

The social linguistic soundscape and its influence on language choice in Stornoway

Abstract

Gaelic is a minoritised language across all administrative regions of Scotland, with the exception of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar is the only one of the 32 local administrative regions where a majority of the population, 52.2%, self-reported to be able to speak Gaelic (Mac an Tàilleir, 2013). All Gaelic speakers are bilingual in English and Gaelic (Dunbar, 2011) and this means that speakers of the language needs to make a choice of what language to use according the other participants and the circumstances in which the interaction takes place.

This chapter discusses the findings of a unique multimodal study which explored the linguistic practices and the negotiation of code-choice in Stornoway, the largest town in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. Ethnographic data was collected *in situ* and in real time in a selection of public spaces in the town to evaluate how, when, and by whom Gaelic was used in this community.

The findings of this study indicate that Gaelic continues to be part of the social linguistic soundscape of the public spaces of Stornoway, with Gaelic used in conversations where the language is considered to be what Myers-Scotton (1998) has termed ‘unmarked code-choice’. The use of Gaelic was found to be strongest within social networks, whereas English was the default language used in public domains except those circumstances where Gaelic was actively included in the social linguistic soundscape created by members of staff working at the public interface of the organisation.

Introduction

Gaelic has been categorised as ‘definitely endangered in the UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger (Moseley, 2010) as a result of what (MacKinnon, 2011) has referred to as ‘runaway language shift’. The last national census, conducted in 2011, indicated that there were only 57,375 individuals remaining in Scotland who reported to be able to speak Gaelic, 1.1% of the population (National Records of Scotland, 2015). This represents a 87.5% decrease in absolute speaker numbers since 1891, the first time the census systematically collected information pertaining to the language and when 254,415 individuals, 6.3% of the population of Scotland, were recorded as Gaelic speakers (Thomas, 1998).

The increasing fragility of the language, which not only saw a reduction in the speaker number but also in the levels of intergenerational transmission, influencing language use patterns in the home, the family but also the wider community, across all Gaelic communities (see, for example, Duwe, 2005; MacKinnon, 1977; The Scottish Council for Research in Education, 1961), went largely unnoticed by the authorities throughout the 20th century, despite increasing pressures from communities to provide support for the language (Durkacz, 1983). This started to change in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the authorities recognised that the rapid decline in speaker numbers might result in the language disappearing, and that strengthening the position of the language might also support the fragile socio-economic position of the Gàidhealtachd, the traditional stronghold region of the language in the north-west of Scotland (the area covered by the three local authorities of Argyll & Bute, Highland Council and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar today). This marked the start of what McLeod (2010) has termed the

‘era of professionalisation and institutionalisation’, away from community based, local initiatives and towards an increasing centralisation and national approach towards language revitalisations, cumulating, in 2005 with the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act. This Act of the Scottish Parliament (which is often referred to as the Gaelic Act) established Gaelic as ‘an official language in Scotland, commanding equal respect to the English language’ (Scottish Parliament, 2005). Dunbar (2010) and McLeod (2010) have described this Gaelic Act as enabling legislation as the formal recognition for the language has not resulted in rights for Gaelic speakers nor any obligation on the part of the authorities to make provisions for Gaelic speakers in the provision of goods and services. The Gaelic Act established *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* (the Gaelic language board) as a statutory agency to promote the use and understanding of the Gaelic language at a national level, through the creation and enactment of a national plan for Gaelic. A further function of *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* is to request, and oversee, the preparation of Gaelic language plans by public authorities based in Scotland in which the organisations are required to set out their strategy for the promotion of Gaelic through its service provision. The increasing provision of goods and services in the language is expected to result in a greater perception of usefulness and stimulate both the motivation to use and learn the language (Strubell, 2005) in order to fulfil the official aim, as articulated by *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* (2018), to increase the use of Gaelic, by more people and in a wider range of situations. Oliver (2010) has suggested that there has been an explicit expectation on the part of the public authorities that ‘the public domain can reverse what it arguably precipitated – language shift’ (p. 77). The most obvious indication of this official support and promotion of the language is the inclusion of Gaelic in the public linguistic landscape of public authorities with Landry and Bourhis (1997) suggesting that this inclusion of a language in the public linguistic landscape can be used as an indicator that ‘the language in question can be used to communicate and obtain services within public and private establishments’ (p. 25).

This increased visibility of Gaelic in the public linguistic landscape has come at a time where analysis of the census data has indicated that intergenerational transmission of Gaelic has all but ended (National Records of Scotland, 2015). This absence of intergenerational transmission, the *sine qua non* of language revitalisation according to Fishman (1991), has had a significant impact on the extent to which Gaelic is used, not only in the home, but also within the family, with younger generations typically not speaking the language with their elders, (Birnie, 2018; Smith-Christmas, 2016a). These changing linguistic practices have also affected the use of the language in the community, with NicAoidh (2010) identifying that English was used in community interactions, even in circumstances where all participants in the conversation recognised that Gaelic could have been used. These findings were supported by Munro, Mac an Tàilleir, and Armstrong (2011) who found that English is used in ‘virtually social setting in the community’ as a result of ‘uni-directional bilingualism’ where ‘only Gaelic speakers are expected to be bilingual; they expect and are expected to use the dominant language of the majority, English’ (p. 9) in their interactions. The language used in interactions in the

different social and public settings of a community creates a social linguistic soundscape. This concept, first described by Birnie (2018) is similar to the notion linguistic landscape, but where the linguistic landscape is defined as the ‘visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region’ (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 23), the social linguistic soundscape refers to the language used in spoken interaction in a public space. These spoken interactions are an important indicator of the vitality of a language as they are characterised by spontaneous improvisation are often based on a ‘reflex action rather than a result of reflection’ (Altuna & Basurto, 2013, p. 28). Whereas the inclusion of Gaelic in the public linguistic landscape can be managed and coordinated by an organisation, often as part of their language management programme, the use of Gaelic for spoken interactions is not be as easily managed; it depends on a number of factors, including the linguistic competences and confidence of the participants in the conversation.

The dichotomy between the traditional L domain use of Gaelic and the language management initiatives promoting its use in public domain interactions is most obviously played out in Stornoway, the location of this study. Stornoway is the largest town in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the most north-westerly of Scotland’s 32 local authorities and the only region where a majority of the population, 52.2%, have reported to be able to speak Gaelic (Mac an Tàilleir, 2013). Stornoway, as the only settlement with any ‘urban characteristics’ (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, 2018), acts as the *de facto* capital and administrative and economic centre of CnES and although it might be considered the “least Gaelic” of all the parishes in the CnES, with 43.4% of the population self-reporting to be able to speak the language in 2011 (National Records of Scotland, 2013), the language makes a significant contribution to the social, economic and cultural life of the town. Stornoway is home to a number of Gaelic-sector organisations, mainly associated with education, the media and language development, as well as public organisations, including the headquarters of the local authority, with Gaelic language plans produced as a result of the Gaelic Act. This raises the question whether these language management initiatives in the public domain in Stornoway can, as Oliver (2010) suggested, ‘reverse what it arguably precipitated – language shift’ (p. 77), or whether, in fact, these initiatives have resulted in what Smith-Christmas and Ó hIfearnáin (2015) have termed ‘reverse diglossia’ with Gaelic speakers in the town using the language in H (High) language functions (education, the workplace and in interactions with the authorities), but with no or limited use in L (Low) domain functions, such as the home, the family and the community.

Methodology

A question pertaining to Gaelic has been included in the national decennial census since the late 19th century and this has created the impression that there is a clear understanding about the sociolinguistic position of Gaelic. Although the census data can be used to provide an indication of the trajectory of Gaelic in terms of speaker numbers and density, this data is based on self-reporting and personal

interpretation of the question which asks whether respondents can speak Gaelic, but without providing a definition or minimum level of proficiency. Munro (2011) has therefore concluded that without any data about relative ability, domains of frequency of language use it is ‘impossible to know how, and even if, those who self-report to have Gaelic are actually using Gaelic’ (p. 165). Information about the frequency and domains of use of Gaelic have been based on a limited number of studies, all conducted in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the most north-westerly of Scotland’s 32 local authorities and the last remaining ‘stronghold’ of the language (with 52.2% of the population self-reporting to speak the language in 2011 (Mac an Tàilleir, 2013)). These studies have all followed a similar approach with participants, speakers and non-speakers of Gaelic, being asked to pre-coded, scaled responses to indicate the use of Gaelic in different social situations and settings, which typically ranged from ‘never’ to ‘all the time’ but without providing further quantification on what this might mean in practice. Bourhis and Sachdev (1984) have suggested that, in the case of a minority language, the political and social circumstances as well as personal ideology might influence how speakers report their use of, in this case, Gaelic, which can result in either an over- or under-estimate of the extent to which the language is really used. A further factor which might influence how the use of Gaelic is reported on in these studies is what Hill (2008) has referred to as ‘reporting bias’, also known as the ‘phenomenon of misplaced scale’ (Urla, 2013). This reporting bias suggests that the occurrence of a word or phrase in a minority language might be enough for this to be reported as an interaction in that language (Hill, 2008). These studies have, therefore, been very valuable in tracing the perceptions of how the use of Gaelic has changed in the community (see, for example, MacKinnon, 1977; Munro, Armstrong, & Mac an Tàilleir, 2011; NicAoidh, 2006) based on retrospection, where participants’ recall can lead to aggregate response, with a particular focus on the more recent experiences rather than giving weight to each instance (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003). With the notable, and important exception of the research conducted by Smith-Christmas (2016a) who audio recorded and analysed individual instances of conversations occurring within a Gaelic speaking family, no previous research on the use of Gaelic has focussed on analysing language use based on *de facto* occurrences in different situations and domains.

The research method used in this study was adapted from the *Kale Neurkata* (Street Surveys of Basque Language use), conducted once every five years across the different communities of the Basque Country (Altuna & Basurto, 2013). During the *Kale Neurkata* data collection period, researchers visit neighbourhoods and, over a period of two hours for each session, record (using a standardised observation form), the language(s) of each conversation they observe, together with the demographic profile of the participants in the conversation (age profile and gender). The quantitative data gathered has been used as a ‘kind of barometer of the efficacy that language promotion and education policies are having in ... making Basque a “public” language’ (Urla, 2013, p. 18) mirroring the aims of the Gaelic language management initiatives in Scotland.

The OLUS used the same principles as have been adopted in the *Kale Neurkata*, systematically recording all observed conversations in a given space over a defined period of time. As with the Basque study, the unit of measurement was taken to be a conversation, defined as a face-to-face interaction involving two or more individuals in which information was exchanged beyond an initial greeting – as previous research by Birnie (2018) has indicated that the language used in a greeting need not be a reliable indicator of the language used in the remainder of the interaction -.

Conversations were delineated by a change in participants, a change in language or a change in purpose. As in the *Kale Neurkata* study the researcher would position themselves in a public space for a defined period of time to collect information on the demographic profile (age-profile, gender) as well as the designation of the participants (member of the public or a member of staff), the language of the interaction and its purpose (private or business), noting the information on the observation form. Unlike the Basque Country where these observational surveys have been conducted since the 1980s and where there is longitudinal record of how the public use of Basque has evolved over time, this was the first time that a study of this kind has been conducted in the context of Gaelic to assess the extent to which Gaelic is used. In the absence of longitudinal data assessing the use of spoken Gaelic in public spaces before and after the implementation of the formal language management initiatives, and therefore it was decided to compare the overall levels of spoken Gaelic language use, as well as the participant demographic and designation as well as the purpose of the interaction in locations with formal language management initiatives and those without any official measures to support the use of Gaelic in their public spaces.

In the absence of longitudinal data indicating the extent to which Gaelic was used in these locations before and after their implementation, locations were selected with and without GLP to evaluate the extent to which the presence of a GLP contributed to the inclusion of Gaelic in the social linguistic soundscape. Eight locations were selected, all in the centre of Stornoway, four in organisations with a Gaelic language plans (GLP) and four in locations without any language management initiatives. These locations were selected to publicly accessible open spaces with a single service point for interactions between members of staff and members of the public and all were visited multiple times by the researcher; at different times of the day and different days of the week to capture, as far as possible, a representative cross-section of the users of these spaces. A total of 2,000 conversations were collected over the duration of the study; 1020 in locations with a GLP and 980 in locations without formal support mechanisms for the language (see Figure 1).

figure 1 about here

This data was analysed according to the mathematical model developed by Yurramendi and Altuna (2009) for the *Kale Neurkata* which considers the size of the data set, the number of participants in each interaction and the presumed level of bilingualism in the community in order to determine the validity and reliability of the sample size. Applying this model to the dataset gave a confidence level

of 99.0 % with a margin of error of $\pm 2.85\%$, suggesting that the results obtained can be confidently assumed to be an approximation of the statistically expected results for this community.

Location	Gaelic plan	No. of observations	% English conversations	% Gaelic conversations
CnES public reception area	Yes	440	82.3%	12.7%
Sport Centre reception area	Yes	200	98.5%	1.5%
Library	Yes	240	89.6%	10.4%
Ferry waiting room	Yes	140	82.2%	7.8%
Arts & Creative centre	No	480	95.0%	5.0%
Café	No	240	95.9%	4.1%
Restaurant	No	160	99.4%	0.6%
Public house	No	100	65.0%	35.0%

Figure 1: Language use survey locations and observation results

In all of the eight locations, at the end of the OLUS data collection period, the results were discussed with the main gate-keepers of the locations in which the surveys had taken place to discuss the findings and collect information about the linguistic competences of the members of staff in public-facing roles and the position of Gaelic within the organisation, including the conceptualisation of the GLP in the daily practices.

Results and discussion

Social linguistic soundscape

The results of the OLUS show that English is the dominant language across the public spaces surveyed, and as a representative sample, across Stornoway as a whole. English was used in 90.9% of all the interactions recorded in the OLUS. These findings are not surprising; 42.4% of the population self-reported to be able to speak Gaelic, well below the threshold proposed by O Giollagain, Mac Donnacha, Ni Chualain, Ni Sheaghdha, and O' Brien (2007) of 67% of active speakers required for the use of a language to be sustainable in a community. Without any clear linguistic or social markers to identify Gaelic speakers in the community the question, therefore, should not be Gaelic only makes a small contribution (9.1%) to the social linguistic soundscape of Stornoway, but precisely how Gaelic is negotiated as a linguistic norm in those instances where the language is used.

One of the main indicators that was presumed to be a contributing factor to the use of Gaelic in a particular space was the inclusion of the language in the linguistic landscape of a location. The overt inclusion of Gaelic in permanent signage of a location was directly linked to the existence of an organisational GLP and thus the presumed promotion of the language in the goods and service provision of the organisation. Analysis of the OLUS data shows that the average use of Gaelic across locations with and without a GLP was the same, 9.1%, suggesting, in the first instance, that the

presence of language promotion initiatives does not result in a greater use of spoken Gaelic in these locations. Further analysis shows, however, that this situation is more complex than the overall numbers would suggest, and this is evident when the designation of the participants in the conversations was analysed.

Across the study there was, on average, no statistical difference in the extent to which Gaelic was used in conversations involving only members of the public (14.1% in locations with a GLP and 14.9% in locations without language management initiatives). It may be assumed that in the majority of these interactions the individuals involved were already acquainted with each other and had established a set of linguistic norms based on the language competences and ideologies of the various participants in the conversation. Spolsky and Cooper (1991) have suggested that once a particular language is established as the unmarked code-choice between a group of individuals, this will, in almost all instances, be the language that continues to be used, regardless of the situation or circumstances in which the conversation takes place, the so-called 'inertia condition of language choice' (p. 146). This would, therefore, suggest that the language that members of the public use to interact with each other in public spaces is also likely to be the language they use in private domains and this data can, therefore, be used as an important indication of the extent to which Gaelic is used in *Gemeinschaft* domains.

Whereas there was a consistent level of Gaelic language use in conversations involving only members of the public across the two types of locations (with and without a GLP), this was not the case for conversations involving members of staff. In locations with a GLP members of staff used Gaelic in 14.7% of their interactions with other members of staff, compared to no conversations between members of staff in locations without a GLP. This could have been due to language competence of the members of staff; recruitment process for customer interfacing roles in organisations are likely to have favoured Gaelic speakers. Organisations with a GLP might also have expressed an expectation towards members of staff to act as agents of the language policy (Nahir, 1998), with organisations without a GLP not having these same expectations even where members of staff can speak the language. It is important to note that in these circumstances 'no policy is also a policy' – if members of staff are not explicitly given encouragement to use Gaelic, or if the implicit expectation is that the only unmarked code-choice of the organisation is English, this will be the language that members of staff will use. It is interesting to note that the same GLP was in place in three locations included in the OLUS; the main CnES reception area, the sports centre and the library, but that the extent to which Gaelic was used by members of staff varied significantly across these three locations. In both the CnES reception area and the library Gaelic was used regularly in interactions between staff whereas in the sports centre the language was not used at all by this group despite being subject to the same staff recruitment and language promotional initiatives. In the library and the CnES reception area Gaelic had been the long-established linguistic norm between colleagues, even before the implementation of the GLP. In the leisure centre the established linguistic norm between members of

staff was English, despite a number of the individuals working in this location being recorded on the organisation's system as Gaelic speakers, resulting in an "English-only" social linguistic soundscape. This would suggest that the policy and the encouragement by the organisation to use Gaelic, of themselves, are not enough but that personal ideologies as well as the aforementioned inertia condition of language choice, also contribute to the use of Gaelic:

The real language policy of a community is more likely to be found in its practices than in management. Unless management is consistent with the language practices and beliefs, and with the other contextual forces that are at play, the explicit policy written in the constitution and laws is likely to have no more effect on how people speak than the activities of generations of school teachers vainly urging the choice of the correct language (Spolsky, 2004: 222).

The importance of the extent to which members of staff used Gaelic in interactions with each other, and this the overt inclusion in the social linguistic soundscape of the organisation can be seen when analysing the language of the interactions between members of staff and members of the public. There was a direct correlation between the extent to which Gaelic was used in interactions involving members of staff and in interactions involving both members of staff and members of the public (mixed participant interactions). In locations, both with and without a GLP, where members of staff did not use Gaelic to speak to other members of staff, the language was also not used by members of the public to access goods and services in the language. The exception to this was the public house, where there was only one member of staff on duty at the time of the OLUS and where, therefore, no staff-to-staff interactions could take place.

The use of Gaelic by members of staff can be considered to serve two different, but interlinked purposes in terms of signalling that Gaelic is an unmarked code-choice. In a community such as Stornoway where the default language is English, the 'etiquette of accommodation' (McEwan-Fujita, 2010) means that individuals will only use the language(s) they consider to be the unmarked language. The use of Gaelic by members of staff indicates, in the first place, that Gaelic is one of the unmarked code-choices in that particular space, and is the equivalent to an implicit 'active offer' to members of the public (Heller, 1983). Equally important, the inclusion of Gaelic by members of staff in the social linguistic soundscape served a second purpose; it allowed members of members of the public to explicitly identify, in the absence of other linguistic markers, those members of staff who were willing and able to speak the language in a particular location, thus removing the need to actively negotiate Gaelic as a linguistic norm.

Changing language use patterns

The OLUS did not only provide an indication of the extent to which Gaelic was included in the social linguistic soundscape of the public spaces in Stornoway, they can also be used to provide an insight into the changing linguistic practices of Gaelic speakers themselves, especially when comparing the use of language by members of the public and by members of staff according to the age-profile of the speakers. This analysis shows that the use of Gaelic was not equally distributed across the age-groups:

participants aged 60 and over involved in 65.0% of the Gaelic interactions between members of the public, compared to young adults (aged 18 to 30) who were only involved in 8.3% of these interactions. This clear delineation in language use by age group is significant and supports the findings of other studies, NicAoidh (2010), Munro, Armstrong, et al. (2011) and MacKinnon (2011) for example, as well as evidence from the census, in providing a clear indicator that language shift is still ongoing and that ‘Gaelic has ceased being the language used with the greatest facility and frequency’ in young people (Dunbar, 2011, p. 153). Young adult Gaelic speakers are most likely to be ‘new speakers’ (see McLeod & O’Rourke, 2015), having acquired the language in the education system rather than through intergenerational transmission. Will (2012) has suggested that the absence of opportunities to use the language in a social setting, with both the social settings of the education environment and the home dominated by English, has resulted that in this group of speakers not considering Gaelic as a language for social interactions. Smith-Christmas (2016b) has furthermore suggested that the formalised setting of the classroom for language acquisition might have resulted in an association between Gaelic and ‘authority’. This association also has resulted in Gaelic being considered a skill to be acquired, and one that can be commodified and commercialised. This notion is, incidentally, further promoted by Bord na Gàidhlig (n.d.) in its ‘information for parents’ which promotes the acquisition of the Gaelic as offering ‘many career opportunities’ through the opportunities that Gaelic Medium Education provides for young people to become bilingual, rather than encouraging the acquisition of the language as a communicative tool to be used in social interactions. The evidence of the commodification of the language is also clear from the results of the OLUS; whereas young adults were only involved in 8.3% of the Gaelic interactions between members of the public, this age-group was involved in 24.3% of the Gaelic interactions between members of staff, almost three times more frequently than as members of the public.

Conclusion

The OLUS study was the first of its kind in Scotland and allowed for the creation of a unique perspective on where Gaelic is spoken in Stornoway and by whom. The results, in the first instance, have provided an indication of the contribution of Gaelic to the social linguistic soundscape of the town, which indicated that although Gaelic was a minority language, it was audible, to a greater or smaller extent, in all locations surveyed. This would indicate that although the use of Gaelic is changing, the language is still being used as a means of communication, both in *Gemeinschaft* domains as well as the new domains of the language – public services. The data from the OLUS does indicate however that language shift is still ongoing, with Gaelic generally more frequently used in the older age groups than in young adults in interactions between members of the public which can be considered a reflection of the linguistic soundscape in the *Gemeinschaft* domains.

The post-modern era has seen the professionalisation and institutionalisation of Gaelic management initiatives and this has created new opportunities for Gaelic to be used in in formal, H domain interactions. The influence of these initiatives on linguistic practices not only influences who will use

the language but also the extent to which Gaelic is used in the public domain, creating the conditions for 'reverse diglossia' through the language shifting from use in the private to the public domains. Rather than strengthening the language, this might in fact have created a competition between all domains (Romaine, 2006) which might, eventually result in further language loss especially as the results of the OLUS study indicate that the presence of a GLP, often most evidently present in the public spaces of an organisation through the inclusion of Gaelic in the linguistic landscape, did not, of itself, increase the overall spoken use of Gaelic in these locations. In a social linguistic soundscape that is dominated by English, it will be English that is the general 'norm', especially if the participants do not know each other in advance of the conversations, as is likely in interactions between members of the public and members of staff, especially in the more formal context of public organisations. This English as the unmarked code-choice can be replaced by the less categorical 'Gaelic is possible' when the language was overtly included in the public social linguistic soundscape of an organisation. Gaelic was more likely to be used by members of staff in locations with a GLP where there was a clear organisational expectation coupled with staff competence and ideology: the 'capacity, opportunity, and desire' model proposed by Grin (2009) and further developed by Lo Bianco and Peyton (2013). This, in turn, resulted in an implicit active offer to members of the public that Gaelic could be used in the particular locations with the particular members of staff present there, and therefore resulted in a greater use of the language in interactions between members of the public and members of staff.

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