

Just For Fun: Irish!

Introduction

What is Irish? Irish, also known as Gaelic or Irish Gaelic, is a language traditionally spoken by the Irish people. It is still spoken today by a minority of the people of Ireland, and learned as a second language by a larger percentage. It is the national language of the Republic of Ireland (with English as a secondary language) and one of the official languages of the European Union, of which Ireland is a member.

Note: There are two “Irelands” with the Republic of Ireland occupying most of the island known as Ireland, and a smaller part occupied by a part of the United Kingdom (UK) known as “Northern Ireland.” The capital of the Republic of Ireland is Dublin, and the capital of Northern Ireland is Belfast.

The Celtic Language Family

Irish has been the predominant language of the Irish people throughout most of their history. It is a member of the Celtic language family, which is a subgroup of the Indo-European language family.

Irish is closely related to Scottish Gaelic (spoken in Scotland) and Manx (spoken on the Isle of Man). Other more distantly related modern Celtic languages are: Welsh (spoken in Wales, UK), Breton (spoken in Brittany, France) and Cornish (spoken in Cornwall, UK).

It is interesting to note that Celtic languages used to be spoken over a much wider area; the now-extinct Galatian language (spoken in Galatia, mentioned in the New Testament, located in what is now central Turkey) was Celtic and thus related to Old Irish.

History of Irish

The earliest known writing in Irish dates from the 4th century. These inscriptions were written in the Ogham alphabet in a form of Irish called Primitive Irish. A later form of the language, called Old Irish, used the Latin alphabet and dates from about the 6th century. In the 10th century the language is called Middle Irish. A good bit of literature survives from this period.

The use of Irish declined steadily through the centuries due to the increasing power of the English state in Ireland. During the Great Famine in the 1800s Ireland lost 20-25 percent of its population, further decreasing the use of the language. Today Irish is spoken in everyday life only by small minorities in every area, except in what is known as the *Gaeltacht*, a group of small regions where Irish is still used as the everyday language. Altogether Irish is used in everyday life only by about 5 to 10 percent of the Irish population. There are three main groups of dialects of Irish; the pronunciation changes from place to place in Ireland.

Interesting Features

Some interesting features of the Irish language include:

*Irish uses the Latin alphabet. The system of spelling and pronunciation is very complicated but follows definite rules. For example, there are two kinds of vowels: slender (e and i) and broad (a, o, u). The sound of consonants can change depending on whether they are next to slender or broad vowels.

Also, the letter “h” can follow some consonants, also changing its sound. These combinations also each have a slender and broad version. Also, vowels can be with or without accent marks. An accent mark makes the vowel sound longer.

*Consonants at the beginning of words can change in different situations. For example, “Shoe” is *bróg*, [pronounced “brok”] but “my shoe” is *mo bhróg* [pronounced “muh vrok”]. This means that the word for "woman," for example, could be *bean*, *bhean*, or *mbean*, depending on which word comes before it.

*The normal order of words in a sentence is Verb – Subject – Object. So a sentence like “The man hits the ball” would come across as “Hits the man the ball” in Irish.

*There are no words for “yes” or “no.” Instead, you just repeat the verb in the question, for example, “Did you eat?” “I ate.”

Some words with interesting spelling:

Fadhb	(problem)	Pronounced like “fibe”
Bhfuil	(a form of “to be”)	Pronounced like “will”
Maedhbh	(a legendary queen)	Pronounced like “mayv”

Some basic words and phrases (with pronunciation guide in parenthesis):

Gaeilge	Irish	(GUHL-ge)
Béarla	English	(BEER-luh)
Dia dhuit	Hello, literally “God to you”	(Dee-uh gwit)
Go raibh maith agat	Thank you, literally “that there may be good at you”	(gruh-MAH-uh-guht)
Slán	Good-bye	(Slahn)
Éirinn go Brách	Ireland forever	(EYrinn guh brahkh)
Gráim thú	I love you	(GRAH-eem hoo)
Pádraig	St. Patrick	(PAW-drig)
Go n-éirí an t-ádh leat	Good luck	(Guh-NYAY-ree uhnTAH-ah-luht)
Cá bhfuil an leithreas?	Where’s the bathroom?	(KAW will uhn-LEYH-ruhs)