to govern ourselves. We can only keep out the enemy and all other enemies by completing that task ... The biggest task will be the restoration of the language. How can we express our most subtle thoughts and finest feelings in a foreign tongue? Irish will scarcely be our language in this generation, not even perhaps in the next. But until we have it again on our tongue and in our minds we are not free, and we will produce no immortal literature. (Collins 120-123)

References to the "enemy" here testify to a context of post-war trauma in this initiative period of state folklore collection in Ireland, and the desire to "get back" is of course recalled in the title of Ó Riordáin's poem "Return Again". The grammatical elements cited by Ó Riordáin would through this postcolonial prism be understood as examples of linguistic factors bearing witness to the "Irish ways". The "vocative case" referred to is for example a linguistic phenomenon whereby addressing a person causes that person's name to become inflected as part of a "morphological marking of the vocative" that is unknown in the modern English language:

The function of the vocative (Irish *an tuiséal gairmeach* "the vocative case") is to address an individual and get his or her attention as in the English example *Michael, we have to leave soon*. This function is a matter of discourse which is why the vocative is located in pragmatics. However, as part of its Indo-European heritage, Irish has morphological marking of the vocative. The vocative has traditionally been treated as a grammatical case and appears in case listings in early grammars of classical languages and later, because of this tradition, in grammars of Irish. (Hickey 31)

The association of the vocative with the exoticism of "early grammars of classical languages" partially explains why Seán Ó Riordáin was to be wowed by the vigour of the vocative once encountering it in West Kerry, where it was to be heard "on people's mouths" as opposed to the graphocentric medium represented in his poem by "Shelley, Keats and Shakespeare" and their "civilised halter of English". The vocative case in the Kerry Gaeltacht had by the time of Ó Riordáin's visits in the 1950s continued to exist as a feature of a living, spoken language

that had endured independently of “grammars of Irish”, but it is interesting to note that by the arrival of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the vocative had become conspicuous by its absence rather than by its presence. A 2008 article published in *Comhar* and targeting the kind of Irish to be heard on Raidió na Gaeltachta<sup>1</sup> complained that:

Is teimheal nó breoiteacht don intinn an saghas breilléise a theilgeann craoltóirí áirithe inár leith. Is léir nach smaoiníonn na craoltóirí seo ar an ábhar a bhíonn idir lámha acu, ná cén chaoi lena chur ós comhair an phobail. Is i gcúrsaí spóirt is suntasaí atá an fabht seo le feiceáil: nathanna sleamchúiseacha droch-Ghaeilge á spré orainn, an teanga á cur ar as a riocht, go fiú an tuiseal gairmeach de “Mícheál” mícheart... (Roibeáird 32)

That Raidió na Gaeltachta’s sporting commentators should neglect the vocative may be contextualised by a reminder that almost all languages of Indo-European heritage have long since done away with it, as American-born professor of Polish literature and folklore enthusiast, Robert Rothstein, explains by way of reference to the Slavic context:

The vocative case has been in decline in Polish for over a hundred years. All languages change over time, and one way in which they change is when speakers no longer find a particular distinction necessary. Polish is not alone among the Slavic languages in losing the vocative ... Russian has gone even further and has only a few remnants of the vocative, such as *bozhe moi*, a much milder oath than its literal English translation. (47)

The fact that Seán Ó Riordáin should wax lyrical over the vocative as a feature of native speech in West Kerry, together with Máirtín Roibeaird’s tirade in response to instances of its absence, quite neatly delimits the apparent reverence for grammar within the Irish speaking community. The seemingly oxymoronic presence of the phrase “illiterate linguistics” in the title of this paper, then, stems from a situation in which state-sanctioned notions of grammatical appropriacy were being formed on the basis of a corpus which was actively gathering linguistic material from Gaeltacht areas such as West Kerry whose inhabitants in the words of Barry McCrea were “renowned for their instinctive command of the language and for their knowledge of the ancient oral repertoire” (112), and whose custodians were not uncommonly illiterate, as in the case of Seán Mac Criomhthain.

#### 4. The Irish Folklore Commission

The Irish Folklore Society was created in 1927 (Almqvist 8). It was later renamed the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935 during which year full time civil servant folklorists were first commissioned to travel, often in state cars (NFC 1045: 428), to rural areas such as Corca Dhuibhne or indeed Baile Mhúirne where the first IFC collectors made visits during Ó Riordáin’s boyhood there. Transcribing folktales and lore to the tune of 2,835 “thick volumes” (Almqvist 10), and recording in many cases the voices of their informants using the newfangled ediphone (Briody 342).

Seosamh Ó Dálaigh of Dún Chaoin is considered one the most prolific of these collectors and correspondents, and during the 35 years of the Irish Folklore Commission’s activity, he contributed over 60,000 pages of transcription and opinion to the National Folklore Collection (C. Ó Sé viii).<sup>2</sup> It is significant then that this authoritative figure would cite Seán Mac Criomhthain, along with “Peig”, as the very best storytellers he had encountered

during the work he carried out under the auspices of The Irish Folklore Commission (Tyers 82). A reminder of the supremacy in Irish folklore of Peig Sayers, who via Máire Ní Chéilleachair's edition (*Peig*, 1935) of her repertoire became synonymous with the language itself, provides a counterpoint to criticism that Irish national folklore is absent of women (c.f. O'Connor 32-34; Ó Giolláin 141).

Linguistically speaking, however, this supremacy has also contributed to an imbalance regarding the common perception of the Irish of County Kerry which arguably has become conflated with the local variant once spoken in the now uninhabited Blasket Islands, where Peig spent most of her life. The one extant comprehensive dialectological study of Kerry Irish was thus based exclusively on native speakers living in the extreme West of that county (D. Ó Sé 7), as though tracing “the historical decline of vernacular Irish not just to Dún Chaoin but all the way to its ultimate conclusion, to the extinction of native speech” (McCrea 118). It is for such reasons that the late Monsignor Ó Fiannachta had stressed, in one of the last publications over which he presided as founding director of An Sagart, that the northeastern part of the Dingle peninsula was overdue an accurate account of the dialect specific to that area (Ó Fiannachta, “Brolach” 11). This is where the dialect of seanchaí Seán Mac Criomhthain comes in.

### 5. Seán Mac Criomhthain and Kerry Irish

17 km from Dún Chaoin pier from whence one may take a boat to the Blasket Islands is Cill Maoilchéadair to the northeast of the Dingle peninsula, and Seán Mac Criomhthain lived there from 1875 until 1955. Over a thousand individual items of tradition were catalogued from this particular seanchaí during the period 1927 until 1951. Mac Criomhthain's vast folkloric repertoire has inadvertently provided an excellent linguistic corpus with which the existence of two sub-strata of West Kerry Irish have been hypothesised (Mac an tSionnaigh 8-15), complete with evidence for the ongoing existence of the “the Dual Number, and the Subjunctive Mood, and the vocative case” (McCrea 283).

The following is an example from Mac Criomhthain's corpus of the inflected form “a fheara”, which despite being the traditional vocative case for the plural noun “fir”, literally meaning “men”, it may in this vocative context be said to have the force of “guys” or “fellows”. Such issues around translating vocative phrases from Irish to English are revelatory of the kinds of translation gaps that exist between these two languages in particular.

Bhí Eoghan Rua ag imeacht do fhéin lá, agus do casadh go dtí meitheal a bhí ag baint phrátaí é. “Tánn sibh ag obair ana-dhian **a fheara**,” arsa é sin. (NFC 966: 546-551)

Like the vocative case, the dual number is also a feature of nominal inflexion, and was by Thurneysen explained as a feature of Old Irish's having preserved “the three numbers of Indo-European, singular (sg.) plural (pl.), and dual (du.). The dual form of a noun is always accompanied by the numeral ‘two’” (154-155). Dual number forms in the Official Standard for Modern Irish are limited to, as listed by Ó Fiannachta, the nouns “dhá láimh, dhá bhois, dhá chluais, dhá chois, dhá bhróig” (*Sean-Ghaeilge* 19). Mac Criomhthain's use of dual number forms was more extensive, and is in the following examples responsible for the declension of “muc” to palatalised “mhuic”, meaning “pig”, and of “adharc” to palatalised “adhairc”, meaning “horn”:

Tháinig fear mar chliamhain isteach ar an mbaile seo, agus is amhla a fuair sé dhá **mhuic** ramhra ó mhuintir a chéile. (NFC 1035: 165-172)

Do rug sé ar dhá **adhairc** air, is bhuail sé ar chnámh a dhroma é. (NFC 981: 359-361)

Many languages employ the subjunctive as a verbal mood to express wish, order, or doubt, and the subjunctive form for the verb “téigh” in Irish may be familiar to those having taken an Aerlingus flight where “go **dté** sibh slán” has become a common postflight greeting. The use of the subjunctive by Dublin Bus and Iarnród Éireann in phrases such as “ná gaibh thar an líne bhán go **stada** an bus”, “fan go **lasa** an cnaipe agus brúigh”, or indeed the more widespread use of “go **raibh** maith agat”, are also equally worthy of mention. Further evidence for its more traditional usage can be found in the following citations from Seán Mac Criomhthain:

Nuair a raghaidh m’athair abhaile, go **dté** dealg droighean id chois. (NFC 967: 490-500)

Go **gcuire** Dia ar a leas an té a ghoid mo láirín rua. (NFC 967: 7-10)

Such linguistic complexity meant that similar specimens of West Kerry heritage collected from Peig Sayers for use in the national school system where Irish was being taught as a compulsory subject. A contrasting viewpoint of the value of West Kerry’s linguistic heritage, however, is on offer in a short story from Pádraig Ó Cíobháin’s collection *De Chion Focal* where the people of Tralee and their cynicism in respect of the language spoken by their Gaeltacht neighbours region to the South-West is, ironically, characterised by a sentence whose phonetic composition mimics the accent of that town:

Is ait leis an gcleas aduaidh iad. An teangain dá labhairt age na hiartharaigh is aite leis na tuairsceartaigh.

“Fait do they vaint to speak that oul’ language for?” ar a mbéalaibh.

Ábhar Gaelainn fachta ar scoil acu. Seanabhlas uirthi dá réir sin. (132)

As part of a composition entitled “The Reckonings of Our Ancestors”<sup>3</sup> originally published in *The Irish Press* in 1932, Flann O’Brien seems to parody both sides of the linguistic divide in a satirical letter attributed to a fictional character calling himself “Anti-Humbug”:

Dear Friend,

My son is being obliged to spend most of his time at school learning this “Compulsory English,” instead of studying poetry or magic. What will he gain from English when he leaves the country? Not one note is spoken in Scotland other than Gaelic, and the Kingdom of Saxons is full of nobody but violent, ignorant savages. (*The Short Fiction* 40)

The novelist Máirtín Ó Cadhain brought the speech of the Irish oral tradition beyond school textbooks and into its own as a powerful medium of modernist expression in *Cré na Cille* (1949) which in recent English translation became *A Dirty Dust* (2016) in one edition, translated by Alan Titley, and *The Graveyard Clay* (2016) in another, translated by Mac an Iomaire and Robinson. In a passage reminiscent of Ó Riordáin’s allusion to “Shelley, Keats and Shakespeare”, Ó Cadhain’s 1969 essay *Páipéir Bhána agus Páipéir Bhreaca* appears to address the kinds of protests brought against the Irish language and explored by Ó Cíobháin and O’Brien above:

Níor léigh mé comic ariamh ná leabhar ar bith den chineál a d’fheicinn ag mo chaomhaoiseachaí i mbaile mór na Gaillimhe an tráth sin féin. Ach tá mé cinnte gur mhó go mór an borra faoi mo shamhlaíocht na rudaí seo ar fad a luaim ná léitheoireacht mo chomhaoiseachaí cathaireach. Is cuimhneamh liom daoine gan scoil gan foghlaim ag cur síos, go háirid ar thaibhsí agus ar sprideannaí, ar bhealach nach sáródh ach na scríbhneoirí is cumasaí, Dante nó Shakespeare. (9)

## 6. Institutional frames in folklore collection

Although the Irish language did to some extent become a divisive issue in 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland on both parochial and intellectual levels, the National Folklore Commission’s substantial collection of “items of tradition”, whether in English or Irish, continues to represent very important primary sources for the historian, the folklorist, the creative writer, and the dialectologist alike. The institutional frames which defined the manner in which these items were collected must however be taken into account when making any use of them, as such frames had a direct impact on which elements exactly were to be collected, and how. Michael Briody has suggested that there was more than mere “linguistic nationalism” at play:

However, in concentrating initially on what it saw as the richest veins of Irish tradition, namely traditions in the Irish language, it was not simply motivated by narrow linguistic nationalism. Scholars like Reid Th. Christiansen and Carl Wilhelm von Sydow believed, rightly or wrongly, that in the rich body of folklore still extant in the Gaeltacht lay a key to understanding much of the lost oral tradition of medieval Europe. Thus, viewed from an international perspective, rather than a purely national one, the focus of the Irish Folklore Commission was far less essentialist. (54)

The legacy of this European cultural continuity is partly expressed by the fact that a version of folktale type ATU 1792 A collected in 1947 from Seán Mac Criomhthain known as “The Priest Stealing the Pig” (NFC 966: 296-302) is told in places from South Africa to the Basque Country (Mac an tSionnaigh 913). A passage from the *Handbook of Irish Folklore* by Seán Ó Súilleabháin in 1942 demonstrates quite clearly a conscious desire to establish stronger relations with Europe contemporarily:

In this material lies mirrored the routine of rural life of our ancestors, a source of inestimable value to the student of European ethnology ... The exuberant imagination of the fairy-tales, which enriched the literature of twelfth century Europe, is as fresh today as a thousand years ago in the tales of the Irish Gaeltacht. (3)

In his comparative study of Ó Riordáin, Passolini, and Proust as writers who McCrea argues effectively used a minority language to activate their strategy of creative modernism, Barry McCrea essentially argues with great success for an understanding of many instances of the 20<sup>th</sup> century drive to archive and enshrine the oral culture of Ireland as a part of an expression of the general modernist condition:

[T]he minor literary tradition of lyric poetry in the waning peasant languages of Europe, far removed from the cosmopolitan experience of Paris, London, and Vienna, and at first glance a last remnant of a premodern world that was bound to fade, was another, later strain of European modernism that deserves a place in our accounts of twentieth-century European culture. (120)

Irish stories also accompanied Irish immigrants beyond Europe, across the sea into the New World, and such a situation may explain how versions of folktale type ATU 1894 B “Payment with the clink of money” were collected both from Seán Mac Criomhthain (NFC 621: 157-159; NFC 967: 224-226) and from the African-American tradition in the United States where a version was published in a collection called *Negro Folktales in Michigan* by R. M. Dorson (60-61), although Seán Ó Súilleabháin in *Folktales of Ireland* does remind us that versions of this same story have also been collected in places as varied as in Italy, in Indonesia, and in Japan (273).

However, during the first decades of Irish independence from Great Britain, the fact remains that an important influence on the work of the Commission concerned the institutional desire to distance the Free-State from the United Kingdom and aspects of its culture. Indeed, the Irish language folklore found in the manuscripts of the Irish Folklore Commission are still valued as contemporarily as in the most recent publication in West Kerry folklore on the grounds that they contain little evidence of perceived “anglicisms” (De Mórdha 222). The kinds of comments made by collectors contemporarily in their private correspondence with the head office must be understood in this context. Seán Ó Dubhda was one such collector:

Ó Dubhda (1873 - 1963), originally from the parish of An Baile Dubh, near An Clochán on the north side of the peninsula, taught at Feothanach National School, Cill Maoilchéadair from 1902 until his retirement. For much of his teaching career, he recorded local folklore on an informal, voluntary basis on behalf of the Irish Folklore Commission, and shortly after his retirement in 1952 was appointed a 'special collector' by the Commission. (Mac Cárthaigh 76)

“Níor thug sé aon phioc dá shaol ar scoil ach amháin cúpla seachtain ar fad geall leis” (NFC 621: 184) wrote Ó Dubhda in 1936 of Seán Mac Criomhthain who was consequently reported to be illiterate in the censuses of 1901 and 1911. Neither had his father been to school, and this was no harm according to Ó Dubhda who insisted again and again (NFC 1352: 328) that Irish people had been spoiled by foreign learning, having consequently lost their native wit and character (NFC 621: 138). Such a view lends weight to Ó Giolláin’s remark that “poverty and isolation were necessary to the specificity of folklore since prosperity and integration of necessity involved the assimilation of modern values inimical to it” (142). In Mac Criomhthain’s case, however, this was as sectarian an issue as it was folklore-related, and Ó Dubhda therefore duly noted that what he termed the foreign protestant school (NFC 1115: 19) was located right beside the Mac Criomhthain household, and that they were to be commended for not succumbing to it.

Seán Mac Criomhthain may have been a proud Catholic (National Archives Census of Ireland 1901; National Archives Census of Ireland 1911), with a habit of referring to Irish Protestants as “Sasanaigh” in a slightly pejorative fashion, but he was no stranger to the “civilised halter of English” nor to actual Englishmen either as in the case of unilingually anglophone Máistir Footcroft. Footcroft was a school teacher who had taught in Kilmalkedar’s protestant school and whose habit of verbally relaying information garnered from newspapers to Seán is yet another nod to the robustly phonocentric culture of West Kerry:

Fear ana-dheas ab ea é ar a shon é a bheith ina Shasanach. Is dócha go bhfuil chúig mbliana is dathad ó bhí sé anso. Bhí sé timpeall lé trí fichid an uair sin. Bhí Éire ar fad siúltha aige, ag imeacht ag múineadh scoileanna. Bhí sé féin is a bhean ann, agus beirt leanbh. Scrígh sé chúm tréis an áit seo a dh’fhágaint, agus is é áit go raibh sé ná

thíos i County Down an uair sin. Níl aon scéal a bhíodh ar an bpáipéar ná niseadh sé dom. (NFC 936: 408-410)

Ní mór an Ghaelainn a bhí aige, ach focail. Bhí Éire siúltha aige, agus dúirt sé liom gurb é Gaelainn a chuala sé fhéin ar magpie “maraodh an phota”. (NFC 936: 431-433)

Mac Criomhthain’s humility in allowing Footcroft to contribute to his own enormous Irish vocabulary with the addition of the word “maraodh an phota” is quite remarkable. Since Master Footcroft could not speak Irish, Mac Criomhthain was occasionally required to assume the role of interpreter during the school teacher’s visits to his similarly monolingual father, as is clear from the following reference to the rooster which is evocative of folktale type ATU 960 C:

Triúr againn a bhí istigh, mise is m’athair, is é fhéin. Bhí m’athair ag caint mar gheall ar an gcoileach ag teacht comh déanach.

“Abair lé t’athair,” arsa é sin, “ná fuil aon díobháil ansan. Ní thagann coileach lé haon drochscéal”. (NFC 968: 155-156)

A conversation with another visitor, which Seán recalled as part of his response to Seosamh Ó Dálaigh’s question regarding the correct name for “the ruined church with the roof that was built out of stone” (Hardie 5) beside his home, features an interesting description of the use of English as speaking “go galldha” or “foreignly”:

Cill Maoilchéadair. Ní thugann éinne anois air ach “an Chill” mar ar mhaith leo. “Cillmilcéadair” a deir daoine, agus “Cillmicéadair” a deir a thuilleadh. Tháinig duine uasal lá Domhnaigh thíos anso age cró na snáthaide. Bhí m’athair amuigh anso. Bhíos fhéin ag an aifreann. Labhair sé leis go galldha bhuaidh aníos.

“Níl aon ghnó agat díom,” arsa m’athair.

“Tá,” arsa é sin á dh’fhreagairt as Gaelainn, “cé atá ina bhun san?” arsa é sin.

Dá bhfiarthódh sé dhomhsa é ach go háirithe, déarfainn gurb iad na Connors so thíos a bhí ina bhun. Bhí leabhar aige.

“Maolchéadair,” arsa m’athair. (NFC 979: 64)

Seán Mac Criomhthain engaged on occasion in metalinguistic discourse of the kind represented by his altruistic musings over the various pronunciations of the name of his own townland, and this is perhaps more than a little contradictory of the expectations expressed by Ó Riordáin’s employment in “Fill Arís” of the ichthyological term “shoaling” which for McCrea is evocative of the understanding that “for native speakers, grammatical forms are invisible, undifferentiated parts of the natural order of the world ... which their utopian language language communities seem to be unconsciously part of” (118-119). Mac Criomhthain, as we have seen, however, was quite conscious of grammatical variation, and could cite examples of this phenomenon. Further evidence for metalinguistic discourse on the part of Mac Criomhthain may be consulted in the following reflection over the phrase “I was going to mass” wherein the varied application of initial mutation is alluded to:

“Bhíos ag dul **go dtí an Aifreann**,” “bhíos ag dul **go dtí an tAifreann**” – tá sé le clos anso ar an dá chuma. (NFC 1178: 567-601)

Standard Irish would require a prosthetic “t” before “Aifreann” in this situation as per the rules of the nominative case, but it appears from Mac Criomhthain’s examples that some

confusion may exist as to whether the dative or the nominative case might be employed. Although in general quite precise in his deployment of initial mutation throughout the corpus, there are other occasions where he seems unbound by any rigid system of the kind later presented by *Gráiméar Gaeilge na mBráithre Críostaí* (1960) to generations of school children. A degree of flexibility is evident during Seán's recension of a version of folktale type ATU 706 "The Maiden Without Hands", however. On that particular recording session in July 1948, Seán is heard to offer four slightly differing formulations of a phrase which translates directly to English as "seven years" – from "seacht blian" to "seacht bliana" to "seacht mblian" to "seacht mbliana":

Chuir sí an leabhar uirthi, gan é sin a dh'insint d'éinne go neosfadh sí do **leanbh seacht blian** gan baisteadh ... gan é sin a dh'insint d'éinne go neosfadh sí dho **leanbh seacht bliana** gan baisteadh ... ó lá go lá nó gur bhuail an leanbh **seacht mblian** ... agus i gcionn **seacht mbliana** ... dúirt sí liom é a dh'insint do **leanbh na seacht blian** gan baisteadh ... agus duitse atáimse á dh'insint a **leanbh na seacht blian** gan baisteadh. (NFC, CT0319)

Although a solid rule of usage with regard to the number "seacht" is difficult to discern according to dialectologist Diarmuid Ó Sé in his at length description of West Kerry Irish, he does suggest that the most common occurrence regarding voiced consonants is for lenition to be applied. Lenition in the Irish context involves adding the letter "h" after the initial consonant of the word being lenited. In none of the above four cases of 'seacht' being used in tandem with voiced consonant "b" does Mac Criomhthain apply lenition. Possibly mitigating circumstances may however be theorised. The final phrase "a leanbh na seacht **blian** gan baisteadh", for which the official Standard would recommend "a leanbh na seacht **mbliana**", is partly composed of a genitive construction involving the two nouns "leanbh" and "bliain". The inclusion of the phrase "gan baisteadh" with its unlenited "b" may also have influenced the morphology, and the non-standard treatment of "bliain" may therefore stem in this context from a hitherto unattested dialectical deviation from standard morphology. At any rate, of importance for the present purpose is the evidence for flexibility of Mac Criomhthain's morphological system as well as the challenge presented by his expressions to existing accounts of West Kerry Irish.

In keeping with a longstanding tolerance of a diglossic situation in Gaeltacht areas, Mac Criomhthain appeared to be without any resentment of the English language, and neither was he shy of incorporating it into his repertoire. Although Irish predominated in the Gaeltacht until well into the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the tradition of macaronic song provides just one example of the use of English in Gaeltacht culture. Transmission of macaronic song in Irish-speaking regions has long escaped scholarly attention as observed by Liam Mac Mathúna (11) whose discussion of such material in *Béarla sa Ghaeilge* constitutes an excellent antidote to such oversight (183-217). Seán Mac Criomhthain's corpus also includes several macaronic items. "Age Teorainn Chluain Meala agus Charraig na Siúire", featured by Ó Muirthe in his anthology of macaronic song *An tAmhrán Macarónach* (41), represents one such song collected from Seán Mac Criomhthain. Depicting a conversation between a monolingual Irish-speaking man in pursuit of a monolingually anglophone woman, the motif is one that was borrowed from the oral tradition by Brian Friel in writing *Translations* (1981), in which play Máire from Donegal and Yolland from England find themselves in a similar linguistic situation. The pair manage to fall in love despite the language barrier as per Mac Criomhthain's version of the motif where there is talk of marriage in the final stanza (NFC 967: 143-144):

Now my dear Johnny, I know what you mean,  
 you are a brave thrasher, and that's a good trade,  
 before we get married, we'll travel away,  
 I hope we'll live happy, the rest of our days. (NFC 967: 144)

Unlike the “brave thrasher” from this song, Seán did speak English as well as his native Irish which sometimes bore the hallmark of the scorned anglicisms which according to Ó Dubhda were beginning to pervade the speech of the old Irish speakers (NFC 621: 190).

The anglicisms referred to by Ó Dubhda would include the commonplace habit of suffixing to English words, for example, “-áil” to verbal forms, “-éir” to nominal forms, and “-áltha” to past participle forms for harmonious use as words of Irish speech. This practice gave rise to the presence of hybrid forms such as “*wheeláil*”, “*murderéir*” and “*fairáltha*” in Seán Mac Criomhthain’s speech, and still more words were spoken in plain English.<sup>4</sup> The Irish Folklore Commission’s collectors were required to “record the information in the exact words of the speaker, if possible” and to “make no ‘corrections’ or ‘changes’” (Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook* xii), and although Seosamh Ó Dálaigh was a conscientious scribe in this regard, he also took the time to underline such words of English in his transcriptions. Mac Criomhthain also in one instance alleged that Ó Dubhda had modified his version of “Agallamh an Dá Mhada Rua” to the effect of substituting “bithiúnach” for “madarua” (NFC 455: 943). Such attitudes towards the collection, cataloguing and classification of folklore have led Robert Hodges to argue as part of his discussion of the folklorist’s haste to force items of tradition into neat generic groups that “classification is always a strategy of control ... classifications of people ... and what they should think and mean” (21).

“The revival of the Irish language and the preservation of Irish folklore were parallel undertakings” (129) as pointed out by Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, and if the Commission’s linguistic essentialism may in part account for the growth of interest in Gaeltacht regions, it has also informed the way in which the state classified aspects of its culture to its detriment. The institutional aversion to anglicisms in the domain of Irish folklore was passed on to state lexicography in the sense that words such as “practiceáil” were not acknowledged in the Irish dictionaries that were prepared and supplied for the teaching of Irish such as *English-Irish Dictionary* (1959), by De Bhaldraithe, and *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (1977), by Ó Dónaill, whose chief editor had as part of a thesis worthy of an Oireachtas prize entitled “Forbairt na Gaeilge” which condemned certain elements of Gaeltacht speech as being no more than unadorned anglicism (Ó Dónaill, *Forbairt* 12). Writing in 1951, he traced this development to have had its beginnings within the immediately preceding generations during which time the Irish language had lost its ability both to accommodate foreign words and to come up with its own:

Nuair a chastaí focal orthu nach raibh glacadh ar chruth Gaeilge aige, bhéarfadh siad iarraidh focal Gaeilge a chur ina áit. Anois níl acmhainn acu drannadh le fuaim ná le focal. Bheir siad leo an focal nua fãna chruth Béarla, mar a chuala siad é. Ní thabharfadh siad anaidíní ar anodynes dá mbeadh a mbeatha i ngeall air. Ní mítheangachas leo bicycle a rá ach diúltaíonn a gcluas do rothar, cionnas nach gcuala siad ag a muintir é. (*Forbairt* 16-17)

Whereas “bicycle” and its plural “bicycleí” were natural elements in the active English language of vocabulary of Seán Mac Criomhthain, he in other areas takes pride in his usage of native terminology in contrast with the anglicisms of others as for example in NFC 968: 530 where he refers to “sionán” as his own equivalent for English “beehive”, or “skip” as he reports others in the area to say.

Once a part of the educational system via its dictionary resources, the institutional aversion to anglicisms was passed on to second language speakers of Irish. Pádraig Ua Maoileoin in his novella *Na hAird Ó Thuaidh* illustrates this situation very nicely by means of an anecdote in which a second language speaker on his holidays to the Gaeltacht encounters the word “practiseáil”:

“Practiseáil,” arsa an stróinséir, “ach nach focal Béarla é sin agat?”

“Ar mh’anamsa féin nach ea,” arsa Paid, suas leis an bpus aige, “ach focal breá Gaelainne atá riamh againn agus age n-ár muintir romhainn.”

“Ach, ná déarfá gurbh fhearr d’fhocal ‘cleachtadh’ go mór ná é, agus cad ina thaobh nach é athá agat?” a dúirt an stróinséir thar’n ais. (33)

Although Ó Dónaill had suggested that grammaticians and scholars were at fault for a situation in which his generation of Gaeltacht citizens were no longer contributing to terminological development on the grounds that they had traditionally had been afforded no authority in that matter (17), he and his team neglected to include “practiseáil” as a headword in their dictionary. Ultimately, prescriptive lexicography in the Irish context came to mean that undesirable anglicisms from folkloric texts were not to be taught in Irish classes, and this institutional bias against words derived from English is partly responsible for a situation which has permitted a “social and spatial distance of official terminology planning from the circumstances of the Gaeltacht speech” as Helena Ní Ghearáin has suggested in her work on the relationship between institutionalised Irish terminology development and the Gaeltacht speech community (318). The dialogue, however, is ongoing. Others would later attempt to through poetry bridge such distance as Ó hÁinle has reported (776), and a case in point is Michael Davitt’s poem “Ar an gCeathrú Rua” which in featuring a direct translation into Irish the English idiom “my heart missed a beat” made albeit tongue-in-cheek use of gaelicised forms of the English verb “to miss” as well of the noun “beat”, with spectacular poetic results:

**Mhiosáil** mo chroí **bít** ar an gCaoran Mór  
Éalaíonn Muimhneach ó  
ghramadach (39)

Yet another ode to Gaeltacht pilgrimage, “Ar an gCeathrú Rua” differs from the earlier “Fill Arís” in its celebration of “escape” from grammar as opposed to Ó Riordáin’s “shoaling” to it.

## 7. Conclusion

It is perhaps contradictory, in the context of a state ideology whose earliest prolocutors lauded “the rural life of our ancestors” (Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook* 3) as an ideal on which to model Irish society going forward, that a “social and spatial distance”, in Ní Ghearáin’s words, could ever have inserted itself between Gaeltacht culture and state linguistic practices during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Snippets of evidence as have been drawn upon in the present article from Seán Mac Criomhthain’s corpus and from civil servants’ correspondence do however lend credence to such an interpretation of the fate of the Gaeltacht. This is a “social and spatial distance” which also contradicts the position of two of the most important Irish language writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Seán Ó Riordáin and Máirtín Ó Cadhain, whose literary cultures not only were founded on but actively championed what is known as *caint na ndaoine*.<sup>5</sup> One could also suggest, however, that one of the merits of Gaeltacht speech is precisely its “social and spatial distance” from the institutional realm of self-consciously linguistic practices as evinced by the presence of An Coiste Téarmaíochta,<sup>6</sup> whose voluntary

work on behalf of Irish terminology, for that matter, is of equal albeit dissimilar importance to the cultivation of the language. Ó Riordáin thus chose to traverse the “spatial distance” through trips to the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht, allowing him to poeticise having experienced “shoaling there the Dual Number, and the Subjunctive Mood, and the vocative case”. Indeed, Barry McCrea has suggested that “it was exactly this distance that Irish offered Ó Riordáin [as an Irish language poet]” (283). Furthermore, the evidence in Mac Criomhthain’s corpus for the co-existence of both English and Irish in the Gaeltacht as well as for the allowance for divergence from grammatical norms taken together suggest that even within the Gaeltacht were degrees of “social distance”.

The introduction outlined an intention to adjudicate as to whether the treatment of the Gaeltacht was detrimental to the cultivation of the Irish language. Indeed, the institutional antipathy of the kind shown by the Irish Folklore Commission to macaronic songs in the Gaeltacht has been deemed by Ó Laoire and McCann to be counterproductive to both languages, giving rise to “suspicion and anomalous categories that, in privileging some and devaluing others, are damaging and limiting to all” (261). In light of the debate sparked and the wealth of literature inspired by the Gaeltacht phenomenon, however, it is difficult to suggest that its treatment was indeed “detrimental” to the language. Whether the Gaeltacht regions could have been maintained in such a way as to yield better rates of intergenerational transmission of the language and its traditions is yet another issue. Regardless, the National Folklore Collection has enshrined elements of its oral culture, and will always be on hand to assist future historians, dialectologists, folklorists and visitors of all other description towards bridging the “temporal distance” by means of offering a unique anachronistic insight into Irish society.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A national Irish language radio station which is primarily intended to serve the Gaeltacht regions.

<sup>2</sup> See also his Irish language biographical entry “Ó DÁLAIGH, Seosamh (1909–1992)”, available at <https://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=1680>.

<sup>3</sup> “Mion-Tuairimí ár Sinnsir” originally but given here is Jack Fennell’s translation (O’Brien, *The Short Fiction* 40).

<sup>4</sup> Glossaries may be consulted in *Scothsheanchas Sheáin Mhic Criomhthain* (Mac an tSionnaigh 195).

<sup>5</sup> “The people’s speech”. Ó hÁinle mentions both authors in this respect, recognising Ó Cadhain’s use of *caint na daoine* with a reminder that Ó Cadhain also composed his own words and borrowed from literary sources too (776).

<sup>6</sup> “An Coiste Téarmaíochta” is the Irish language terminology committee.

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Received: 31 October 2017

Revised version accepted: 26 January 2018

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