Yesterday's post on Plato's Cave was not, as it turns out, the only one to have come out of Saturday morning's discussion that Jacqueline and I had at the Weleny Wetlands and Wildlife Trust Reserve.

The second of the three ideas that we developed during our discussion relates to a phenomenon long known to us, not least because Jacqueline's parents were both brought up speaking the Irish language. Although in later life they hardly ever used it, the syntax of that language heavily influenced the way in which my late father-in-law, in particular, used English. The ideas in this post flow from our latest discussion on this issue, and the consequences for the way in which language has itself influenced political-economic thinking.

AI was used to ensure that Irish references in this post are, we hope, accurate.

"Sadness is on me": Language, Responsibility, and Care

In Irish, you do not say **I am sad**. You say **tá brón orm:** literally, "sadness is on me."

At first sight, this may look like a quaint idiom. However, in reality, it embodies a radically different perspective on responsibility, care, and human experience than that to which neoliberal English-speaking societies have become normalised.

This matters because how we frame misfortune determines whether we treat it as a personal failing or as a shared condition for which society must assume responsibility. Language matters, then, not least in the political-economic inferences it creates.

1. English individualism and neoliberal grammar

English is a language built on the centrality of the word and idea of "I." "I am sad." "I broke my arm." "I lost my job." Even when accidents or systemic failures are involved, English frames them as though the individual suffering the consequence is responsible for what has happened to them. To be sad in English is not just to experience sadness,

but to **be** sadness. To lose your job is not simply to be made redundant by an economic downturn, but to have failed in some way.

This habit of grammar aligns perfectly with neoliberal ideology. Neoliberalism insists that individuals are responsible for their own fates. Poverty, unemployment, debt, or illness are redefined as personal flaws or bad choices. The grammar of English feeds that narrative: it makes each person linguistically responsible for their own misfortune.

2. Irish relationality: states "on" us, not "in" us

Irish undermines this frame. Hunger is "on" you (**Tá ocras orm**). Joy is "on" you (**Tá áthas orm**). Sadness is "on" you (**Tá brón orm**). These states do not describe your essence; they are conditions that come upon you. They may describe your current condition, but they can also pass.

This phrasing acknowledges transience. Sadness "on me" does not mean I will always be sad. Hunger "on me" does not mean I am by nature hungry. Emotions and conditions are visitors, not permanent labels. They can come and they can go. Crucially, they do not define who you are.

That is inclusive and non-judgemental. It recognises that different people may experience different states at different times, without making those states into permanent marks of identity or failure.

3. Beyond binaries: no "yes" and "no"

This logic extends to the way Irish handles affirmation and denial. Irish has no single word for "yes" or "no." If asked An dtuigeann tú? ("Do you understand?"), you cannot answer with an abstract "yes" or "no." You must respond with **Tuigim** ("I understand") or **Ní thuigim** ("I do not understand"). The verb itself carries the affirmation or negation.

That makes answers always contextual, specific, and provisional. They are about the **situation**, not an abstract binary. **Ní thuigim** does not mean "No forever." It means "I do not understand now." Understanding may arrive later. Again, transience is emphasised.

Contrast this with English, which thrives on binaries: yes/no, success/failure, worthy/unworthy, striver/skiver. Neoliberal ideology depends on these divides. They allow it to categorise populations into the deserving and undeserving, the winners and losers, the employed and the work-shy. The grammar of English fits seamlessly with this worldview. Irish grammar resists it.

4. Nature, nurture, and the politics of blame

This difference goes even deeper. English is the language of genetic determinism: "I am

who I am because of my inheritance." It frames personal identity as fixed, unchanging, carried in the genes. This dovetails with neoliberal individualism: if your genes make you what you are, then your fate is your own, and society owes you little. Poverty or ill-health are reduced to biology, reinforcing fatalism and cutting away social responsibility.

Irish suggests something different. If sadness or hunger is "on me," then I am not reducible to my inheritance. I live in a moving environment. I am shaped by the conditions that come upon me, and those conditions can change. Nurture matters. Context matters. Society matters.

In other words, Irish grammar encodes a politics of nurture, not nature. It recognises that we live in a shifting landscape of influences, some supportive, others harmful. Who we are cannot be reduced to a fixed genetic script; it depends on the conditions that surround and act upon us.

5. Gaza: hunger imposed, not chosen

Nowhere is this distinction more urgent than in situations of extreme suffering. Consider Gaza today. In English reporting, people are said to be "hungry." That phrase carries a hidden implication: hunger is a property of the person. It is their state, as if somehow generated from within.

But that is profoundly misleading. People in Gaza are not "hungry" in the abstract. Hunger is **on** them. It has been imposed upon them by blockade, by war, by the deliberate withholding of food. They have not failed. Hunger has been forced onto them.

The Irish phrasing captures this truth more directly. **Tá ocras orthu** — "hunger is on them." The responsibility is displaced from the individual to the external conditions that created the hunger. That makes visible the politics of famine and suffering in a way English can obscure.

6. From grammar to political economy

Why does this matter for economics? Because the way we talk about misfortune frames the policies we imagine.

*
If poverty is something you **are**, then welfare is charity for the undeserving.

*
If poverty is something that is **on you**, then welfare is society lifting a burden that should never have been there.

*

If unemployment is a personal failing, then the answer is "work harder."

*

If unemployment is a condition that comes upon you when the economy falters, then the answer is to reform the system.

*

If sadness is your identity, then therapy becomes a private responsibility.

*

If sadness is "on you," then care can be shared, and society can play its part in alleviating it.

7. Towards a politics of care

The politics of care requires us to resist the binaries of neoliberal thought — winners and losers, taxpayers and scroungers, yes and no. It requires us to see that human conditions are transient, situational, and imposed as much as chosen. It requires us to admit that nurture, not nature, defines the lives most people live.

Irish grammar offers us a ready-made language for this. It does not deny personal responsibility, but it situates it within a wider frame of shared experience. It does not reduce people to their lowest moments, but recognises that conditions pass. It does not isolate individuals, but points always to the larger forces "on" them.

8. Relearning grammar as political practice

If neoliberalism has colonised our minds through the grammar of English, then part of building an alternative lies in relearning other grammars. That does not mean everyone must start speaking Irish. It does mean that we can become more aware of how language encodes responsibility, blame, and care.

We can learn to say, not "I am poor," but "poverty is upon me."

Not "I am a failure," but "failure has visited me."

Not "they are hungry," but "hunger has been placed upon them."

These are not evasions of truth. They are more accurate descriptions of how human lives are lived. They make visible the role of society, economy, and politics in shaping outcomes. And they create the linguistic space for solidarity rather than judgement.

Conclusion

The phrase **_tá brón orm -_** "sadness is on me" - reminds us that emotions and conditions are not fixed properties of the individual, but transient states that move through us. It resists binary judgements. It points to nurture and environment rather

than fixed nature. It is inclusive and non-judgemental.

In a world scarred by neoliberal blame and binary division, and in places like Gaza where suffering is imposed upon millions, such grammar is not a curiosity. It is a reminder that we need new ways of speaking and thinking — ways that acknowledge shared responsibility and build a politics of care.

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