

REVIEW OF *IRISHNOW!*

Title	<i>IrishNow!</i> (Deluxe Edition)
Version number	V8 (2000)
Platform	PC and Macintosh
Minimum hardware requirements	Windows 95, 98, or NT 4.0 with Service Pack 3 or higher; 486 (or better); 16 MB RAM; 35 MB disk space; sound card; speakers; VGA monitor with support for High Color or True Color settings and at least 800 x 600 resolution. Mac: System 7.1 (or better); Power Mac or better processor; 8 MB RAM; 30 MB disk space; monitor with support for Thousands of Colors setting and at least 800 x 600 resolution. Plus: 2X CD-ROM drive; microphone required for recording; browser and Internet connection required to link to online quizzes.
Publisher	Transparent Language Inc. 9 Executive Park Drive Merrimack, NH 03054 USA www.transparent.com
Support offered	Phone: (603) 262-6300; Fax: (603) 262-6555; E-mail: support@transparent.com
Target language	Modern Irish (Gaelic)
Target audience	Beginner and advanced
Price	\$49.95US
ISBN	NA

Reviewed by Colleen Cotter, Georgetown University

OVERVIEW

IrishNow! (Deluxe Edition) is a CD-ROM-based multimedia package designed for beginning and advanced learners of Modern Irish (also known as Gaelic or Irish Gaelic). The Deluxe Edition comes with a microphone to record and compare one's own pronunciation to native speakers and, on a separate CD, a Multilingual Word Processor program which includes fonts for 100 languages as well as a multilingual spell-checker. *IrishNow!* promises to assist learners at different stages in the development of speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills.

In addition to word games, grammar tools, online quizzes, and quasi-interactive speaking opportunities, the package features attractive video segments of places, events, and people in Ireland. These videos are narrated by native speakers and they are the basis of numerous "immersion" activities. An invaluable component, particularly for a language with relatively few native speakers, is the opportunity for learners to hear native speaker pronunciation and compare it to their own.

DESCRIPTION

The software is organized around four different "titles": Discovering Ireland, An Excerpt from *Angela's Ashes*, Most Common Words in Ireland, and Survival Phrases. A "title" is the program's equivalent of a main topic, around which numerous supporting activities are grouped. Three clickable buttons are available for each title: Open, Games, and Listen and Speak. A fourth clickable button, Conversation Practice, is available for Survival Phrases and Most Common Words. The Open button leads a user to the main text of a title. [Figure 1](#) shows the middle of the Discovering Ireland title, a 1,198-word travel narrative with video.

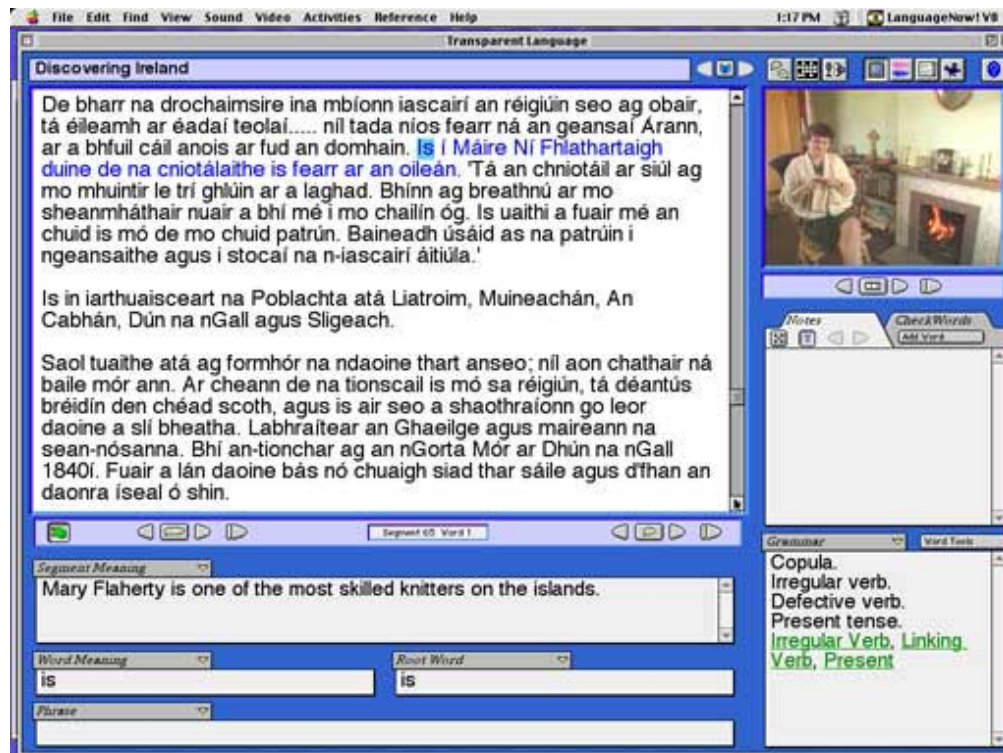


Figure 1. Discovering Ireland, segment 65, Aran knitter, presented in Video mode

The user can focus on different types of comprehension skills by switching between Video, Sound Palette, Text Only, and Theatre modes, which changes the screen presentation to emphasize different aspects of language learning. The Video mode runs the accompanying video in the upper right of the screen without ambient sound or music, and it gives the learner the option of listening to the narrative (and simultaneously reading it in Irish and English) either as continuous speech or in gloss form with pronunciation of individual words. The Theatre mode (Figure 2) is similar to the Video mode but it has a larger video screen in the middle of the page and it includes both music and ambient sound. Both modes use the same multi-media panoply of maps, illustrations, still photos, and recent video to emphasize history, geography, social and cultural activities, landscape features, and personal interactions. The Sound Palette mode eliminates the video and instead provides a spectrogram (a graphic representation of measurable acoustic properties of the words that are spoken), and a place for speaker recording and playback, as shown in Figure 3. Text Only mode emphasizes reading.

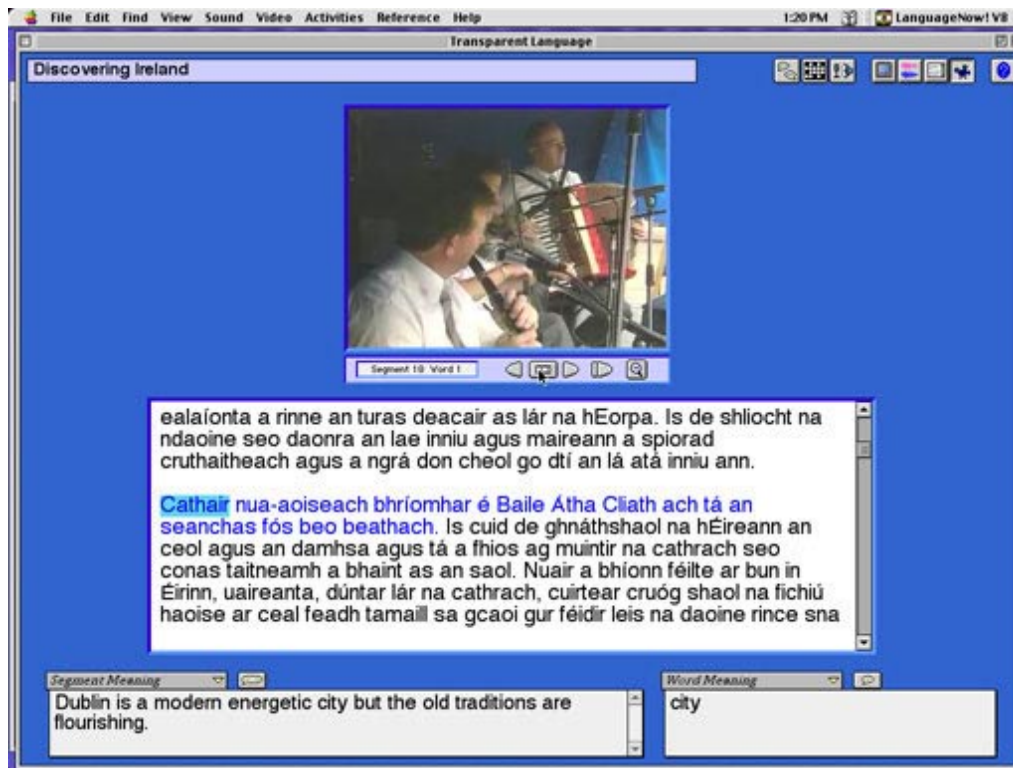
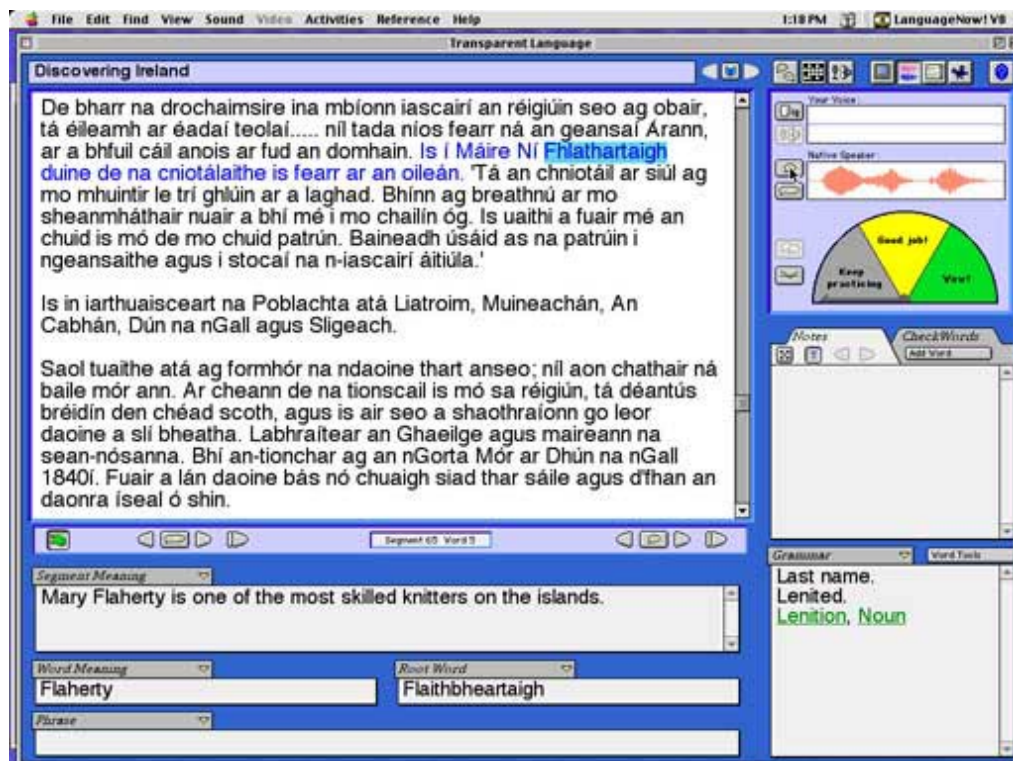
Figure 2. Discovering Ireland, Music *seisi n* (session; segment 18) -- Theatre mode

Figure 3. Discovering Ireland, Aran knitter (segment 65) -- Sound Palette mode

In each mode, a Word Tools button in the lower right corner of the screen allows the user to obtain more explicit grammar information about a highlighted word by providing links to relevant explanations within the Grammar Basics file. The explanations linked to the word button are minimal (e.g., copula, habitual

form, etc.), but a comprehensive Grammar Tutorial is always available to pique the interest and to support the advancement of the intermediate learner (at the same time, its background status ensures that the new learner, who may be overwhelmed by some of the unique phonological and grammatical features of Irish, will not be deterred). The Grammar Tutorial is a separate file that can easily be consulted by the learner who has an immediate question that the Grammar Basics file does not cover, or who just wants to read an overview grammar of the language.

Grammar and vocabulary exercises and drills are presented on the Games and Listen and Speak pages for each title. Games include

- Vocabulous!@ (which focuses on vocabulary and spelling)
- Unscramble (which emphasizes syntax skills by requiring the learner to put words in grammatical order)
- Plug-n-Play (which builds on knowledge of vocabulary and sentence structure by requiring the learner to drag missing words into the text)
- Crosswords (which emphasizes vocabulary and spelling)
- Video Unscramble (which enhances listening comprehension by requiring the learner to drag video clips from a passage and put them in proper order)

Listen and Speak features three activities: Word Dictation (spelling and listening), Word Pronunciation (speaking skills and vocabulary), and Sentence Pronunciation (to further emphasize the native target -- see Figure 4). The Word Pronunciation activity provides windows which compare the pitch contour, loudness contour, and fricative production ("hissing and buzzing") of the learner with the native speaker version. Besides the acoustic comparison, a needle points to one of three achievement levels: Keep Practicing, Good Job, and Wow!

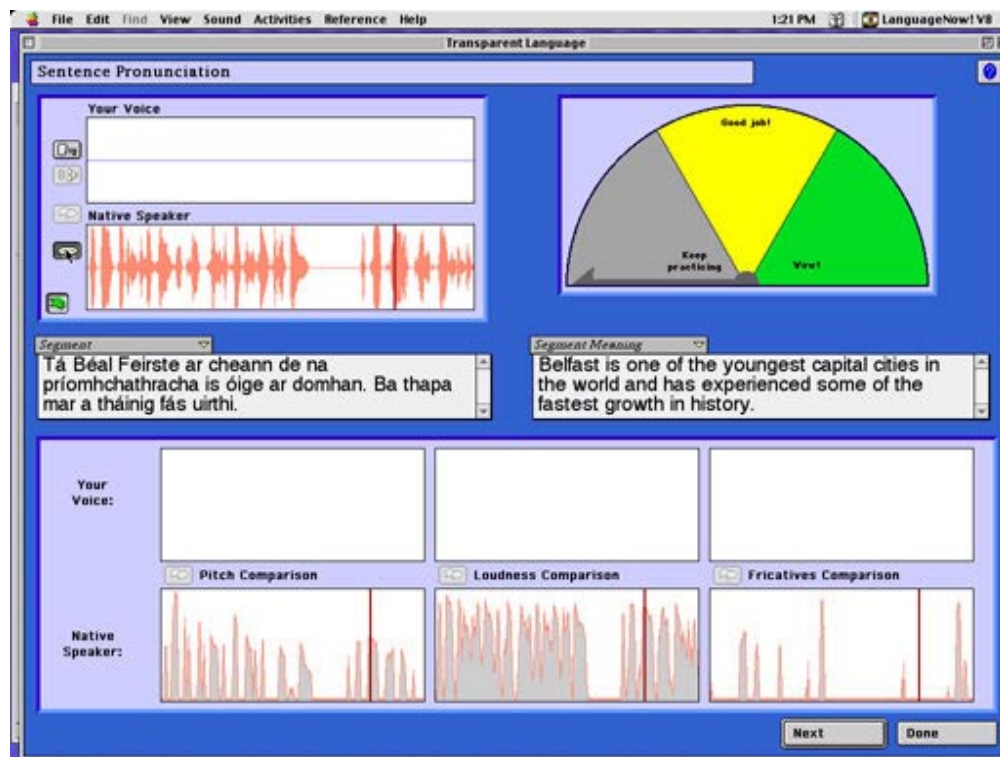


Figure 4. Sentence Pronunciation activity within Discovering Ireland segment

The Most Common Words in Irish and the Survival Phrases titles provide a third activity: Conversation Practice. Conversation Practice allows a user to choose one of several short scenarios mostly at the intermediate level and to "interact" with an Irish conversational partner, whose voice and still photo are provided, and then to compare the user's speaking skill with native pronunciation. A learner is not restricted to one conversational position -- there are five characters to choose from -- and can consult three concealable windows (showing a conversational prompt, an English translation of the line, and the actual line in Irish that is expected) for assistance.

EVALUATION

The implications of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) are writ larger with an endangered but highly valued language like Irish, a language that has been losing speakers for many generations and, by most accounts, is close to extinction despite recent revitalization efforts within Ireland and abroad (Hindley, 1990). *IrishNow!* is valuable for individual language learners, particularly as it provides a native-speaker model, and also as a tool for the perpetuation of the language. Not only has Irish been in fairly steady decline for more than 200 years, but pedagogical materials and innovations have been very scarce until just recently.

The multi-media program provides for challenge and accomplishment, and it minimizes frustration -- something that is not always the case with more traditional teaching methods. Furthermore, the unique features of the Irish language which often baffle learners (e.g., initial consonant mutation in which complex but patterned sound changes at the beginnings of words do a great deal of significant grammatical work) can probably be better sorted out with a multi-media system. In addition, users receive immediate feedback (e.g., online quizzes are graded instantly), and they can easily compare their own pronunciation to that of native speakers. An unintended benefit of the spectrogram comparisons could be that users learn to read formant patterns. The software affords the user many options in terms of varied intellectual challenges (games and online quizzes, different concealable translation screens) and pacing (the SlowSound feature -- the "green-turtle" button -- slows down the native speaker's voice). While the *LanguageNow!* series emphasizes the value of its "Successful Immersion Approach," an approximation of the complexity of actual immersion made possible by the multiple technological capabilities of the CD-ROM medium, they also offer a Step by Step Approach for those who prefer to take a more structured or traditional approach to learning.

The program's content is substantive linguistically, especially considering the wide range of learner proficiencies it serves, and it is easy to see how learners at different stages would find using the program by turns intriguing, enjoyable, and useful. The treatment of grammar is comprehensive, readily available for those who want it, avoidable for those who don't. The texts have been vetted by the Bord na Gaeilge (the primary government agency that works on behalf of the Irish language in Ireland).

The program easily blends depictions of life in rural and urban Ireland, in the North (which is part of the United Kingdom) and in the South (the Republic) -- sites of longstanding tensions -- without too much fuss. The presentation is as apolitical as it can be. While there is a certain simplification of Irish life and attitudes that comes with the territory, particularly in an overview, the more tacky and stereotypical images that exist outside of Ireland are mercifully absent. In *IrishNow!*, Guinness, traditional dancing and music, history, and horses races are embedded in a contemporary social context, aided and enhanced by the video images which convey more cultural complexity than the text can alone. One can hear, for instance, a segment that describes dancing in the streets during festivals and then look at the video window and see a great deal of variety among the people and the activities.

Given its many benefits, there are some aspects to the package that might be seen as drawbacks:

- More traditional learners might find the multi-media "immersion" setup baffling initially; a few hours with the program should set that to rights. Computer savvy learners will be clicking and understanding the hypertextual relations like the native cyberliterate they are.
- There is no accompanying booklet, although online help and tutorials answer nearly all questions learners could be expected to have.
- While becoming proficient in the "four language skills" is part of *IrishNow!*'s promise, the opportunities for writing (with the exception of spelling) and speaking by initiating new utterances are fairly minimal. Listening and reading are favored.
- The text on the package is also somewhat misleading and overwrought (perhaps excusable as a marketing decision), promising "full comprehension of Irish Gaelic" and interaction "with your new language like a true native." (Calling it Irish Gaelic in the box text was a somewhat more valid marketing decision, given the non-native audience it is meant to serve. For many native Irish speakers, "Gaelic" refers to the sister language spoken in Scotland and is seldom used to refer to the language in the Republic, a distinction most non-Irish don't make.)
- While the language is described structurally, there is nothing said about the language in terms of its sociopolitical history or in terms of its endangered status and cultural relevance now, although granted, whether to do so is a debatable point. Neither the number of fluent speakers (approximately 10,000 or so; Hindley, 1990), the three main dialect regions which for Irish speakers are highly significant divisions, nor the current status of the language are mentioned. Perhaps this is a good thing, as one criticism of the preservationist paradigm in Ireland over the past 100 years is that the language is only used to chronicle its demise (Ó Dónaill, 1995). *IrishNow!* instead chronicles its social pertinence, linguistic significance, and potential vitality.

SUMMARY

This multi-media language learning system can be used by learners of Irish for self-study and as a supplement to language classes, particularly the many small unofficial classes that have been springing up throughout the US and elsewhere in the past several years. As the multi-media presentation affords examples of native speaker language use via different computer-assisted domains, it is particularly useful for situations outside of Ireland in which the learners have little or no access to native or fluent speakers. For more advanced learners, who may have been to Ireland for language study or attended one of many immersion weekends scheduled by enthusiasts, the software will provide opportunities to build skills and to feel nostalgic. It is software for the diaspora.

Given the paucity of pedagogical materials and approaches until recently (most L2 speakers in the 20th century learned rotely with *Bunt s Cainte*, *Progress in Irish*, and the Christian Brothers' grammar) *IrishNow!* has even more import than it might otherwise. Of course *IrishNow!* does not replace real immersion but it offers a better approximation than anything else to date.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Colleen Cotter is an Assistant Professor at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., with an appointment in the Linguistics Department and the Communication, Culture and Technology Program. Her research has focused on the current revitalization of Irish (in Ireland and the US) and on the social and institutional factors that influence the status of endangered or lesser-used languages.

E-mail: cotterc@georgetown.edu

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