

## Celtic languages

Celtic languages, the western-most branch of the \*Indo-European family, located in historical times in western and southern Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Northern Italy, Spain, France, and Belgium, and on the islands of Britain and Ireland. The languages in question are: from ancient times, Celtiberian in Spain and Gaulish in France and northern Italy; Gaelic, first attested in the fifth century \*ogam inscriptions and surviving today as \*Irish, Scottish Gaelic, and (until recently) Manx; British, first attested in ogam inscriptions of the fifth and sixth centuries, and surviving today as Welsh and Breton, which later spread from southern Britain to the Armorican Peninsula in the fifth and sixth centuries. Two northern varieties of British, Pictish and Cumbrian, died out in the early middle ages, while Cornish survived until the eighteenth century. Migration in ancient times brought the Celtic languages down the valley of the Danube and into Asia Minor, where there is evidence that the Galatians may have remained Celtic-speaking until the fourth century AD. Modern migrations established Celtic-speaking communities in Nova Scotia, other parts of Canada, and in Patagonia.

The Celtic languages are most closely related to the Italic group of languages and somewhat more remotely to the Germanic. Phonologically the most distinguishing characteristic of Celtic is the loss of Indo-European syllable-initial position — e.g., ‘p’ in Irish *athair* : Latin *pater* [father]; Irish *nia* : Latin *nepos* [nephew]. Morphologically the Celtic languages show passives and deponents in -r — e.g. Old Irish, *berair* : Latin *fertur* [is borne], Old Irish *sechithir* : Latin *sequitur* [follows]. Pronouns are suffixed to prepositions — e.g. Irish *orm* : Welsh *arnaf* (preposition + suffixed first singular pronoun) [=on me]. A feature shared by all living Celtic languages is initial mutation, changes in the initial of a word according to its phonological context in the prehistoric period — e.g., Irish *a chara* [O friend] from *cara*; Welsh *fy mrawd* [my brother] from *brawd*. Additionally, the Gaelic languages have a system of phonemic oppositions between palatalized consonants (made with the tongue raised in front) and neutral consonants (made with the back of the tongue raised), so that Irish distinguishes, for example, *beo* [living] from *bó* [cow], where only the quality of the initial consonant distinguishes the word.

The Celtic languages are frequently classified into q-Celtic and p-Celtic, accordingly as they retained the Indo-European sound ‘q’ or changed it to ‘p’. The q-Celtic languages are Celtiberian and Gaelic. All the others are p-Celtic, though there are some traces of ‘q’ in ancient Gaulish. The geographic distribution of the change to ‘p’ seems to indicate that this was a dialect feature which spread from a centre in continental Europe but never reached the far west of the

language area, Ireland and Spain. Another common classification is a geographic one, into Continental Celtic and Insular Celtic. Coincidentally, this is also a historical distinction, since the Continental Celtic languages, through contact with Greek and Latin, became literate at a much earlier date than the Insular languages and so are attested from the latter half of the first millennium BC, while the Insular languages are scarcely attested before the fifth century AD. As might be expected, therefore, the Continental languages display a much earlier stage of linguistic development than their Insular counterparts.

For the past two thousand years the Celtic languages have been under pressure from the Germanic and Latin languages. This led, in the Roman and post-Roman period, to the extinction of the Continental Celtic languages. In Britain and Ireland the languages survived to modern times but in an ever-decreasing geographical area. Welsh, with perhaps a half-million speakers is the best preserved, but is spoken by a mere twenty per cent of the population of Wales. In Scotland, where there are about eighty thousand speakers of Scottish Gaelic, the language has practically died out on the mainland but survives in the Hebrides. For Breton there are no reliable recent figures available and estimates range between twenty thousand and seven hundred thousand. In Ireland there is a similar disparity between a perhaps pessimistic estimate of ten thousand speakers living in Irish-speaking communities and the certainly over-optimistic figure of one million respondents to the linguistic question on the census-forms who declare themselves Irish speakers. The inevitable outcome of the decline indicated by these figures is that the Celtic languages will soon disappear as traditional community languages, whether or not they survive in some form among groups of individuals dedicated to their preservation. See Leo Weisgerber, *Die Sprache der Festlandkeltan* (1931, rep. 1969); Kenneth Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (1953); David Greene, *The Irish Language* (1966); Máirtín Ó Murchú, *The Irish Language* (1985); and Reg Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language* (1990).