

In search of Gaelic: The social linguistic soundscape as an indicator of minority language use in a bilingual English/Gaelic island community

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ABSTRACT

Gaelic is a minority language of Scotland, with 1.1 % of the population claiming to be able to speak the language, around a quarter of these individuals live in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the most north-westerly of Scotland's 32 administrative regions which consists of 15 inhabited islands and is considered the last remaining heartland of the language. This article looks at the findings of a unique study in the context of Gaelic which explored the social linguistic soundscape of one such island community: Barra. Using observational language use surveys, the results of this study show that the overall use of Gaelic in the public spaces of this community was very low, and, in the absence of clear linguistic or identity markers associated with Gaelic, English was the default unmarked code choice of most spoken interactions. This does not mean however that Gaelic has disappeared from this community altogether: the use of Gaelic is associated with social networks and prior acquaintance of the (preferred) linguistic norm of the participants in the interaction. The dispersed nature of this community means that opportunities for day-to-day spontaneous interactions in public spaces with those that are part of an individual's social Gaelic network are very small, but that community events allow for these linguistic practices to become a more definite feature of the social linguistic soundscape. This highlights the importance of these events for current and future Gaelic language practices.

RESUMEN

El gaélico es una lengua minoritaria de Escocia, con un 1,1 % de la población que afirma poder hablar el idioma; alrededor de una cuarta parte de estas personas vive en Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, la región administrativa más noroccidental de las 32 que hay en Escocia, que consta de 15 islas habitadas y que se considera el último núcleo de la lengua. Este artículo examina los resultados de un estudio único en el contexto del gaélico que explora el paisaje sonoro lingüístico social de una de estas comunidades insulares: Barra. Mediante encuestas de observación sobre el uso de la lengua, los resultados de este estudio muestran que el uso general del gaélico en los espacios públicos de esta comunidad es muy bajo y que, a falta de marcadores lingüísticos o identitarios claros asociados al gaélico, el inglés es el código elegido por defecto en la mayoría de las interacciones orales. Sin embargo, esto no significa que el gaélico haya desaparecido por completo de esta comunidad: el uso del gaélico está asociado a las redes sociales y al conocimiento previo de la norma lingüística (preferida) de los participantes en la interacción. El carácter disperso de esta comunidad significa que las oportunidades de interacciones espontáneas cotidianas en espacios públicos con aquellos que forman parte de la red social gaélica de un individuo son muy reducidas, pero que los eventos comunitarios permiten que estas prácticas lingüísticas se conviertan en un rasgo más definido del paisaje sonoro lingüístico social. Esto pone de relieve la importancia de estos eventos para las prácticas lingüísticas gaélicas actuales y futuras.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gaelic is an indigenous Celtic language of Scotland. External and internal pressures (McLeod, 2020) have resulted in the language being categorised as “definitely endangered” (Moseley, 2010). The decline of Gaelic has not been uniform, with the language increasingly becoming confined to the north and west of Scotland and in particular the group of islands that forms Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CnES) has a population of approximately 26,700 people (National Records of Scotland, 2015b) and is home to around a quarter of Scotland’s 57,375 individuals who self-reported to be able to speak Gaelic in the 2011 National census (National Records of Scotland, 2015a), making it the only administrative region where more than half the population (52.2 %) can speak the language (vis-à-vis less than 6 % for each of the other 31 regions in Scotland) (Mac an Tàilleir, 2010).

Recent studies conducted in CnES (see, for example, Munro et al., 2011; NicAoidh, 2006; Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020) have indicated that, even in this last remaining “stronghold” of the Gaelic language, changes to the linguistic practices in the speech community mean that the sociolinguistic position of the language is more precarious than the impression given by the census data. Writing in

the 1970s, MacKinnon (1977) reported that the use of Gaelic in CnES was extensive: “the tourist may traverse the length of the Outer Hebrides and scarcely see one word of Gaelic written anywhere ... yet, he will hear Gaelic spoken at every turn” (MacKinnon, 1977, p. 170).

However, just four decades later, in the first decade of the 21st century, NicAoidh (2010) found that English had become the main language of communication in CnES, even in situations where it was recognised that Gaelic could be used.

These findings were supported by Munro et al. (2011) who found that “the language of formal meetings and community settings is English” (Munro et al, 2011, p. 9), with study participants reporting a move away from the use of Gaelic and in increased dominance of English in social settings. This “runaway language shift”, as MacKinnon (2011) called it, was driven by a combination of different factors, including long standing (negative) ideologies towards the language, which was, as recently as the 1960s, considered a continuing obstacle to economic development (McLeod, 2010), with English considered the “language of commerce, progress, prosperity — the language of the future” (Durkacz, 1983, p. 222), a view that endures today amongst some young Gaelic speakers (Oliver, 2006).

One of the main sources of data available to evaluate the position of Gaelic today is the language proficiency data (reading, writing, speaking, and understanding) that is collected through the decennial national Scottish census, the last one of which was conducted in 2022 (with the results not currently available). However, the census does not collect data on the frequency or domains of Gaelic language use, making it “impossible to know, and even if, those who self-report to have Gaelic are actually using Gaelic” (Munro, 2011, p. 165). In spite of the limited data, there is a general consensus, amongst both academics and official (government) organisations tasked with supporting and strengthening Gaelic in Scotland, that the use of Gaelic in Scotland is declining, especially in the home, the family and the community (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2018; MacKinnon, 2011; Walsh & McLeod, 2007).

The focus of the formal language management initiatives has been on “increasing the number of speakers and users of Gaelic” (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2012, 2018) but their impact has been difficult to evaluate without an understanding how many individuals use Gaelic in their daily linguistic practices, especially as all Gaelic speakers will also be proficient in (at least) English (Dunbar, 2011). Using the results from one such study set in one of the islands, Barra, which is part of CnES, this article discusses how the use of observational language use surveys (ELUS) in public spaces has been used as a simple, yet contextualised language vitality assessment to gain an understanding of how the different languages in a bi- or plurilingual speech community are used, by whom, and what this means for the language support initiatives. The article will start with a description of the sociolinguistic profile of community in which this study was conducted before discussing the use of observational language use surveys to evaluate the social linguistic soundscape in a bilingual community — both in public

spaces as well as during community events and how this can be used to provide an overview of the manner in which a (minority) language is conceptualised.

2. BARRA

The civil parish¹ of Barra covers the islands of Barra and Vatersay (hereafter: Barra). These islands are the most southerly inhabited islands of CnES and have a population of approximately 1,264 (National Records of Scotland, 2015b). There are two main settlements on the islands, which are linked by a circular 13-mile single track road, with a causeway giving access to the settlements on Vatersay. Public services, including a post-office, adult learning centre, and tourism and leisure facilities for the islands are concentrated in Castlebay, which is also home to the only supermarket on the islands as well as some smaller shops selling homewares and grocery products. Primary education is provided in Eoligarry, on the north-side of islands, and Castlebay, which also has nursery and secondary school provision. Barra is well-connected to the main population centres of Scotland by daily flights, the only scheduled airline service in the world to use a beach as a landing strand, or a five-hour ferry journey, as well as the other islands through a small ferry linking Barra to the neighbouring islands of Eriskay and Uist.

The economy of Barra is based on fishing, with the fish and shellfish processing plant being the largest private employer on the islands. Other key employers include the public sector, tourism, offshore energy production and transport services (MacLeod, 2017). There are several community-owned companies on the island; *Bùth Bharraigh* (The Barra shop),² a local producer co-operative and community hub, providing (tourist) information, a local produce shop and small café, and *Coimhearsnachd Bharraigh agus Bhatarsaigh* (The Barra and Vatersay Community)³ which aims to support local development through attracting investment to the islands. Information about events for residents of the islands is available through the weekly local newspaper, *Guth Bharraigh* (the Voice of Barra). The Gaelic names of these community organisations reflect the position the language holds in this community; Barra was recognised as the “Gaelic community of the year” in 2012 by Comunn na Gàidhlig (a Gaelic development organisation), with the nomination for the award stating that:

“Barra is alive with community events, and these are influenced heavily by Gaelic language and culture. Gaelic is at the heart of all that we do from the nursery to the school, to the workplace and to public services such as local authority and health

¹ The smallest statistical geographical unit used in the census analysis.

² <https://barrashop.co.uk>

³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20210205114537/http://isleofbarra.com/coimhearsachdbharraigh.htm>

services as well as churches, shops, hotels and B & Bs, cafes and the fishing industry. The language is also highly visible throughout the community with Gaelic signs to be seen in places such as shops, offices, hotels, restaurants and even on the golf course.”

(Comunn na Gàidhlig, 2012)

The position of Gaelic at the heart of the community described in this statement would also appear to be supported by the last census data which indicate that 62.2 % of the population could speak the language, the second highest level of self-reported competence in any parish in Scotland after Barvas, on the Isle of Lewis with 64.1 % of the population declaring to be able to speak Gaelic (National Records of Scotland, 2015a). Barra has resisted language shift from Gaelic to English longer than most other parishes in Scotland, with Nicolson (1845) reporting in the *New Historical Accounts of Scotland* that “Gaelic is the language universally spoken, and it is very pure and still unmixed with many English words” (Nicolson, 1845, p. 209). This is supported by data from the first national census which found that 89.6 % of the population were “habitually speaking Gaelic” (Census Office Scotland, 1883). Duwe (2005) has suggested that Gaelic remained the main language of the community until the early 20th century, with only incomers speaking English and Castlebay being the only anglicised part of Barra where ‘merchants, hotel keepers and harbour masters dominated the sociological balance’ whereas in ‘more remote places the language [Gaelic] was universally spoken apart from the odd elementary teachers who by definition did not speak the language of their scholars’ (Duwe, 2005, pp. 6-7).

Economic pressures at the start of the 20th century resulted in outmigration and a significant decline in the population of Barra, falling from 2,545 in 1901 to 1,090 in 1971 (Duwe, 2005). This decrease in the population living on the islands did not impact significantly on the percentage of recorded speakers, which only dropped from 92 % to 83.5 % over that same period (Duwe, 2005). Intergenerational transmission, considered one of the main contributors to language vitality (Fishman, 1991; UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003) remained high in Barra until the late 20th century, with a survey conducted in 1961 showing that Gaelic continued to be the preferred language of 84.4 % of the primary school and 94.6 % of the junior secondary school children (The Scottish Council for Research in Education, 1961).

There are, however, indications that the sociolinguistic profile of Gaelic speakers started to change significantly towards the last few decades of the 20th century, with individuals reporting that children started to be mainly socialised in English, rather than Gaelic, from the 1970s onwards (MacLeod, 2017). The number of monolingual speakers of Gaelic had at this point also dropped to 2 % (20

individuals),⁴ down from 49 % of the population in 1901 (Duwe, 2005). This would indicate that the population of Barra was increasingly becoming bilingual in Gaelic and English and that community interactions increasingly required a knowledge of English (uni-directional bilingualism) (Munro et al., 2011). Furthermore, as suggested by Dunbar (2011), all Gaelic speakers are now bilingual in (at least) English and Gaelic and for the greatest majority English will be the language which they use most frequently and with greatest ease.

Today Barra is the parish with the second highest recorded level of Gaelic speakers in Scotland, 62.2 %, ⁵ although this is a majority of the population, it falls short of the percentage of 67% which was suggested by O Giollagain et al. (2007) for the use of a minority language in the community to be sustainable. These census figures can be used as an indication of what Grin (2003) and later Lo Bianco and Peyton (2013) termed the “capacity”: an individual’s proficiency to communicate in the language, acquired either through intergenerational transmission or educational opportunities. However, as indicated by Munro (2011) and Dunbar (2011), this need not result in the creation of opportunities to use the language or the desire to do so. This study, the first of its kind in this community, allowed systematic data to be collected on the *de facto* use of (spoken) Gaelic and the domains in which the use of the language is “natural, welcome, and expected” (Lo Bianco & Peyton, 2013, p. iv) on Barra. This allowed for an evaluation of the extent to which Gaelic continues to be a significant part of the lived reality of this community, as a glance at the census figures and the overt presence of Gaelic in the linguistic landscape would suggest, or, whether, in fact, this masks a different sociolinguistic reality.

3. METHODOLOGY

Studies looking at Gaelic language use have almost exclusively focussed on questionnaires and structured interviews with individuals across the community⁶ (see, for example, Munro et al., 2011; NicAoidh, 2010; Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020). Participants in these studies were typically asked to record their own confidence and competence, as well as their own (perceived) language use across a range of different domains, on a rating scale. Self-reported language practices, as shown by De Meulder and Birnie (2020) and Ó hIfearnáin (2010), need not necessarily correlate to *de facto* (spoken) language

⁴ The 1971 census was the last one to ask whether individuals could speak Gaelic only, although it is assumed that no individuals can speak Gaelic only, except, perhaps, for very young children growing up in Gaelic-speaking households (Dunbar, 2011).

⁵ After Barvas on the Isle of Lewis, where 64.1 % of the population self-reported to be able to speak Gaelic in 2011.

⁶ With the work by Smith-Christmas (2012, 2016) on family language policy a notable exception.

use. Bourhis and Sachdev (1984) have suggested that the political and social circumstances in which the speech community finds itself can affect perceptions around the use of that language, leading to both under- and over-reporting. In the case of Gaelic, although currently the political climate is, in general, supportive of Gaelic and the language revitalisation efforts, this is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Unequal power-relationships between languages (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995), such as the historical relationships between Gaelic and English, can affect the perceptions of the community itself (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003). These perceptions, which might not be articulated in a formal way nor need to be founded on objective facts, will affect how speakers position themselves. Furthermore, Woolard (1989) has suggested that after years of assimilation with the dominant language, in this case English, the use of a minority language is more likely to be limited in public domains. The result is that occurrences of interactions in Gaelic, even where only a few words or phrases are used, are more likely to be recalled by both speakers and non-speakers of the language, than conversations in English, which are more common. This “phenomenon of misplaced scale” (Urla, 2013) means that respondents to questionnaires or participants in interviews are more likely to over-report the use of Gaelic which can create the impression that the language is more frequently used in (community) interactions than might be the case. This, therefore, calls for methodological approaches which are able to gather data in a rich and contextual manner on communal linguistic practices and that can address any potential gap that might exist between “linguistic competency and linguistic practice” (Altuna & Urla, 2013, p. 224), whilst not relying on the direct reporting of these by individuals within the speech community itself.

One such approach that aims to capture *de facto* linguistic practices in a community *in situ* is by using observational language use surveys. These observational language use surveys (OLUS) have been developed and used in the Basque Country for the *Kale Neurkata*, the street surveys of language use, which are conducted every five years. These street surveys use ethnographic observations to collect information on the spoken use of different languages and the speaker demographic using a language observations survey template in a particular area for a given period. Using the “conversation”, or the “face-to-face verbal interaction among two or more individuals” (Altuna & Urla, 2013, p. 216) as the unit of analysis, these provide a quantification of the extent to which different languages are used in spoken interactions in public spaces of a community (Urla & Burdick, 2018), and by extension in the other domains of the community: the social linguistic soundscape.

The research instrument used for this study was based on the language use survey template used in the *Kale Neurkata* (Altuna & Basurto, 2013; Altuna & Urla, 2013), and was previously adapted for use within the Gaelic context (see Birnie, 2018b). As with the *Kale Neurkata* study, the unit of

measurement was the conversation, defined in this study as a face-to-face interaction between two or more individuals present in the same physical space, involving a verbal exchange of information beyond a basic greeting. This definition was chosen to exclude very brief interactions which might rely on the use of common phrases such as “good morning” or “good afternoon” which are likely to be known and used by both Gaelic and non-Gaelic speakers in the community and might not reflect the wider underlying linguistic practices or competences of individuals. Conversations were delineated by a change of language, a change in participants, or a change in purpose (business or private) — based on the notion that both the context in which the interaction takes place, as well as the topic are associated with certain linguistic norms (Bell, 2002). Any conversations where metrics were missing, or incomplete were excluded from the analysis. Intra- and inter-sentential code-switching was not noted where this involved only a few words or phrases, but where the interaction alternated between the languages, these were recorded as two separate conversations on the language use survey and a note added about the nature of the interaction (see Birnie, 2018b for a detailed discussion of the metrics collected in observational language use surveys).

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Committee at the University of Strathclyde and the fieldwork for this study was conducted during the first week of October 2018. This period was selected as it was the low season for tourists, thus reducing the possibility that those not habitually resident on the island were included in the survey.⁷ The language use surveys were conducted in a variety of different public spaces across the community, including those most likely to be frequented by most of the population such as the local supermarket (the only one on the islands) and the transport hubs (the airport and associated café, and the ferry terminal), as well as other local shops and community facilities. The observational language use surveys were conducted on a “sampling” basis; with each location visited multiple times, at, where possible, different times in the day and different days of the week. The locations were selected to gain information about the linguistic practices of as wide a cross-section of the types of public spaces and population of Barra as possible and included shops, transport hubs as well as leisure facilities. During the fieldwork 600 conversations were noted on the language use survey template and further 70 conversations were observed and recorded in the observational language use survey template during a community event.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Given that Barra recorded the second highest percentage of Gaelic speakers in the 2011 census (National Records of Scotland, 2015a) and won the “Gaelic community of the Year award” a year later

⁷ The nature of this study, with data collection based only on observational methods, means that the inclusion of individuals not resident on the islands cannot be fully excluded.

(Comunn na Gàidhlig, 2012), it would, therefore, have been expected that the language was present in the social linguistic soundscape of the community. However, the data collected in this study showed that only 5.6 % of the interactions included in the language use survey used Gaelic with the remainder of the conversations being in English. Across the public spaces of Barra, without exception, English was very much the dominant language of the community. This would suggest that there is no longer a natural “breathing space” (Fishman, 1991) within the public arenas of this community; a place where minority language is the “unmarked” language and where “minority language speakers have a chance to use their language ‘normally’” (Belmar & Glass, 2019 emphasis by the authors).

The percentage of Gaelic interactions was matched by the percentage of individuals who were observed speaking Gaelic at the time of the study, 5.6 %, significantly lower than the 62.2 % those who report to be able to speak the language in this community. The results from this study have shown that Gaelic speaker numbers might not be an accurate reflection on the linguistic practices: individual (self-reported) competences do not necessarily reflect the communal and public linguistic practices (Urla & Burdick, 2018). This is an important distinction as both the absolute and percentage speaker numbers in a community are commonly used in the discourse around language endangerment to provide an overall indication of the sociolinguistic vitality of a minority language (see, for example, Krauss, 1992; UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003). This potential mismatch will have implications for how the sociolinguistic vitality of the language is imaged, with, as it would appear to be the case on Barra, the speaker numbers creating the impression that the minority language (in this instance Gaelic) is in a more secure position than might, in fact, be the case.

Knowledge of a language is “a matter for the individual” whereas spoken use of a language is by nature a collective matter. Oral use of a language does not depend on the individual, but on the group (Altuna & Basurto, 2013, p. 74). This means that analysing the demographic data from the OLUS can be used to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics that underpin the social linguistic soundscape. A conversation, by the definition applied in this study, involves two or more individuals and for communication to take place these individuals need to speak the same language. In community where bilingualism is not uniform, as is the case with Gaelic on Barra, which means that individuals who speak both languages of the community must decide for each of their conversations which language(s) to use, whereas monolingual speakers do not need to (re-)negotiate this choice. In Barra 37.8 % of the population self-identify as not being able to speak Gaelic, this means that this part of the population can only use English in their interactions with other members of the community. This significantly impacts on the ability of those who can speak Gaelic to use the language in different social situations who can only use the language with other speakers of Gaelic.

Although this would appear to be self-evident, in practice this is made more complex by the lack of linguistic markers to identify Gaelic speakers within the community. As previous studies in Stornoway, the largest urban centre of CnES, have shown (see Birnie, 2018a; Birnie, 2021), bilingual Gaelic / English speakers use Gaelic in conversations with others that are known to speak Gaelic, either through personal acquaintance or through indirect signalling that Gaelic is an accepted linguistic norm (for example through using the language with other individuals in a particular location or space). This would suggest that the use of spoken Gaelic is not isotropic, or based on spontaneous occurrences between any random individuals within the community, but, instead, anisotropic and based on social networks (Martínez de Luna et al., 2006).

This anisotropic nature of Gaelic interactions becomes evident when analysing the social linguistic soundscape of a community event on Barra which was held during the period of the fieldwork. This event was a concert by group of young musicians, with posters (in English only) advertising the event circulated through social media but also visible throughout the community in shops and other locations frequented by members of the public. This (ticketed) event itself was held in a converted church hall in Northbay during a weekday evening and there were approximately 60 individuals present (around 5 % of the community). The event was led by the performers themselves, 2 out the 6 of whom were Gaelic speakers, and throughout the first half of the concert Gaelic and English were used, depending on the song or piece of music performed, with the second half of the concert being introduced in English only. The performers interacted with the audience both before and after the concert, as well as during the interval, using both Gaelic and English (according to their own linguistic repertoire). The members of the public arrived before the event and were greeted (in Gaelic) by one of the performers, there was then an opportunity to exchange news with other members of the community at various points in the evening.

The observational language use survey for this community event gathered 70 entries, and Gaelic was used in 31 of those (44.3 %). Although a relatively small sample, the level of Gaelic language use was closer to the statistically expected level (55.5 %) based on the overall group size, number of conversations and number of participants involved in each interaction (see Altuna & Basurto, 2013; Yurramendi, 2009 for a detailed description of this statistical model). This increased use of Gaelic at community events was also observed in previous OLU studies conducted in different parts of CnES (see Birnie, 2018b) and provides an indication of the complexity of language use in the community. It is important to note that this event was not advertised or promoted as a “Gaelic” event, and the interactions observed were spontaneous and not driven by any underlying language policy or expectation. The performers did, through their use of a Gaelic greeting at the door, provide an explicit indication that the use of Gaelic was welcomed in the space (Heller, 1983), although it is likely that

established linguistic practices and norms between individuals from the community would have already favoured the use of Gaelic (Spolsky & Cooper, 1991).

This concert provided an opportunity for groups of individuals to get together (Cotter, 2001), increasing the chance that a Gaelic-speaking individual will meet another community member who also speaks the language. Gaelic language use is anisotropic — based on social networks and prior knowledge of the preferred linguistic norms of individuals and this signals a further important function of these community events. The changing sociolinguistic profile of the community, where an increasing number of individuals are “new speakers” of the language (McLeod & O’Rourke, 2015), having acquired the language in the educational system, but without social networks where the use of Gaelic has already been established, means that speakers of the language increasingly rely on the “behaviour made available by specific actors in specific contexts to make decisions” (Pujolar & González, 2013, p. 4). Gaelic-using individuals at these community events act as (covert) micro-language planning agents (Nahir, 1998): signalling who is able and willing to use the language. This makes these community events highly significant as part of the language revitalisation and support initiatives: not only do they provide an indication of the social networks in which Gaelic is currently established as the linguistic norm, but also to act as a first step to establishing new social networks for new speakers of Gaelic and thus the continued use of the language.

The importance of this identification process of “who speaks Gaelic” can be seen from a conversation which took place during the community event, where an older member of the community addressed a young child (in Gaelic) to ask if they spoke Gaelic. The child hesitated in their response, at which point the speaker responded with “ach — tha Gàidhlig aig do mhàthair is tha Gàidhlig aig do ghranaidh” [but — your mother speaks Gaelic, and your grandmother speaks Gaelic]. This very short interaction shows the importance of establishing these linguistic norms, and although this interaction might also have taken place in another public space, the chances of this happening would have been very much reduced. Although this interaction was significant “in the moment” — the establishment of Gaelic as the new linguistic norm between these individuals is likely to result in future interactions, regardless of the domain in which they take place, also using the language.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings from the OLUS have shown that the sociolinguistic reality in Barra is complex; although a majority of the population has self-reported to be able to speak the language, the presence of Gaelic in the social linguistic soundscape of public spaces in the community is very low, indicating that English has become the unmarked code-choice of many of the interactions. However, the nature of this community needs to be considered when drawing conclusions around the sociolinguistic vitality of the language. Barra, like many of the communities in CnES, has a population which is spread out

over the island, which means that many of the public domain interactions are isotropic; based on spontaneous interactions between small groups of individuals present in a particular space, at a particular time. This means that the overall statistical likelihood of two or more Gaelic speaking individuals meeting, spontaneously and without prior arrangement, is very low, and for the language to be used, Gaelic must (already) be established as the linguistic norm, or an active offer made to (re-)negotiate Gaelic as the preferred code of interactions, as can be seen from the analysis of the OLUS conducted during the community event.

The findings of this have significant implications for the way the sociolinguistic vitality on Barra (and of Gaelic in general) is conceptualised, providing further proof that individual knowledge of the language need not mean that the language is used in spoken interactions, even in a “Gaelic community” where the language is extensively used in the linguistic landscape. Furthermore, the results show that social networks are the most significant drivers of Gaelic language use in the community, and where there are opportunities for (larger) groups of individuals to get together, this will allow for these linguistic norms to make an overt and significant contribution to the social linguistic soundscape, which, in turn contributes to the formation of new social networks and the continued use of Gaelic.

This means that language policy and planning initiatives should consider supporting and strengthening opportunities for pre-existing social networks to meet and gather, making an active offer to use Gaelic and to ensure that the language is included in the linguistic soundscape of an event to signal its acceptance as a linguistic norm. This also involves creating opportunities for new speakers of Gaelic to establish social networks where the use of Gaelic is the unmarked code-choice, for example the Taigh Ceilidh (meeting house) initiative established in Stornoway, on the Isle of Lewis (the most northerly of the islands that make up CnES) — (see An Taigh Ceilidh, 2023 for more details about this not-for-profit community project). Furthermore, replicating the study in other bilingual communities will allow for a clear evaluation of the extent to which each of the languages is being used. This will give an overall indication of the sociolinguistic vitality, based on *de facto* spoken language use that is independent of perceptions by speakers and non-speakers, ideologies and (formal) language policies of the community.

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