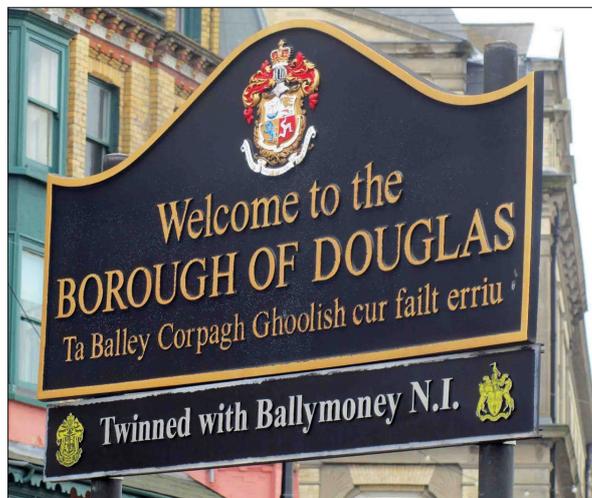


Christopher Lewin
discusses the Celtic
language, Manx,
and how it has
been revived in the
modern Isle of Man



Manx

Where is it spoken?

Manx, or Manx Gaelic, is spoken in the Isle of Man, a small semi-independent micronation in the Irish Sea mid-way between England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, which is not part of the UK or the EU and has its own laws, government and traditions.

What kind of language is it?

It is a Goidelic Celtic language closely related to Irish and Scottish Gaelic, and partially mutually intelligible with them. It is more distantly related to the Brythonic Celtic languages (Welsh, Cornish and Breton) and more distantly still to the other Indo-European languages (such as English, French, Russian, Hindi).

Where did it come from?

It is believed the language was brought to the island from Ireland around AD 500, and was spoken by the majority of the population until the mid-nineteenth century. From then it gave way to English, first in a heavily Manx-influenced guise, and latterly in the form of the fairly standard and generic English spoken natively by most Manx people today.

However, the last generation of traditional native speakers survived well into the twentieth century (the last, Ned Maddrell, died in 1974) and a number of people who developed an interest in the language learned Manx as a second language from them, supplementing their study by reading the few works of

literature such as the eighteenth century Bible translation. These pioneers of the language revival in turn have taught Manx to many others and there have even been children raised in the language, so it once again can be said to have native speakers.

Who speaks it?

Although very few people speak Manx as a first language, there is a growing network of enthusiastic fluent speakers who use Manx on a regular basis as the medium of communication in friendships, social and cultural events, the workplace, the media, and other areas. According to the 2011 census, there are 1,662 people able to speak Manx in the island out of a total population of 84,497 (2%).

People of all ages are involved in the Manx language movement, and represent many different backgrounds and motivations for learning Manx. Some feel it is an important part of their Manx national identity, but many people who have moved to the island from Britain and Ireland and further afield have adopted the language, and ‘come-overs’ (as Manx people light-heartedly call them) have been some of the most ardent supporters of Manx over the years.

How has Manx survived?

One of the most important developments in the language in recent times has been the development of a Manx-medium primary school, Yn Vunskoill Ghaelgagh (‘the Gaelic Primary School’), which began with four pupils in 2001 as a unit in an existing school, and now has about sixty children and its own premises and head teacher. Children are immersed in nothing but Manx for the first few years and learn all subjects, apart from English, through the medium of Manx. By the age of 11, the pupils leave the school with a high degree of fluency in Manx and several graduates are already making important contributions to the Manx language community.

Is Manx safe, endangered, moribund or extinct?

In 2009, there was an outcry in the island when UNESCO’s Atlas of World Languages in Danger classified Manx as ‘extinct’. A flurry of letters to the organization from politicians, Isle of Man residents, Manx speakers, and the children of the Manx school (who asked ‘If our language is extinct then what language are we writing in?’) led

to the status being changed to ‘critically endangered’.

What is it like?

Manx was cut off for many centuries from the wider Gaelic cultural sphere, including the classical Gaelic literary tradition and writing system. For this reason when it first came to be written down by Anglican clergy in the seventeenth century, they used an English-based system and it is a version of this system which is still in use today. For example, *ee*, *oo*, *ie*, *ay* are pronounced as in English. Not everyone likes this system, and it can be a barrier to Irish and Scottish Gaelic speakers trying to read Manx, but it seems too well established to change now. Manx also has some distinctive orthographic conventions, such as *aa* for the vowel sound in English ‘care’.

One notable feature of Manx grammar is **initial consonant mutations** (sound changes which change meaning). For example, *moddey* (pronounced ‘mawtha’) means ‘dog’, *e moddey* (‘uh mawtha’) means ‘her dog’, and *e voddey* (‘uh vawtha’) means ‘his dog’. In Manx, the basic word order is verb-subject-object, unlike English, where the verb comes in the middle. This is quite unusual as only 12% of languages worldwide have this word order.

Manx, like other Celtic languages, as well as many other languages world-wide such as Russian, does not have a verb ‘to have’, using a prepositional construction instead: to say ‘I have a dog’, Manx says *ta moddey aym*, literally ‘there is a dog at me’. This kind of expression is also found in Manx English still spoken by some older people. Similar expressions can be used for certain feelings and emotions, so ‘I love you’ is *ta*

Manx in five minutes

Kys t’ou [kis t̪au] How are you?

Ta mee braew [t̪a mi brau] I am fine

Goll as gaccan [gɔl̪ as gagan] Going and grumbling (a common reply to Kys t’ou?)

Gura mie ayd [gurə mai ɛd] Thank you

Palchey puddase as skeddán dy liooar [ˈpalitʃə pəˈdʒɛːs as ˈskaðən d̪ə liuːr] Plenty of potatoes and herring enough (part of a New Year blessing)

Bioys da dooinney as baase da eeast [ˈbjoːəs dʒɛː d̪un̪ə as bɛːs dʒɛː jiːs] Life to man and death to fish (i.e. may the fishermen return safely from the sea with a good catch)

Ta graih aym ort [t̪a grai ɛm ɔrt̪] I love you

graih aym ort ‘there is love at me on you = I have love on you’. Notice also that Manx has single words for preposition + pronoun (e.g. *ort* ‘on you’), so you have to learn tables of conjugated prepositional pronouns.

In terms of sounds, Manx pronunciation is not very difficult for English speakers, although there are a few tricky sounds such as the **velar fricative** *gh* [x] (‘ch’ in Scottish *loch* or German *Bach*), and **palatal** Ls and Ns (which are pronounced with a kind of in-built ‘y’ sound). Manx vowels and diphthongs are quite complex. ¶

Christopher Lewin recently graduated with a degree in Celtic Studies from the University of Edinburgh. He was born and brought up in Douglas, the capital of the Isle of Man.

Find out more

Online

For information about Manx today and learning materials, visit www.learnmanx.com

Books

‘Manx’ by George Broderick. In *The Celtic Languages* edited by Martin J. Ball and Nicole Müller (Routledge, 2010).

An Outline of Manx Language and Literature by Robert L. Thomson and Adrian Pilgrim (Yn Cheshaght Ghailckagh, 1988).