

THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL SINGING PERFORMANCE IN UNPLANNED LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AND REVIVAL

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Vocal music traditions provide interesting opportunities for aesthetic and affective uses of language. Research on ethnolinguistic vitality (e.g. Wray et al 2003) has increasingly recognised the importance of aesthetic and affective uses to language maintenance and revitalisation. Drawing on concurrent ethnographic studies of Irish cultural activities and South Indian/Sri Lankan Tamil cultural activities in metropolitan Australia this paper aims to explore the relationship that aesthetic and affective dimensions of language use have with the ethnolinguistic vitality of a language as evident in the performance of *Karnatic* (South Indian/Sri Lankan Tamil) and *Sean-Nós* (Irish) vocal music traditions. From a global perspective the languages of focus, Irish and Tamil, occupy different points on a spectrum of ethnolinguistic vitality; with Irish undergoing continued processes of revitalisation while Tamil is comparatively stable and not under any linguistic threat. The local (and transnational) contexts of Irish and South Indian/Sri Lankan cultural communities in Australia provide interesting insights into the ways that broader concerns of ethnolinguistic vitality are reflected in language use highlighting the “unplanned” aspects of language policy and planning (Baldauf 1994). In this paper the local contexts of focus are the “performance events” (Bauman and Briggs 1990) in which songs in Irish and Tamil are sung providing a micro-level and performance-centred perspective on language policy concerns for multicultural nation states such as Australia as well as for the cultural homelands of Irish and Tamil. This paper draws on preliminary ethnographic findings from a doctoral research project on Tamil-speaking and Irish-speaking communities in Sydney including participant observation of events in which the performance of these vocal music traditions take place and interview responses by performers and audiences on the connection and association between their languages (Tamil and Irish) and vocal music traditions.

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Bauman, R and Briggs, C L 1990 Poetics and performance as critical perspectives on language and social life, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1990, vol 19, pp 59-88.

Wray, A; Evans, B; Coupland, N; and Bishop, H 2003 Singing in Welsh, becoming Welsh: ‘Turfig’ a ‘grass roots’ identity, *Language Awareness*, vol 12, no. 1, pp 49-71.

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