Can we Defuse the Digital Timebomb?

Linguistics, Speech Technology and the Irish Language Community

Ailbhe Ní Chasaide, Neasa Ní Chiaráin, Harald Berthelsen, Christoph Wendler, Andrew Murphy, Emily Barnes, Christer Gobl
Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland
anichsid@tcd.ie, neasa.nichiarrain@tcd.ie
www.abair.ie

Abstract

Does speech/language technology represent a ‘digital timebomb’ - or an unprecedented opportunity - for minority and indigenous languages? For successful outcomes, technology development must address linguistic challenges, answer to the needs of the local language communities, enlisting them as a central partner in development. The Irish language ABAIR initiative is building (i) linguistic resources, (ii) core technologies, and (iii) applications for public, educational and access/disability use. The Government’s Digital Plan for Irish Speech and Language Technology provides a model of the support needed by minority languages in the digital age, if the language is to feature in everyday community activities.

Keywords: Irish, speech technology, digital strategy, language community, education, disability

Résumé

An dainséar nó deis dúnann an réabhloid dhigitheach? Do mhíontaeangacha agus do threach an mhaoil, caithfidh forbairt na teicneolaíochta oiriúint do struchtúr na teanga agus do riachtanais an phobail. Seanchas a dhiobhtaithe a thugtar i náisiúntacht na teangeolaíochtaí, agus (iii) aiseanna don phobail, do lucht an oideachais agus do dhíth a sheasmhachadh. Tá Plean Digitsce na Teicneolaíochta Uhlabhra agus Teanga na Gaeilge an Rialtais mar mhúnla don tacaíocht atá de dhíth ar mhíontaeangacha sa ré dhigitheach. Beidh toradh na hoibre ag brath ar chomhpháirtíocht idir theangeolaíthe, theicneolaíthe agus phobal na Gaeilge.

1. Timebomb or Unprecedented Opportunity?

Speech and language technologies have become deeply embedded in our daily lives and are increasingly central to how we work, interact socially, access information and education. For a language that is not digitally available the language community is forced to switch to the major language for access to these resources. Increasingly the technology is seen as a ‘digital timebomb’ (Evans, 2018), which is forcing the shift from the indigenous to the major language (Mac Thomáis, 2018). Precisely because of its increasingly central presence in our lives, digital technology also presents an unprecedented opportunity for the documentation, preservation and revitalisation of the endangered language. There is a growing awareness that the provision of speech and language technologies is one vital strand in ensuring language survival. The Irish Government is launching a Digital Plan for Irish Speech and Language Technology, which will provide a 10-year roadmap for research and development (see Section 4).

Irish is an endangered language (Moseley, 2013), spoken as a community language in small ‘Gaeltacht’ areas, mostly in the West of Ireland. Nonetheless, as an official language of the State, and since 2007 of the EU, it enjoys considerable State support and is a core curricular subject in Irish primary and second level schools.

In this paper, we describe the experience of the Irish language initiative ABAIR, which is developing speech and language technology for Irish (ABAIR, 2019). This entails a longterm strategy of (i) basic linguistic research, (ii) core technology building, and (iii) developing applications which draw both on the linguistic resources of (i) and the technologies of (ii). The development of applications answers to the needs of the language community. The focus has been on providing not only public resources but also on tools for education and disability/access. While technology development in major languages is typically driven by commercial considerations, for the minority and indigenous language it is important to focus on the community’s own priorities. This can mean a different trajectory: for example, recognition and synthesis in call centres to handle large volumes of calls are hardly necessary, but their use in the teaching of the language can have far reaching implications in the minority language context.

2. Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Challenges

Each language presents its own complex linguistic and sociolinguistic set of challenges. Irish has a number of structural features that make it different from English and many of the European languages. It is a verb-initial language (VSO); it is highly inflected with alternations affecting both the beginnings and ends of words (see Figure 1a for an illustration of inflected forms for the word bád ‘b’ a: ː /a: ‘boat’). A striking feature of the language is its sound system, where there is a contrast of palatalized and velarized consonants (see Figure 1b) (Ni Chhasaide, 1999). Simply put, there are twice as many consonants as in, for example, English. This quality distinction among consonants serves not only to differentiate words, but is intricately linked to the system of grammatical inflection. For example, switching
between a final velarized and palatalized consonant differentiates between the nominative and genitive case, as in \( \text{báid} /\text{b} / \) vs \( \text{báid} /\text{b} / \) (see first two items in Figure 1a). As the Roman alphabet does not provide different letters for this consonantal distinction, the orthographic conventions for signaling consonantal quality entail the use of adjacent vowel letters. The vowel letter closest to the consonant (before or after) indicates it as belonging to the palatalized or velarized set. This, of course, results in complex strings of vowels in orthographic forms. As the illustration in Figure 1c shows, many strings of vowels correspond to a single vowel phoneme (in this case /i:/) as many of these vowel letters are simply markers of consonantal quality. Structural aspects of the language such as these are important considerations in developing resources and technologies and they are crucial to many of the applications, particularly those targeting language teaching/learning. As in many minority languages, there is no spoken standard but rather strikingly different dialects. This has implications for technology development. In the case of Irish, it was necessary to consider multidialect provision from the outset, as this would be essential for its acceptability, uptake and usage by the community. The importance of this factor is not necessarily immediately obvious to an outside agency.

Figure 1a, 1b, 1c: Features of Irish phonology, morphology & orthography

As mentioned, although Irish survives as a community language in small, geographically separated and rather isolated areas, the language is taught nationally to school going children and adolescents. This, however, presents many challenges. Many structural aspects of the language, such as those above, are generally poorly understood by learners or teachers. Given the interconnectedness of the sound system and the grammar, and the complex writing conventions, learner outcomes in terms of pronunciation, grammatical accuracy and literacy development are often disappointing. Compounding these difficulties is the fact that learners have limited access to native speaker models of the language. Most teachers are second language learners who may themselves have an incomplete model of the language. Teaching materials tend to be dated and relatively unattractive compared to what is available for other languages.

The absence of speech and language technologies has had a particular impact on those with disabilities, excluding them from full participation in Irish language education and social (online) activities. The lack of Irish digital technology impacts particularly on the younger digital generation, on whom the future of the language depends. It contributes to an outlook where

the language is associated with the past, with poverty, with all that is not modern, alienating the younger generation who may not see the value of the language as it is disassociated from many of their daily activities, their future work and social aspirations.

3. Three Strands of Development

ABAIR entails three parallel strands of research and development, which can be illustrated in terms of the tree in Figure 2. The roots of the work entail basic research to provide linguistic components, i.e. the digitally available resources that are needed. The roots feed the trunk of the tree, i.e. the core speech technology systems. To date, speech synthesis has been the primary focus, but this is now extending to recognition and dialogue systems. The fruits of the research are the user applications, from which the public impact of the technology will mostly be felt. These applications draw on the core technologies as well as on the linguistic components and target the general public, educational needs and the inclusion of those with disabilities. The circle of people surrounding the tree in Figure 2 represents the language community, the raison d’être for the work and its guiding force.

Figure 2: The 3 strands of the ABAIR initiative

3.1 Linguistic Resources

The linguistic resources include the design and development of phonetically annotated corpora. These need to be phonetically balanced (including coverage of every permutation and combination of consonants and vowels). They need to be provided for each dialect and based on dialect-appropriate materials. Additionally, letter-to-sound rules and lexica are needed for each dialect, as well as other resources such as prosody models. Linguistic research is being carried out on many aspects of the language that had hitherto not been documented. For example, there is considerable ongoing work on the prosodic system of Irish (Dalton and Ni Chasaide, 2005; Dorn and Ni Chasaide, 2015; O’Reilly and Ni Chasaide, 2016) revealing major crossdialect differences, which our technology must capture. Considerable research effort has also gone into the creation of dialect-appropriate corpora, lexica, etc.

3.2 Core Technologies

3.2.1 Multidialect synthesis

TTS voices in three dialects have been developed and are freely available to the public at www.abair.ie. The most recent voices have deployed DNN approaches but HTS and unit-selection voices are also available. The website is widely used: in the first three months of 2019 it had 155K hits, with many of these being from
outside Ireland. This brings home the potential role of digital technology, revealing a global community we were hitherto unaware of, and creating broader networks which are a powerful source of strength and future support. Current work on synthesis is extending coverage from the main dialects to those lesser spoken dialects to ensure they are not left behind by these technologies. A synthetic voice for the local dialect preserves a virtual speaker; a valuable resource for the local community trying to hold on to its language, now and for future generations.

Provision of child as well as male and female ‘speakers’ is a further priority. Furthermore, given the bilingual context in which Irish synthesis is used, and given the frequent code switching in Irish (a feature of all minority languages), work is underway to provide bilingual Irish+English voices (e.g. for bilingual websites) that can also provide codewriting.

Dialogue systems and interactive games are future priorities (see below). Therefore, ongoing research is modelling the prosodic/voice quality modifications needed to capture the affective nuancing such applications require (Murphy et al. 2019; Yanushevskya et al. 2017).

3.2.2 Current Early Stage Developments

Development of speech recognition is underway and a preliminary system has been created. Success in this area will depend crucially on recordings from a very large number of speakers. To be useful in future applications, recognition for Irish must accomodate dialect diversity, native speakers/learners, children/adults. A targetted crowdsourcing initiative Mile Glór (‘a thousand voices’) has been launched, which allows Irish speakers to record as many prompts as possible from materials that are appropriate to the speakers’ dialect. It identifies categories of speaker (child/adult, specific dialect etc).

Early research towards spoken dialogue systems is also underway and will progress as speech recognition becomes available. A pilot intelligent tutoring system, Taidhín, has been developed. Here the learner input is through text, which is then spoken aloud by a TTS voice, and spoken answers are delivered by a talking monkey. Evaluations in schools yielded very positive reactions and dialogue systems are a priority for future research.

3.3 Applications

As mentioned, applications target the broader public as well as specific education and disability/access needs.

3.3.1 Applications for the Language Community

The public webpage at www.abair.ie, has of itself become a public application. Parents use it to help their children with homework (being able to access the pronunciation of written words helps, overcome the obstacle of the complex mapping of orthography to sounds). Foreign users use it for this and wide diversity of reasons: e.g. to pronounce Irish names, to get authentic pronunciation of Irish utterances in a play, etc. An app version of the webpage is being launched, making public access simpler. An add-on feature to web browsers allows all online text to be read aloud. This gives ready access to the spoken realization of dictionary content, online newspapers, email, etc. It also allows the Government to fulfill their statutory obligation to make information and webpages accessible to all, through the medium of Irish.

![Figure 3: Homepage of the ABAIR.ie initiative](image_url)

3.3.2 Educational Applications

The future of the language depends overwhelmingly on how successfully we can transmit it to the younger generation. Irish language teaching and learning can potentially be transformed by digital speech and language technology and much of ABAIR’s activity to date has explored how best to deploy all resources as they come onstream. Combining the core technology of (ii) and the linguistic resources of (i) presents unprecedented opportunities for linguistically informed content and technologically advanced platforms that are pedagogically effective, attractive and motivating for the language learner. Two of the educational applications piloted to date are reviewed briefly here, targeting early and more advanced/older learners respectively. These applications bring native speaker models of the language into the classroom, making the spoken language central for all aspects of language learning. They also put the power of multimodal games and digital technologies at the disposal of learners and teachers.

The game ‘Lón don Leon’ (‘lunch for the lion’) aims to develop phonological awareness (the ability to perceive and produce the palatalized/velarized distinction) and early literacy skills (an explicit grasp of the phonic basis for the spelling rules of the language, where vowel letters sometimes mark consonantal quality and sometimes represent actual vowel targets). Phonological awareness is trained through the use of minimal pairs, where the palatalized/velarized consonant contrast is essential to the differentiation of two words, here ‘lunch’ and ‘lion’. This is done by embedding them in newly composed songs, illustrations and stories – reinforcing learners’ awareness of the contrast and their ability to reproduce it correctly. Through games and language learning activities the learners’ acquisition is monitored. When the sound contrasts are adequately acquired, the orthographic letters are introduced. Differential colour coding of palatalized (orange) and velarized (blue) versions of consonant and vowel letters guide the young learner to an understanding of how they combine in the writing system. This game can be used in the home or in a classroom setting.

![Figure 4: Lón don Leon phonological awareness game.](image_url)

A second platform, An Scéaláí, ‘the Storyteller’, targets...
the older learner and has as an objective the parallel training of all four language skills: writing, listening, reading and speaking (Ni Chiaráin & Ni Chasaide, 2018; 2020). The cover page of An Scéiléal is illustrated in Figure 5. On the face of it this platform presents as a writing tool, which includes spelling and grammar checkers. However, the TTS voice output is a central feature and the learner is led to have all written content spoken aloud. Proofreading is used as the initial strategy for learners to correct their own written work. Here, constant reinforcement of the links of sound → orthographic sequence is essential and evaluations to date show it to be a highly effective strategy in developing learners’ awareness of many types of errors. As an intelligent Computer-Assisted Language Learning (iCALL) application, there are many types of inbuilt prompts to review and correct written work. Many draw on the specific linguistic resources developed in the first research strand above. The prompting is carried out by an interactive dialogue partner who both speaks to the learner (using their preferred TTS voice/dialect) and provides spoken feedback along with written guidance. The dialogue partner can detect areas of recurring weakness, e.g. irregular verb conjugation, and offer the learner opportunities to carry out exercises targeting these. This platform is entirely suited to autonomous learning but is also set up to allow its integration in the classroom where the teacher can monitor their own students’ progress and provide further oversight and feedback. This platform is currently under evaluation in second and third level educational settings in Ireland and abroad.

Figure 5: iCALL platform An Scéiléal (‘the Storyteller’).

3.3.3 Disability/Access Applications

These technologies are particularly important for the inclusion of those with disabilities. Urgent requests from parents of schoolgoing children with visual disabilities led to the development of screenreading software, using the open source NVDA framework (McGuirk, 2015). Users control the spoken output in terms of speed and dialect, and simultaneous Braille output is provided (see Figure 6 below). Multimodal textbooks for the visually impaired have also been developed (Ni Chasaide et al. 2019).

Figure 6: visually impaired user listening & using the Liblouis Braille system simultaneously.

Current educationally-oriented multimodal platforms and games are also intended to provide for the assessment of phonological awareness and reading skills and eventually as the basis for literacy remediation for those with dyslexia (Barnes et al. 2018). A ‘design for all’ approach for ABAIR applications aspires to include the widest possible groups of users, especially those with disabilities.

4. The Digital Plan for Irish

The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht is launching a Digital Plan for Irish Speech and Language Technology, which will seek to ensure that the power of digital technology is available to the Irish language community. It encompasses not only the development of specific core technologies (recognition, synthesis, machine translation, etc.) but also the range of applications and linguistic research that will enable the Plan to have a longterm impact. It also aims to set in place the infrastructure to ensure the future capacity to keep up with the rapid evolution of these technologies.

5. Central Role of Language Community

The extent to which digital technology serves to revitalize the language depends on the extent to which the language community make it their own. The ABAIR experience demonstrates how, over the years, collaboration with the language community has moved from informant → requesters of applications → partners in design, testing and dissemination of specific user applications. The Digital Plan acknowledges the importance of the native speaker Gaeltacht community in this enterprise, as the repository of living language ‘experts’ and seeks its engagement in every aspect. It further aims to ensure that native speakers are among the leading researchers in future digital development. It also seeks to engage in collaborative ventures with the broader Irish language community and user groups at home and abroad.

6. Conclusion: a Model for other Minority/Indigenous Languages

Although the Irish language is endangered and the Gaeltacht communities fragile, Irish is in a relatively privileged position of being a national language with EU recognition. Its survival to date owes much to State support. The work of ABAIR has only been possible due to State funding and enthusiastic support. It is a basic principle of the ABAIR initiative that all outputs are freely available to the community. It is also a basic aspiration, reflected in the Digital Plan, that Irish developments might support the efforts of other language communities, many of whom enjoy little or no State support or recognition. The kinds of challenges faced by minority and indigenous languages are often rather similar and the solutions for one language may be exactly right for many others. It is thus imperative that we learn from each other and that we develop mechanisms for cooperation, sharing our experience, expertise and, where possible, resources.

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8. References


