

# Language management initiatives and language use in public spaces

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## Introduction – Language policy and planning in Scotland

The increasingly fragile sociolinguistic position of Gaelic in Scotland has resulted in the language being categorised as ‘definitely endangered’ in the UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger (Moseley, 2010). Language shift, from Gaelic to English particularly affected the traditional stronghold areas of the language, the Gàidhealtachd - broadly covering the current local authorities of Argyll and Bute, Highland Council and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. The significant decline in speaker numbers as well as their geographical density throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Mac an Tàilleir, 2010) did not attract explicit support for the language from the authorities until the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the focus started to shift away from mechanisms to support the economic and employment opportunities in the Gàidhealtachd towards initiatives which were aimed at supporting the language (McLeod, 2010).

The language management initiatives of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century continued to be driven by economic development (Chalmers & Danson, 2006) (see MacLeod, 2007 for a discussion of the language planning initiatives of the late 20th century), running in parallel with the introduction of Gaelic as a medium of instruction in the education system, and an increase in Gaelic language media output. These language management initiatives, described by Fishman (1991) as ‘higher order props’, although lacking a clearly articulated focus (Dunbar, 2006; McLeod, 2002), followed the principles set out in the ‘Catherine Wheel model’ of language planning (Strubell, 2005). This language planning model equates the increased provision of goods and services in the minority language, with an increase in status, which, in turn, is expected to lead to a greater desire to learn and use the language.

McLeod (2010) has referred to these language management initiatives which developed throughout the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the start of the institutionalisation and professionalisation of the language management initiatives, the culmination of which came in 2005 with the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act. The aim of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act (hereafter: the Gaelic Act) was to ‘secure the status of the Gaelic language as a national language of Scotland commanding equal respect to the English language’ (Scottish Parliament, 2005). Both the wording of the Gaelic Act, and in particular its reference to ‘equal respect’ which lacks a clearly defined legal meaning, and the relative weakness of its provisions, which only apply to Scottish public authorities, has attracted criticism (see Dunbar, 2006; McLeod, 2010; Walsh & McLeod, 2007) as this legislation has not created any absolute rights to use the language in interactions with public authorities. Despite

these criticisms, Dunbar (2010) has acknowledged that the Gaelic Act goes some way towards filling the ‘planning and policy vacuum’ of the previous decades (p. 140) through the provision of a clear policy relating to Gaelic.

The provisions of the Gaelic Act established Bòrd na Gàidhlig (BnG) as the non-executive departmental public body with responsibility for the implementation of the Act; the promotion of the use and understanding of the language in Scotland. BnG is responsible for the creation of a 5-yearly national plan for Gaelic in which the priorities for the language are set out in terms of corpus, status, acquisition and usage planning, as well as overseeing the creation of Gaelic language plans (GLPs) by public authorities based in Scotland. These language management initiatives continue to follow the planning principles as the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, with an implicit intention that ‘the public domain can reverse what it arguably precipitated – language shift’ (Oliver, 2010, p. 77). This, therefore, raises the question of how effective these initiatives have been in halting, or even reversing language shift, and if so, in which domains of language use.

### Gaelic language use

Analysis of the decennial census results relating to Gaelic indicates that language shift is still ongoing, albeit at a slower rate than the decline seen throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The census results, which has included a question pertaining to Gaelic since 1891 provides a valuable longitudinal record of patterns in speaker numbers and geographical density of Gaelic speakers, since 1971 this information been based on self-reported competences (reading, writing, understanding and speaking) rather than on self-reported use of the language which was the focus of the question upto then (Thomas, 1998). The census does not collect data on frequency or domains of language use, making it, according to Munro (2011) ‘impossible to know how and even if, those who self-report to have Gaelic are actually using Gaelic during those ten years’ (p. 165).

Leaving aside any ambiguity over what it means to be able to read, write, understand and / or speak Gaelic in the absence of clear descriptors provided in the census itself, Bourhis and Sachdev (1984) suggested that the extent to which individuals are willing to self-report on their minority language use and competences will dependent on the social and political circumstances in which the language finds itself, as well as personal ideologies. This might lead to either over- or under-reporting of a language (see also Dorian, 1998). This uncertainty over what the self-reported competences mean in terms of actual language use is significant as speaker numbers is one of the main vitality indicators used to evaluate the sociolinguistic position of a language and provide projections of its future sustainability (Kandler, Unger, & Steele, 2010; UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003). Although not explicitly stated in these language vitality assessments, it is assumed that speaker numbers in this context refer to active users of the language in the community, which, coupled with the percentage minority language speakers in a community, might be used to provide an indication of the likely use of that language in all or some community domains.

The discourse surrounding Gaelic in the census has, in some instances, assumed that the self-reported competences in spoken Gaelic are synonymous with active users of the language (see, for example, BBC, 2013; Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2012). One of the clearest indications that the census data might not be a reliable indicator of active language use came in the 2011 census. This census included, for the first time, a question on the language(s) used in the home. Analysis of these responses showed that 43.4% of those who reported to be able to speak Gaelic used the language in the home (Mac an Tàilleir, 2013). The extent to which the language is used in the home is significant as this will also affect the extent to which international transmission can take place, another factor identified as significant when evaluating the sociolinguistic vitality of a language and named by Fishman (1991) as the *sine qua non* of any revitalisation efforts, without which ‘all else can amount to little more than biding time, at best generation by generation’ (p. 399).

The data from the census can be used to further infer that ability to speak Gaelic need not equate to language use; analysis of the geographical density of those self-reporting to speak the language shows that there are no communities remaining where more than 64% of the population can speak the language, below the 67% of active speakers suggested by Ó Giollagáin, Mac Donnacha, Ní Chualáin, Ní Shéaghda, and O' Brien (2007) in their study of the use of Irish in the Gaeltacht of Ireland, for the use of the language in the community to be sustainable. The decline and subsequent limited use of Gaelic in the community is also highlighted in the findings of a number of studies (MacKinnon, 1977; Munro, Armstrong, & Mac an Tàilleir, 2011; NicAoidh, 2006) which identified that English has increasingly become the default language in which community interactions take place even in situations where it is acknowledged that Gaelic can be used (NicAoidh, 2006). This, therefore, raises the question of whether the language management initiatives of the last few decades have contributed to the explicit aim to ‘increase the use of Gaelic’ (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2018), starting with the public domains in which the GLPs have sought to support the use of the language.

### Study methodology

Research into the use of Gaelic has focussed mainly on data collection through questionnaires and interviews (although there have been notable exceptions such as the work conducted by Smith-Christmas (2016)). The nature of these methodological approaches has meant that the information provided, by speakers and non-speakers alike might result in aggregate or generalised responses (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003). Furthermore, as suggested by Hill (2008), these responses might have been subject to ‘reporting bias’ where individuals might recall an interaction in the minority language, where, in fact, only a word or phrase, in this case in Gaelic, was used. In order to evaluate the extent to which Gaelic was spoken, independent of this ‘reporting bias’, this study collected data through systematic ethnographic language observations in public spaces of organisations, both with and without statutory GLPs produced under the Gaelic Act.

This methodology was adapted from the *Kale Neurkata*, the street surveys of language use, which have been conducted in the Basque Country since the 1980s. These five-yearly surveys are based on ethnographic structured observations made by the researchers in the different municipalities - the most neutral space there is (Altuna & Basurto, 2013, p. 39) and, using a data collection template, noting all the conversations taking place in that space over a period of time. This has allowed for an evaluation of the extent to which Basque is used vis-à-vis Spanish or French, as well as create an overview of the speaker demographic (see Altuna & Urla, 2013).

The aim of this study was not to collect data in the streets, but, instead, use this as a quantitative method to allow, in the absence of longitudinal data on language use dating to before the introduction of the organisational GLPs, for a direct comparison in the extent to which Gaelic is used, and by whom, in locations with and without these statutory language management initiatives. This required an adaption of the data collection instrument to include, in addition to collecting data on the main language used in the interaction and the participant age-profile and gender, also an indication of the participant designation (whether the participants in the conversation are members of staff or members of the public) and the purpose of the interaction (private or business).

The study was situated in Stornoway. This town is unique positioned for a study of this kind; not only is it the economic and administrative centre of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, which, as the only local authority where a majority of the population self-reported to be able to speak the language (National Records of Scotland, 2013), might be described as the last remaining stronghold of the language. Stornoway is home to a number of companies and organisations providing Gaelic related goods and services; especially those associated with education, the media, Gaelic arts and language developments as well as public authorities with GLPs. This means that Stornoway can be considered a microcosm of the various strands and developments in the language management initiatives since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, furthermore, it is the only town in Scotland where a significant proportion of the population, 43.34% can speak Gaelic (National Records of Scotland, 2013).

### Results and discussion

For this study a total of ten different public spaces were selected; five spaces in organisations with a statutory GLP and a further five spaces in locations without these management initiatives. All these public spaces were in the centre of Stornoway and open to the general public. Multiple language use surveys were conducted in each of the ten locations, at different times of the day and different days of the week, to capture as wide a range of the user demographic of each of those ten spaces. This resulted in a total data set of 2,000 interactions recorded on the language use observation sheet which can be analysed for language used, participant profile (designation, age profile and gender) and the overall purpose of the interaction.

The overall data set can be used to determine the role that Gaelic plays in the overall public linguistic soundscape of Stornoway. The notion of the linguistic soundscape has previously been used

to indicate ‘any acoustic field of study’ (Schafer, 1977, p. 7), more recently this term has been applied to the study in spoken languages in public spaces, often specifically referring to public announcements (see Backhaus, 2006; Scarvaglierie, Redder, Pappenhagen, & Brehmer, 2013). For this study the term linguistic soundscape was redefined to apply to a wider context of interactions, based on the notion of the linguistic landscape, defined by Landry and Bourhis (1997) as referring to the ‘visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory’ with ‘the prevalence of a specific language on public signs ... [serving] an informal function inasmuch as it indicates that the language in question can be used to communicate and obtain services within public and private establishments’ (pp. 23 - 25). The linguistic soundscape, it was hypothesised, can provide a clear indicator of the language that can be used within in given space and be a contributing factor in code-choice decisions. This is particular pertinent in the case of Gaelic, where, as identified by Smith-Christmas and Ó hIfearnáin (2015), the language is not associated with a particular social status or group and this means that speakers of the language, which will all be bilingual (Dunbar, 2011), have to determine in which situations the use of Gaelic is socially ‘permissible’ and ‘accepted’ – what would be described as ‘the unmarked code choice’ in the Markedness Model proposed by Myers-Scotton (1993).

This ‘markedness model’ aims to explain the interpersonal and societal expectations associated with code-switching, where the markedness is indicative of the accepted norms in the community with ‘choices not motivated by norms themselves, but rather by individual perceptions of social consequences’ (p. 479). The model has been criticised for its assumption that code-choice is rational, ‘[treating] deliberation as it were transparently rational and therefore of little explanatory significance’ (Li Wei, 2005, p. 379), with Woolard (2004) suggesting that the choice of language need not be a conscious decision and one that has any particular social meaning. This does not mean that the use of a language, especially the use of a minority language, which has been subject to years of political and economic suppression (Durkacz, 1983; McLeod, 2014), does not provide an implicit, yet overt, indicator about the linguistic norms and even language ideology of the speaker. The use of a minority languages in a public space, and especially by employees in public-interfacing roles, can, therefore, provide a clear signal about the stance of the organisation towards the language and contribute towards a process of normalisation which will help support the isotropic use of the language (Martínez de Luna, 2006).

The stance of the organisation, whether officially articulated through official planning and policy initiatives, for example GLPs, or through not having an explicit policy, will influence the extent to which Gaelic is perceived to an unmarked code-choice. The influence of these formal language management initiatives on the use of spoken Gaelic, the ‘most natural use of the language ... the most direct kind of linguistic interaction between two or more individuals ... characterized by spontaneous improvisation’ (Altuna & Basurto, 2013, p. 28), could be assessed through an analysis of

the observed conversations according to participant groupings. In this study all interlocutors were categorised as either being a member of staff or as a member of the public.

Members of staff were those individuals present in the locations as part of their (customer-facing) role within the organisation in which the language use survey was conducted. These individuals would, typically, remain present in the space over the course of the language use survey session, and, therefore be observed as participants in multiple interactions. Members of staff can also be considered actors in the implementation of any language management initiatives especially where these include commitments to provide goods and services in Gaelic to members of the public. All other individuals, regardless of their purpose for being in a particular space, were categorised as members of the public. These members of the public were transient, typically present in the location for a short period of time and the inclusion of their interactions in the language use survey was, therefore, by the nature of this study, by chance. As ‘spoken use of a language is by nature a collective matter’ and that, therefore, the language use surveys do not measure the language of an individual but, instead, the language of the group (Altuna & Basurto, 2013, p. 74), the conversations were grouped according to the participant designation; interactions involving only members of staff, interactions involving members of the public only, and ‘mixed participant’ interactions involving at least one member of staff and one member of the public.

Analysis of the language used in conversations involving members of staff only showed that Gaelic was used in 37 out of the 341 observed interactions involving this group of participants. The use of Gaelic in interactions involving members of staff only was not consistent across the locations surveyed. In locations without any formal language management initiatives Gaelic was not used at all for staff-to-staff interactions, compared to 14.7% Gaelic language use by this group in locations with a statutory GLP. This would, in the first instance, validate the notion that GLPs contribute to an increased use in the language, at least in the public spaces of the organisations. The use of Gaelic in staff-to-staff interactions was not consistent across the five spaces surveyed in organisations with a GLP.

The use of Gaelic, by all groups of participants, will be subject to a number of different factors, including the ideologies and linguistic competences of the interlocutors and the perceived unmarked language(s) of a space. In organisations with a statutory GLP it might have been assumed that the stance towards the inclusion of the language as an unmarked code-choice would be supportive. This was not the case in all instances, with one organisation signalling in their GLP that ‘is operating contract specifies that English is the business language’ (Calmac Ferries Ltd, n.d., p. 20). Although this does not specify that this statement also applies to interactions with members of staff also does not create the conditions in which the use of the language is encouraged, which, in this case, resulted in the language not being used in conversations between members of staff in the location surveyed. However even in organisations where the use of Gaelic was actively encouraged through the GLP (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, 2012) the use of the language in staff-to-staff interactions was

not consistent, ranging from no Gaelic interactions by this group in participants in the language to 22.7%. This means that although the use of Gaelic is supported at an organisational level, at a policy level as expressed through a GLP, this does not necessarily translate into Gaelic being used by members of staff in the public spaces of the organisation.

The importance of the inclusion of Gaelic in the linguistic soundscape created by members of staff can be seen in the language choices in mixed participant interactions. The use of Gaelic in these mixed interactions across the study was 3.5%. This was the lowest of the three participant groupings, with no correlation between the type of location (organisations with a statutory GLP and those without) and the use of the language. Further analysis shows that different mechanisms drive the use of Gaelic in mixed-participant interactions in places with and without formal language management initiatives.

The GLPs of the organisations over the public spaces covered by this study made, in all instances, explicit that Gaelic could be used by members of the public in obtaining the services of the organisation; ‘Gaelic speaking staff in Gaelic speaking areas (*this includes Stornoway – IB*) can greet and serve Gaelic-speaking customers (Calmac Ferries Ltd, n.d., p. 20) and ‘[ensuring] that the public can access Comhairle services through the medium of Gaelic, if so desired’ (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, 2012, p. 20) respectively. Both these GLPs appear to place the emphasis on the service user (the member of the public) to indicate that they would like to use Gaelic. The results from this study show that members of the public in spaces of organisations with a GLP would only initiate these conversations if they were clear that Gaelic was an unmarked code-choice in the particular space and with the particular members of staff present. The prime mechanism for deciding whether Gaelic could be used was an analysis of the linguistic soundscape created by members of staff; in locations where members of staff used Gaelic in staff-to-staff interactions members of the public also used the language in conversations with members of staff. In locations with a GLP where Gaelic was not included in the public linguistic soundscape created by members of staff, the language was not used by members of the public to obtain goods and services. The staff-to-staff interactions did not only create an audible indicator that the language was an unmarked code-choice in that particular space but also with whom the language can be used. The results from this study would appear to indicate that members of the public are reluctant to explore the use of the Gaelic where the use of the language is explicitly sign-posted.

The use of Gaelic in mixed participant interactions in locations with a GLP was clearly linked to the linguistic soundscape created by the members of staff in that location, in three of the five survey locations of organisations without a GLP this was not the case. Across this study no Gaelic staff-to-staff interactions were observed in locations without a GLP, but the language was used in mixed-participant interactions to the same extent as in locations with a GLP and therefore the staff-to-staff linguistic soundscape would not have been a contributing factor in the choice of Gaelic in these interactions, although without eliciting further information from the participants it would be difficult

to evaluate what other factors might have resulted in Gaelic being used in spite of the lack of overt presence in the linguistic soundscape, it is however likely that prior acquaintance with the linguistic norms of the members of staff would have been a significant contributing factor rather than an active exploratory negotiation on the part of either the member of staff or the member of the public.

Across this study the use of Gaelic in conversations involving only members of the public was not significantly affected by the type of location, with or without statutory GLP, with 14.1% and 14.9% of the interactions using the language respectively. Gaelic was used in interactions between members of the public in all spaces surveyed, regardless of the linguistic soundscape created by members of staff or the level of mixed participant interactions in the language. Any 'increased' use of the language as a result of GLP will therefore most likely be seen only in interactions between members of staff and in mixed participant interactions. Organisations with a GLP need to clarify their stance on the use of the language with members of staff working in public spaces, and, where they want to encourage the use of the language in service interactions by members of the public, ensure that Gaelic makes a clear contribution to the linguistic soundscape of the location.

Where the inclusion of Gaelic in the public linguistic soundscape by members of staff cannot be realised, for example because not all the staff are willing or able to speak the language, the inclusion of Gaelic as the unmarked code-choice needs to be clearly signalled. This signalling needs to be through an audible cue that indicates that the language can be used (Heller, 1983), rather than the implicit suggestion, for example through inclusion of Gaelic in the linguistic landscape. This 'active offer' by members of staff will, as identified by Auer (1984), exert an influence on the language choice by the other individuals in the interactions. This will not, in all circumstances, result in the member of the public also using Gaelic, even where this individual has competences in the language, but will create the conditions which will indicate the inclusion of Gaelic as one of the languages that can be used in that particular space, with that particular member of staff.

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