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Orange Lemons, Yellow People, Brown Oranges: Language Contact and Changes in the Basic Irish Colour Term *Buí*

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to look at the changes currently taking place in regards to the Basic Colour Term *buí* in Irish. Irish, a Celtic language, is, along with English, one of the official languages of Ireland although it is very much a minority one, with an overwhelming number of L2 speakers of varying linguistic ability. As a result of this, and the fact that the language itself is surrounded by a sea of English, English syntax and vocabulary—and its way of perceiving the world—is constantly being brought to bear on the language, and L1 speakers are continually being exposed to this and coming under its influence. One illustration of this is the Basic Colour Term *buí*. Traditionally, this term had its focus on ‘yellow’ but also covered ‘orange’ through light brown or ‘tan’. However, it is nowadays most frequently understood by L2 speakers as a one-to-one equivalent for the English term ‘yellow’, with *oraíste* ‘orange’ and *donn* ‘brown’ being used, as in English, to cover those other shades that would traditionally be part of *buí*. To this end, I present results from field-work carried out amongst L1 native speakers of Irish to see how far this change has taken place in their own understanding of the language and how much the traditional Irish colour system is yielding to that of English.

Keywords: Irish, English, basic colour terms, language contact, native speakers.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present some field research into the current status of the Basic Colour Term *buí* in the Irish language.¹ Irish is a Celtic language and one of the official languages of Ireland, alongside English, but it is very much a minority one. Currently, fewer than 74,000 people claim to speak the language in a day-to-day setting out of a population of approximately 4.5 million and this number includes

¹ The reader is directed to Berlin and Kay (1969: 5–7) for a detailed definition of what a Basic Colour Term is. In short, it must be monolexic, not covered by any other colour term, must not be restricted in use and must have a stability of reference across informants and occasions of use.

both native and second-language speakers. As such, Irish is falling more and more under the influence of English and the English-language way of perceiving the world and this is putting the native system of Basic Colour Terms, for example, under a lot of pressure to conform to the majority English-language colour spectrum.

Irish-language speakers

The Irish language is one of the two official languages of Ireland and has been ever since the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922. However, Irish is nowadays very limited in its geographical range. When the native Gaelic order fell to the English in the early 1600s Irish speakers ended up being dispossessed, excluded from the realms of business, education and politics and had their language linked with poverty and illiteracy. Whilst these blows were bad for the prestige of the language and it was thus already somewhat on the retreat, the biggest blow came in the form of the Great Famine (1845–1852) and the mass emigration which followed. The number of Irish speakers before the Famine was approximately four million out of a population of eight million, but fifty years later, by 1891, this figure had fallen to just under 665,000, of which there were less than 40,000 monoglots and somewhat less than 31,000 children under the age of ten being raised as Irish speakers. This decline has continued, albeit to a lesser degree, into modern times, but the language has now been reduced to a community language in remote scattered areas along the country's western seaboard, and even though it is a mandatory subject in school less than 74,000 people returned themselves as using it daily in and outside of the *Gaeltachtaí* [Irish-speaking areas] in the latest (2016) census.²

What this amounts to is the fact that only in fairly isolated or remote areas along Ireland's coast is it possible to be an L1 speaker of Irish in a community of other L1 speakers. Although there are L1 and L2 speakers scattered throughout the whole of the country they are lost in a sea of English, and if one does happen to meet an Irish speaker they are most probably an L2 speaker and thus, subconsciously or not, bring with them their English-language worldview—including that of interpreting colour. As the sociolinguist Fergal Ó Béarra—a native speaker himself—states (Ó Béarra 2007: 265)

In 1893, when *Conradh na Gaeilge* [The Gaelic League] was founded [with the aim of preserving the language], native Irish speakers made up over 90% of the Irish speaking population with the remaining 10% coming from the rest of the population. Today, the situation is the opposite with 90% non-native speakers and 10% native.

Ó Béarra goes on to make the point that, even if one is a member of that dwindling band of native speakers, there is a distinction to be made between the older speakers and those younger ones who are more exposed to English (Ó Béarra 2007: 261–62):

2 For details of the numbers of Irish speakers in all of the censi since 1861 see the first three entries at <http://www.cso.ie/en/census/census2006reports/census2006-volume9-irishlanguage/> (accessed 30/09/18). These numbers are, of course, debatable as they depend on self-assessment. Of the 1,761,420 people (39.8% of the population) who claimed to be able to speak some Irish in 2016 (<http://cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/ilg/> accessed 05/09/18), for example, only 73,803 people claimed to actually speak Irish daily outside of the educational system and the statistician Donncha Ó hÉallaithe worked out that, overall, only 20,586 (21.4%) of people living in the official *Gaeltachtaí* use it daily (Ó hÉallaithe 2017a, b)

By Traditional Late Modern Irish, I mean that language which was not only *spoken* in the Gaeltacht by both young and old up until about the 1960s, but that was also *passed on* to the next generation. This language, while still spoken, is now mainly limited to those who are in their 50s or older [...] The influence of English on this type of Irish is minimal and is limited to lexicon. There is little, if any, English influence on the phonology, morphology or syntax. It is as if English never existed. The same cannot be said of the type of Irish spoken today.

As this was written more than ten years ago, such speakers of Traditional Late Modern Irish would now be in their 60s or older and their unique way of seeing the world—including that of classifying colours—is in danger of passing away with them. This paper thus takes a look at the current state of one Basic Colour Term in Irish, that of *buí*, in the light of the increasing dominance of English and the retreat of Traditional Late Modern Irish.

The Basic Colour Term *buí*

The Irish Basic Colour Term *buí* has as its focus the English colour ‘yellow’ but *buí* traditionally shaded into both ‘orange’ and ‘tan’/‘light brown’. This can be seen in the Irish language’s historic refusal to adopt or invent an equivalent term for colour words such as ‘orange’ (English, French, German), ‘pomarańczowy’ (Polish), ‘naranja’ (Spanish), ‘oren’ (Welsh), ‘oranje’ (Dutch) or ‘оранжевый цвет’ (Russian). Most European languages, prior to the introduction of the fruit to Europe, had dealt with the orange colour, if at all, by describing it as a mixture of red and yellow, giving rise to colour terms such as *geolurēad* (English) *gelbrot* (German) and *melyngoch* (Welsh). With the introduction of the fruit, however, the name of the fruit itself began to be applied to the colour.

This did not occur in Irish. Although the name of the fruit was adopted into the language’s orthography and phonetics as *oráiste* /ora:ʃt’ə/,³ the colour remained stubbornly unneeded. Thus, a carrot, if we ignore the English borrowing *cairéad*, was traditionally called *meacan dearg*, lit. ‘red tuberous root’, where the use of *dearg* ‘red’ covered the shade of orange. The political entity from Northern Ireland, the Orangeman, is referred to in Irish as *fear buí* ‘yellow man’ where *buí* covers the reference to orange. Indeed, a look at older dictionaries shows that ‘orange’ either tended to be ignored as a colour⁴ or else given as a combination of ‘red’ and ‘yellow’,⁵ as was the tradition in other European languages.⁶

3 This transcription is based on that of *Foclóir Póca* (1986: 433), although /ʃ/ has been used in place of /s’/.

4 For example, Ó Beaglaioich and Mac Cruitín (1732), Connellan (1814), O’Neill-Lane (1904), McKenna (1911), Ó Dúirín and Ó Dálaigh (1922).

5 For example, Lhuud (*ruadhbhuidhe* 1707: 402), O’Brien (*ruadhbhuidhe* 1768: 408), Shaw (*ruadhbhuidhe* 1780: 306), O’Reilly (*ruadhbhuidhe* 1817: 410, 1864: 430), De Vere Coneys (*ruadhbhuidhe* 1849: 295), Foley (*dearg-bhuidhe*, *buidhe*, *oráisdeach* 1855: 250), Fournier d’Albe (*deargbhuidhe*, *oráiste* 1903: 206), O’Neill-Lane (*ruadh-bhuidhe* 1917: 1121), Dinneen (*ruadh-bhuidhe* 1904: 580).

6 For a more detailed discussion of the translation of ‘orange’ and some of the issues that arose, see Ó Fionnáin (2017).

Buí as ‘orange’

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An effort was made, however, to come up with a precise one-to-one equivalent for the Irish language version of the 1937 constitution. Article 7 of the English text of *Bunreacht na hÉireann* (2012: 8) states that “The national flag is the tricolour of green, white and orange” and the Irish version is “An bhratach trí dhath .i. uaine, bán, agus flannbhuí, an suaitheantas náisiúnta”. Here, the word *flannbhuí* has been coined, a combination of *flann* ‘[blood-]red’ and *buí*, thereby giving a meaning of ‘[blood-]red-yellow’ but a look at the same dictionaries shows that *flann* itself was a rare word to begin with and hardly common in everyday speech.⁷ This term did gain a certain measure of acceptance as a one-to-one equivalent for ‘orange’ as it does make an appearance in the two major Irish-language lexicographical works of the last century, namely de Bhaldraithe’s *English-Irish Dictionary* (1959) and Ó Dónaill’s *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (1977), and also in various modern pocket dictionaries. However, it never totally ousted *buí*, as can be seen in *An Foclóir Beag* (1991), the small Irish-Irish dictionary published by the Irish Government, where the orange is described as follows: “toradh súmhar milis agus craiceann buí air a fhásann i dtíortha teo” ‘a sweet juicy fruit with a *buí* skin which grows in hot countries’.

This traditional use of *buí* to cover ‘orange’ can also be seen in the following line from a song celebrating a local Connemara *Gaeltacht* man, Seán Ó Mainnín, who made a name for himself boxing in America in the 1980s. In a song composed in his honour from the same decade there is the following line regarding the colours of the Irish flag (Mac Con Iomaire 2014: 14):

Ó, ghnóthaigh sé an cath ag troid do na datha uaine, bán is buí
‘Oh, he won the battle fighting for the colours green, white and *buí*’

Buí as ‘tan, light brown’

References to *buí* in the sense of ‘tan’, aside from dictionary definitions, are mostly to be found in saying and proverbs, for example the following two (*Fios Feasa*):

a) Má táimse buí, tá croí geal agam
‘Even if I am dark-skinned, my heart is bright’

b) Más peaca bheith buí tá na mílte damanta
‘If it is a sin to be dark-skinned, thousands are damned’

These two sayings both relate to that time when the destitute Irish speaker was toiling away in the fields under the sun whilst the rich pale-skinned English speaker was sitting at home in his Big House, and

7 It is worth noting that other suggested words for the Irish-language text of the Constitution were *cróchda* ‘saffron’ and *órdha* ‘golden’. No-one seems to have suggested *ruadhbhuidhe* even though it was the most common term offered in the dictionaries, as noted previously (Ó Cearúil 1999: 3).

they both mean the same thing in essence: that there is nothing wrong with being tanned, i.e. poor and working hard in the fields out in the midday sun. This did not stop some translations of these sayings using the very English-oriented colour ‘yellow’, for example Ua Muirgheasa (1907: 140–41) who translates the first example above as “Although I am yellow I have a bright heart”.

This traditional use of *buí* to cover tanned skin can also be seen in the following anecdote as related in recent times by the author Tadhg Mac Dhonnagáin (2009):

Tá scéal cáiliúil sa taobh seo tíre faoi fhear a chuaigh ar saoire chun na Spáinne. D’fhill sé ar an mbaile faoi cheann coicíse agus dath breá gréine air. Casadh duine dá chomharsana air cúpla lá théis dó leandáil ar ais sa mbaile. “Ar éigean go n-aithneoinn thú,” arsa a chomharsa leis. “Tá tú chomh buí le bleaic!”

“There is a famous story in this area of the country about a man who went on holidays to Spain. He returned home after a fortnight with a great colour from the sun. One of his neighbours met him a few days after he came back home. “I’d hardly recognise you,” his neighbour said to him. “You’re as *buí* as a black person!”

If *buí* is understood here as meaning ‘tanned’, then the anecdote is amusing. If it is understood, especially by an L1 English speaker, as meaning ‘yellow’ then it merely becomes ridiculous.

Field work

Initial field work in colours⁸ with native speakers of Irish was carried out in July 2017 with more than 30 speakers in various sized groups of mixed ages (later divided according to the ages 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64, 65+). Since then, various individual speakers have also responded, bringing the total number of respondents currently to 37. This number may change over the coming time but it is unlikely to substantially alter the initial results presented in this paper. The respondents were shown various pictures and asked to write down the colour of the object shown. In the case of ‘orange’ they were shown a) an orange b) the Irish flag c) traffic lights (Figure 3) (green, amber, red) d) fire e) a tanned woman sunbathing and f) a darker-skinned Indian man.

As can be seen in Figure 1, in the case of the orange all but one of the speakers used the word *oráiste* to describe the colour of the fruit. Only one, who is aged 65+, used the traditional term *buí* although there was another respondent in the same age group who admitted that even older speakers would indeed refer to it as *buí*. One of the respondents in the 56–65 age group also admitted that her father does not distinguish ‘yellow’ and ‘orange’ as separate colours in Irish, although she herself put down *oráiste* despite being aware that it is not the ‘correct’ traditional way of naming the colour.

8 This research into the colour ‘orange’ is part of a wider research project into the current status of the whole native Irish colour system.

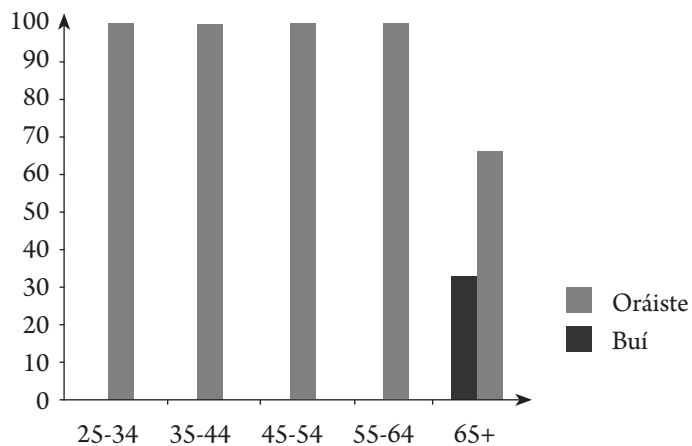


Figure 1: The Orange

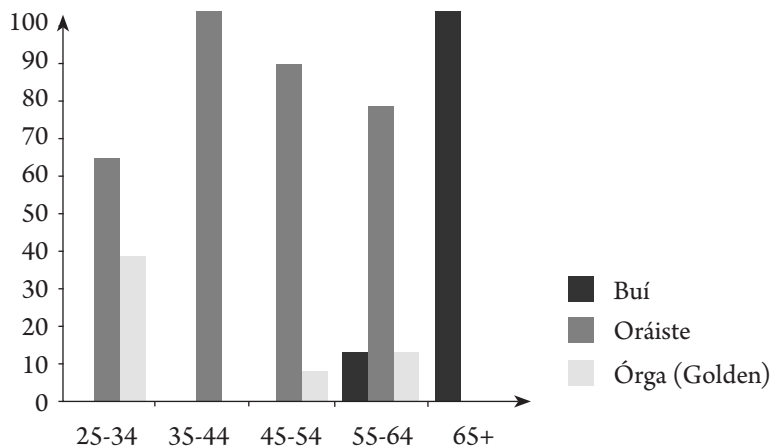


Figure 2: The Irish Flag.

In the case of the Irish flag the results are given in Figure 2 and again *oráiste* is the most common choice, even amongst those in their 50s and 60s. It should be noted that there was no use of the word *flannbhuí* to describe the orange colour, even though that is the specific one-to-one word that was chosen for the Constitution.⁹

⁹ Interestingly, some speakers chose *órga* 'golden' which was one of the words rejected by the framers of the Irish-language version of the Constitution.

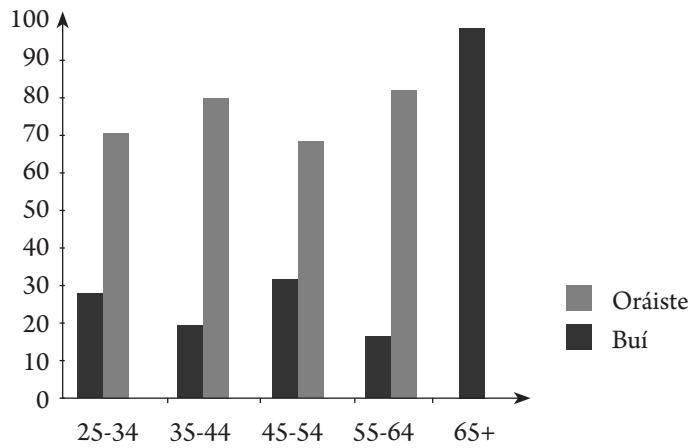


Figure 3: Traffic Lights.

It is also worth noting that the older generation, i.e. those over 65 and thus more likely to be speakers of Traditional Late Modern Irish, all used *buí* to describe the colour whereas the overwhelming majority of all other speakers opted for *oráiste*, a fact which would clearly support Ó Béarra's theory of older speakers being more likely to speak a form of Irish uninfluenced by English and the English-language way of thinking.

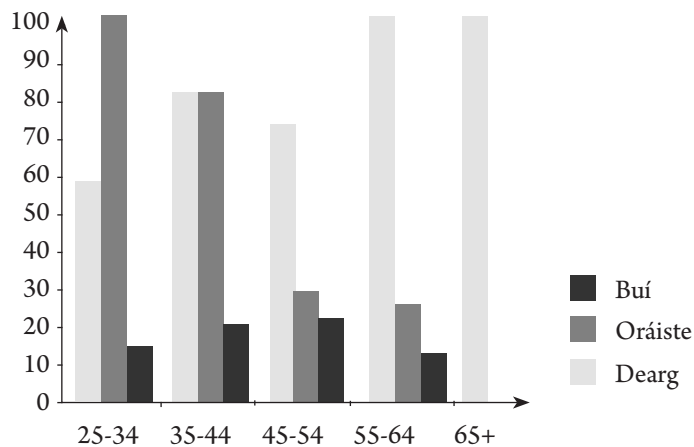


Figure 4: Fire.

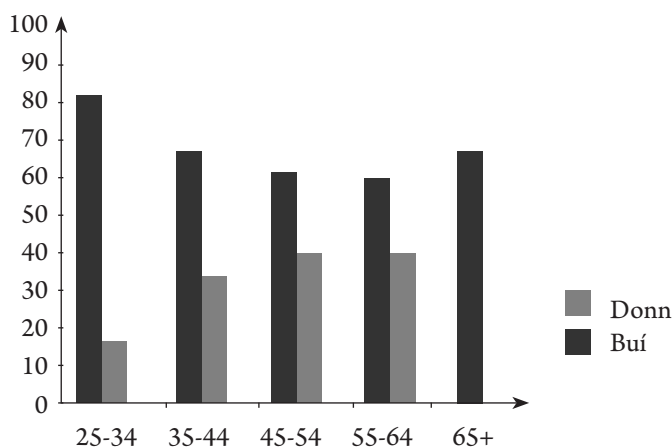


Figure 5: Sunbathing woman

As regards the traffic lights and the colour of the middle light, *oráiste* was still the main choice for most speakers over all the age groups but, again, *buí* was the choice for the speakers of more Traditional Irish and it did make an appearance in the responses from all age groups. This may be because the middle traffic light is not necessarily of an obvious ‘orange’ colour or even referenced as such in English, as it can also be referred to as ‘yellow’ or even ‘amber’, and thus possibly not all of the respondents associated the colour of the traffic light with the orange colour itself.

In the case of the fire (Figure 4), which consisted mainly of orange but tinged with some yellow and red, *buí* was barely used at all to describe the colour of the flames although a small minority of speakers did give it as one of the colours they saw,¹⁰ but it is worth noting here that whilst *oráiste* was popular with the younger generations it tailed off as the respondents increased in age and *dearg* ‘red’ became the common choice to describe the orange colour. In the same way as the carrot—*meacan dearg*—was traditionally described as a ‘red’ root, so ‘red’ was used to cover the orange colour of the fire. In this case, however, fire is a natural phenomenon and therefore more likely to be covered by the traditional colour system than a newer import such as oranges or traffic lights or even the national flag. Furthermore, whilst all of the groups under 65 had respondents who saw *dearg* and *oráiste* (the younger speakers seeing it more as *oráiste*), and a small minority who also included *buí*, in the 65+ group the answers were exclusively *dearg* with no other colours offered.

Whereas the above four examples all contained the colour orange and thus might be expected to return results containing the Irish equivalent *oráiste*, the next two examples were pictures of tanned people and thus had no obvious link to the colour orange. In the case of the sunbathing woman (Figure 5), whilst *donn* ‘brown’ was used, the most obvious colour term chosen was *buí*, especially amongst the younger

¹⁰ Some respondents gave two colours in their answers, some three.

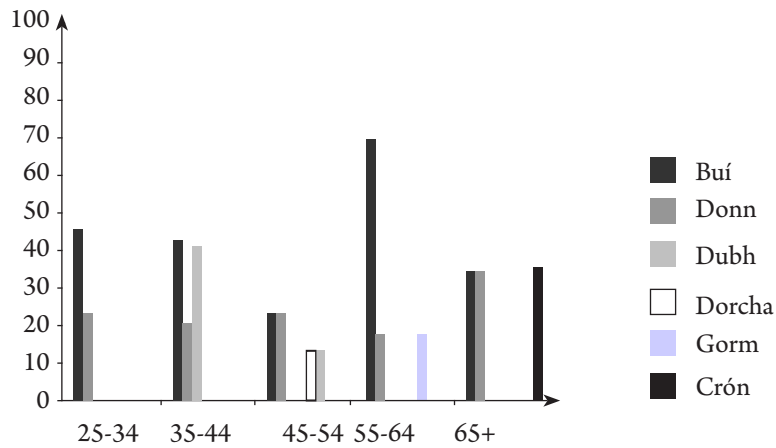


Figure 6: Indian man.

speakers. Of interest here is the fact that the use of *donn* actually increases the older the respondents get, whilst its use is least amongst the youngest speakers. This would seem to go against the grain of Ó Béarra's comments on the speakers of Traditional Late Modern Irish, in that one might expect the younger, more-exposed-to-English speakers of the language to opt for *donn* as a one-to-one equivalent of English 'brown' and the older speakers to ignore it and choose *buí*, but even amongst the 65+ speakers there is a division in the choice of words. Of more interest is the fact that the one speaker who chose *donn* (more correctly *cnódhonn* 'nutbrown') was the same speaker who described the orange as being *buí*.

In the final picture of the darker-skinned Indian man there was a lot more variety in the answers on offer, including *dubh* 'black', *dorcha* 'dark', *crón* 'swarthy' and *gorm* 'blue, shiny black' alongside *buí* and *donn*. It is interesting again to note how well *buí* is holding up in all of the age groups in relation to the other colour terms that were suggested. Of course, as exemplified by the 25–34 age group, there is a much more widespread use of *donn* as the person in question was clearly much darker than the previous tanned woman and possibly some of the respondents felt that *buí* did not cover his particular dark skin tone. Also of interest is the fact that, in the group most likely to speak Traditional Irish, i.e. the 65+ group, there was a three-way split between *donn*, *buí* and *crón*. In addition, there were three speakers in the 55–64 age group who described the sunbathing lady on the beach as *buí* but who described this darker skinned gentleman as *bláthbhúí* (defined in Ó Dónaill as 'sallow-complexioned' whilst *buí* itself is merely 'sallow' (1977: 114, 155)). These three speakers thus clearly saw some kind of distinction in the two different skin tones and a marked difference between *buí* and *bláthbhúí*.

Conclusions

Regarding the orange colour, it would seem to be fairly common now for native Irish speakers to ignore *buí* and opt for *oráiste* as a one-to-one equivalent for the English Basic Colour Term ‘orange’, even amongst the older speakers questioned. As such, *oráiste* can probably now be safely considered one of the Basic Colour Terms in Irish as well, and the fact that it has been accepted to a large degree by the older generations would suggest that this change must have been in progress for quite a while and cannot be blamed on the growing influence of English in recent times. As can be seen, there are still small remnants of the use of *buí* to cover ‘orange’ amongst some of the older speakers but little evidence of this was noted amongst the younger generations. Where the colour orange is not so obvious, as in the case of the traffic light, there is still some reliance on *buí* even amongst younger speakers. In well-established items, such as the Irish flag and fire it can be seen from the older speakers that the traditional system, that which covered these ‘oranges’ by referring to them as *buí* (in the case of the flag) or *dearg* (in the case of fire), is still alive, although the overwhelming choice amongst the younger generation is, again, *oráiste* as a one-to-one equivalent. Finally, where there is no ‘orange’ colour at all, as in the case of tanned, dark skin, *buí* seems to be holding up quite well in the face of other colour terms, especially *donn*.

The Irish-language translator and commentator Antain Mac Lochlainn (2015), in commenting on the recent acceptance of *oráiste* as the colour, alongside the invisible *flannbhuí*, in the new official, State-sponsored dictionaries, does feel some sympathy for those who up to now have had to rely on *buí* to describe both ‘yellow’ and ‘orange’. He accepts that this is not the way it was traditionally and that some ‘purists’ might be upset, but he philosophically notes “d’imigh sin is tháinig seo” ‘this went and that came’, i.e. things have changed. Whilst this may be so in the case of one-to-one equivalents of ‘orange’, such as the fruit and the Irish flag, it would seem that the use of *buí* to cover shades that are not strictly ‘yellow’, however, has not yet totally run its course.

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