3 The Irish Language in Globalization

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the sociolinguistic situation of the Irish language on the island of Ireland. Irish is a minority language spoken in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, yet the position of the language within these two political entities is vastly different. As a result of the 1920 Government of Ireland Act and the subsequent ratification of the Anglo Irish Treaty the ‘Irish Free State’ (Republic of Ireland) came into being, leaving the six counties of Northern Ireland (Armagh, Antrim, Down, Fermanagh, Derry and Tyrone) within the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom. From this point on, the revival of the language became the remit of the newly formed government within the 26-county Republic and was absent from the Unionist agenda in Northern Ireland. For these reasons, the chapter will provide an historical account of the Irish language up until 1920, when official partition took place, and will discuss the language situation from that point to the present day within the context of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland individually. In so doing, the chapter offers an in-depth account of the present situation of the Irish language.

3.2 Historical background

From a historical perspective, the current linguistic sociolinguistic situation in Ireland is the result of a political past, which worked to the detriment of the Irish language. Once the sole language of the
island of Ireland, Irish struggled for presence with the languages of its many invaders from the twelfth century onwards. Many argue that the defeat at the Battle of Kinsale in 1601, which resulted in the death of much of the Irish-speaking nobility, changed the trajectory of the Irish language (Ó Donnáile, 1997). Over time Irish speakers became increasingly marginalized and by the early nineteenth century English had taken over as the language of power and prestige. The famine of 1845–1849 led to a further decline in the number of Irish speakers. By that time the strongholds of Irish speakers were largely in peripheral locations along the western seaboard and these were the regions most affected by the Famine. In fact serious question were raised regarding the future of the language in the 1871 census report which concluded that ‘there can be no error in the belief that within relatively few years Irish will have taken its place among the languages that have ceased to exist’ (quoted in Hindley, 1991: 20). Ó Riagáin (1997) shows through his examination of the 1891 census figures that the transmission of Irish to younger generations had almost ceased by the turn of the twentieth century, with just 3.5 per cent of the population aged ten and under having some knowledge of Irish. Ó hIlfearnáin (2000) points out that in 1891 only 19.2 per cent of the population had some ability in the Irish language, a figure that is unlikely to have increased prior to the formation of the government of the Free State in 1922. Moreover, between 1891 and 1926 the Irish-speaking population suffered from a further decline, when Irish society found itself in a continuing state of transitory bilingualism where English held the upper hand. At the turn of the twentieth century the number of Irish speakers had dropped to just above 17 per cent (Kelly, 2002: 115).

As a result of this process of language shift, English became established as the language of the urban centres and had been adopted as the language of political and social advancement, while Irish became recognized as the language of the rural population and it began to be associated with backwardness. The Irish language lost much of its linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) and English was seen as the language that would garner economic success. Mac Giolla Chriost (2005: 84) argues it was the dissociation of the language with modernity that led to a further decline in Irish as the more popular vernacular and parents began to see English as the language their children