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Minority languages and group identity
Scottish Gaelic in the Old World and the New

John Edwards

Introduction

This chapter examines the relationship between a minoritised language, Scottish Gaelic, and Scottish identity in two English-dominant settings: Scotland and Anglophone Canada. Some historical contextualisation is clearly necessary, and that – together with the geographical scope of the discussion – has suggested that an overview of several case studies is preferable to an emphasis upon only one. Given the focus, the organisation of this chapter departs somewhat from that of the other contributions. Such an overview, combining historical analysis and contemporary research, reveals that the vicissitudes of Gaelic are particularly illuminating when we concern ourselves with matters of language, identity and their relationship. For we have a unique opportunity here to consider the fortunes of a variety that is both an indigenous and an immigrant minority language, and both a European and a North American variety – each of them once having considerable strength. One of the chief findings is, simply, that very similar pressures were (and are) brought to bear on both, that the trajectories of language maintenance, decline and shift are essentially the same in each, that the important factors on one side of the Atlantic are mirrored on the other, and that the story of Gaelic is a rich chapter in the story of endangered languages everywhere. Can one imagine a fully fleshed treatment of applied linguistics, of sociolinguistics or of the sociology/social psychology of language that does not have a consideration of ‘small’ languages at its core?

There are longstanding relationships, in many parts of the world, among language, nationalism and the desire for self-government. Nationalists, especially where the relevant language is ‘small’ or threatened, have long endorsed the words of John Stuart Mill (1964 [1861]: 363): ‘it is in general a necessary condition of free institutions that the boundaries of governments should coincide in the main with those of nationalities’. A recent study by Paterson et al. (2014: 15) found – within an overall population that generally sees Gaelic as a symbolically important part of Scottish identity – ‘strong evidence that, all other things being equal, people who want there to be more Gaelic speakers tend to want full [political] powers’. One might, then, have
reasonably expected that current Gaelic speakers would have endorsed the ‘yes’ option more strongly in the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence.

Unlike the situation in Ireland (and Wales, to some extent), Gaelic in Scotland has not figured prominently in nationalist politics. McLeod (2001: 7) says simply that ‘the Gaelic language does not serve as a talisman of Scottish national identity’. At the end of his recent attitudinal survey (see below), MacCaluim (2002: 335) added that the language is ‘rather peripheral to Scottish life’, that it is not a major political issue, that it is ‘rarely seen or heard by most Scots’ and that the connection between Gaelic and a sense of Scottishness ‘tends to be weak, or even non-existent, in the mind of most Scots’. Not surprising, then, that eight years before the referendum McLeod (2006: 6) observed that ‘support for Scottish independence by no means signals a commitment to Gaelic, and speaking Gaelic by no means signals support for Scottish independence’. (More nuanced analyses, as well as the findings of Paterson et al. 2014, suggest of course that, as a symbolic quantity, the language is or has become rather less peripheral; see also Market Research UK 2003.) The reasons for what some have seen as a Scottish anomaly have historical roots, of course. The upshot is that the rise of the nationalist effort coincides with a severely diminished Gaelic-speaking population.

The issues surrounding ‘small’ and endangered languages have become important in recent years and, within academia, two basic stances coexist. Both scholar-activism, on the one hand, and committed but more detached application of expertise, on the other, are united in their concern for minority or ‘at-risk’ languages.

More is at stake here than a communication system tout court. All languages also have very powerful symbolic significance as bearers of culture, as vehicles of group myth and narrative, and as markers of ethnic or nationalist belonging – in short, as carriers and indicators of identity. It might be argued that this looms larger among activists than among linguistic recorders and archivists – and it is certainly true, of course, that language promoters and activists outside the academic cloisters are animated largely by a concern for vernacular continuity that rests quite solidly upon conceptions of group identity. While there are many things that can act as markers of identity, and many things that can galvanise and give focus to action, the influence of language is often important. Language-as-communication is certainly relevant, but it is when powerful allegiances involving language-as-symbol are added that people are more willing to go to the barricades, as it were. This is what gives minority-language contexts their particular significance: it is not that communicative and symbolic facets of language are unique to these settings, but that their parlous nature throws matters into starker relief. While minority-language dynamics are always of intrinsic interest, then, they can also illuminate features of much wider occurrence or application and, to repeat, the broadest of these always centres upon group identity.

To examine the relationship of Gaelic, as a minority language, with identity, the following sections will first give an historical overview of Gaelic in Scotland and Nova Scotia and then examine key large-scale case studies examining attitudes to Gaelic in these settings. This will be followed by a discussion of what conclusions we can draw about the role of Gaelic in Scottish identity.

Overview

Gaelic in Scotland

The pattern of Gaelic in Scotland is a familiar one: a language that once had considerable regional dominance was forced into steady retreat, pushed into ever more remote regions as a shrinking ‘Celtic fringe’ resulted from the policies of ‘internal colonialism’ (Hechter 1999). As
Gregor (1980), Durkacz (1983), Withers (1984) and many others have noted, the overall picture of Gaelic in Scotland has been one of decline for some time. Its gradual demise can be dated to the late fourteenth century, when it began to lose its position as both a national variety and one broadly acceptable in the corridors of influence. The hardening of the division between Highlands and Lowlands contributed to the increasing isolation of Gaelic and its association with an alien and ‘troublesome’ population. But then, as the Highlands became better known and more travelled, ‘civilising’ and anglicising thrusts further accelerated the language shift. Reliable data are hard to come by before the mid-nineteenth century, but Withers (1984: 253) tables a decline from the 50 per cent of the population who were Gaelic speakers in 1500 to only about 2 per cent five centuries later. From the 1881 census – the first to ask about Gaelic fluency – to that of 2001, the number recorded as Gaelic speakers dropped from about 250,000 to about 59,000. Gaelic monolingualism is now ‘vestigial, prevalent only among pre-school infants and the oldest women’ (Withers and MacKinnon 1983: 113). Most speakers of the language now live out with the traditional areas – the largest concentration, of about 11,000 people, is found in and around Glasgow. The reduced heartland, in the Western Isles, still has a population of whom 60 per cent can speak Gaelic, but it is not immune to broader trends. The latest census suggests that only about one-quarter of the youngest children now speak it. And, while two-thirds of speakers say that they can read Gaelic, and half that they can write it, McLeod (2006: 5) observes that many ‘do not necessarily do so frequently or comfortably’.

Today, more than 98 per cent of Scots do not speak Gaelic, and McLeod (2006: 7) writes that more of them ‘would know the French words Petit and rouge than their Gaelic counterparts, beag or Dearg’. He claims that the most common attitude towards Gaelic is of ‘mild support … shallow and vague … and does not necessarily translate into backing for proactive language revitalisation measures’ (ibid.: 5). It is possible to understand the new Gaelic Language Act of 2005 as part of this mild and vague support, this time at the level of officialdom. The legislation grants official status to the language for the first time, but – as with many such nods in the direction of minority-language communities that one finds around the world – the phrasing is rather weaker than activists would like: Gaelic is described as ‘an official language of Scotland commanding equal respect with the English language’ (my italics) – and McLeod (2006) notes that the word has no clear and obvious legal meaning.

A brief note on education: McLeod (2006) provides some general notes on the growth of Gaelic in education – essentially, no room for it at all when state schools were established in 1872 and some very limited introduction by the close of the twentieth century. Earlier (2001), he reported that 60 schools (or ‘units’) were providing Gaelic-medium education to about 1,900 primary-school pupils. These ‘units’ are classrooms within English-medium schools, which means children receiving their education in Gaelic surrounded by English speakers; there are only a couple of all-Gaelic primary schools. (See also Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2007 for further information on education.)

**Gaelic in Nova Scotia**

Following the ‘clearances’ of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, large numbers of Gaelic speakers were either directly or indirectly forced from their land. Many moved to the urban Lowlands and soon there were sizeable groups of Gaelic speakers in Edinburgh, Glasgow and other towns and cities; by the end of the nineteenth century, indeed, the Oban Times was calling Glasgow the ‘capital of the Highlands’ (see Withers 1991, 1998). But many went much further afield, to Australia, New Zealand and, most notably, to the United States and Canada.
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The first major destinations in the United States were Georgia, New York and North Carolina. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, Gaelic had lost its place as a community language. In Canada, on the other hand – and most notably in Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia – the language remained important for another three or four generations. This was essentially because of greater geographical remoteness; Cape Breton was an actual island until a permanent link was opened in 1955, and the community there retained a remarkable cultural cohesion. It is also the case that, after the American Revolution, most direct migration was to British North America (Newton 2001, 2003), and so most of the later emigrants to America came from or via Canada. So Canada – and Nova Scotia in particular – thus became the North American centre for the Gael, with Cape Breton Island as the new-world homeland (Newton 2005).

The major settlement of Nova Scotia by Gaelic-speaking Highlanders began in the 1770s, in a number of waves. While some 25,000 had arrived earlier, large-scale emigration to Cape Breton began after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. By mid-century, the Scots had become the biggest ethnic group in Nova Scotia, and emigration continued apace – and not only to Nova Scotia: Prebble (1969) writes, for example, that 58,000 left for Canada in 1831 and 66,000 in 1832. Even allowing for the fact that these numbers include Lowland Scots, they are very significant, given an already shrunken Highland population. By the mid-nineteenth century, Gaelic was the third language of Canada and, in Cape Breton Island, about three-quarters of the total population (of 100,000) spoke Gaelic (see Stephens 1976; Mertz 1989). Serious, if unsuccessful, arguments were made for official status for the language.

With increasing literacy and mobility, and with growing pressure from English, however, Gaelic increasingly became associated with backwardness and rurality. It was now a language of ‘toil, hardship and scarcity’, while English reflected ‘refinement and culture’ (Dunn 1953: 134). Taking the 1921 census as a starting point, MacLean (1978) claimed that Gaelic decreased by about 50 per cent every decade thereafter. Precision is unattainable, of course, but MacLeod’s (1958) estimate of 30,000 Gaelic speakers in Cape Breton Island in 1931 seems corroborative. In a recent estimate, Kennedy (2002) suggested that about 500 Gaelic speakers remained in Nova Scotia, with perhaps half that number native users. Small as the figures have become, their significance shrinks further when we realise that many self-reported Gaelic speakers are far from fluent and that the numbers – whatever levels of competence they comprise – certainly do not correlate with ordinary usage patterns. Thus, when we read in the 2011 census of 1,275 Gaelic speakers (including 300 mother-tongue speakers), we should be a little wary, as we ought when enthusiastic spokesmen tell us of a Gaelic renaissance (allegedly due, in part, to the recent government establishment of a Gaelic Affairs division within the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage) (see Taber 2014). In Gaelic, the division is called Iomairtean na Gàidhlig, the first word of which would be more accurately given in English as ‘enterprise(s)’ or even ‘campaign(s)’. It is worth noting, incidentally, that the overarching government agency used to be called the ‘Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage’; the linking of the last three nouns here suggests something of contemporary bureaucratic thinking, and the slight alteration in the department’s name does not indicate any sort of sea change in official impulses. The insightful work of McKay (1992, 1994) on the modern and quite conscious development of Nova Scotia ‘tartanry’ in the service of tourism is illustrative in this regard. (Tourism, incidentally, is now part of the government department devoted to economic and rural development.)

While Nova Scotians of Scottish ancestry comprise about 32 per cent of the region’s 950,000 residents and while the very name of the province is historically revealing, it is now a predominantly Anglophone area, and has been for some time. Indeed, as Ian McKay
John Edwards (Taber 2014) has pointed out, Scottish roots are more extensive in Prince Edward Island than they are in ‘New Scotland’.

So far, we have overviewed the historical literature. In the following section, we turn to a number of important case studies to see what these have to tell us about the relationship between Gaelic as a minority language and Scottish identity.

**Research**

**Gaelic in Scotland**

Three large-scale research studies provide some indicators of the present state and likely prospects of Gaelic in Scotland. The first, an investigation undertaken by Alasdair MacCaluim (2002), focused upon adult learners of Gaelic. In the main section of his study, MacCaluim distributed (English-language) questionnaires to a large sample of learners, receiving completed forms back from 458 people (a response rate of 42 per cent), most of them Scottish residents. Most of the respondents were middle-aged or older, with few falling into the ‘strategically important 16–25 age group’ (ibid.: 323). There were disproportionate numbers of well-educated, middle-class and left-learning informants (including teachers, clerics and medical and service workers). About 20 per cent of the sample were Catholic (the latest census reveals that about 16 per cent of the general population claim Catholicism). About one-quarter of the Scottish sample had Gaelic-speaking parents and about one-third reported grand-parental competence in the language – most, that is to say, could not claim any reasonably recent ancestral involvement with Gaelic. Levels of reported competence were modest; MacCaluim writes of the predominance at the ‘less advanced end of the Gaelic learning scale, due to a high drop-out rate amongst learners and the inadequacies of the Gaelic learning infrastructure’ (ibid.: 237). Helping the survival of Gaelic was reported as a very important reason for learning it, considerations of identity and ‘roots’ also figured significantly, and a substantial proportion implied that learning Gaelic was more or less a ‘hobby’. More immediately instrumental uses for the language were suggested much less frequently.

The other two studies were more official in nature. Commissioned by the BBC and Bòrd na Gàidhlig – the official governmental body with responsibility for the language – Market Research UK (2003) conducted interviews with just over a thousand respondents. This was a national sample, taken with due regard to region, age and gender. The findings revealed that, while almost 90 per cent reported no knowledge of Gaelic, about two-thirds agreed that the language was an important aspect of Scottish life. Most said that they favoured children learning Gaelic if they and their family wished, and more than half agreed that Gaelic-medium programmes should be expanded. About 30 per cent of the interviewees said that they might consider learning Gaelic in the future. Eight years later, another language-attitudes survey was officially commissioned (Scottish Government Social Research 2011). Once again, a national sample of about 1,000 respondents was drawn, ‘representative of the adult population (aged 16 plus) in terms of sex, age, employment status and socioeconomic group’ (ibid.: 4). As with the earlier survey, only about 10 per cent claimed some knowledge of Gaelic – but a more pointed inquiry revealed that only 2 per cent had any real degree of fluency. Most knowledge of the language was concentrated in the Highlands and Islands. Almost 60 per cent felt that Gaelic was important, or very important, for their sense of national identity. In the main, the results of the 2003 and 2011 surveys do not greatly differ. (It is worth remarking that both are stronger on data-reporting than they are on interpretation; it is also worth noting that – as with similar
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‘series’ of surveys elsewhere – comparisons across time are sometimes hindered by inconsistency in questions asked, a point made by MacKinnon 2011.)

When we consider the findings of these three investigations – and other, smaller-scale inquiries not reported here – a pattern emerges that is familiar to all those who work in those minority-language contexts in which the use of the ‘original’ or ‘ancestral’ variety has become vanishingly small. First, apart from a small group of language activists – both within and without academia – the mass of the population no longer use or intend to use that variety. (Surveys like the ones mentioned here often suggest some slight interest in learning the language – but this is a task rarely undertaken, of course. Relatedly, programmes for language learners typically have high drop-out rates.) Second, there generally exists fairly widespread, but passive, goodwill towards the future prospects of the language. Third, individual conceptions of national allegiance often make room for the language, in what we might style a ‘symbolic’ sense. Fourth, there tend to exist both a rural heartland where native speakers may still be found and urban regions to which some of these speakers have migrated and in which there may also be pockets of language learners (sometimes termed ‘secondary bilinguals’).

**Gaelic in Nova Scotia**

There has been very little systematic and reliable research on Gaelic in Nova Scotia (or in the rest of North America, for that matter). Kenneth MacKinnon (1979, 1982, 1985) conducted fairly extensive fieldwork in the 1970s, focusing upon two rural communities in Cape Breton – one largely Protestant, the other mainly Catholic. His general observations: greater fluency was found among older Gaelic speakers, there was little transmission of the language to children, favourable attitudes and aspirations for the future of Gaelic were associated with fluency (and such language activism as could be found), and a broad but rather amorphous ‘cultural loyalty’ was much more evident than linguistic attachment. (Interestingly, MacKinnon reported that a handful of Gaelic monolinguals – women in their 80s and 90s – were still to be found in the mid-1970s).

Aside from one or two minor studies (Dembling 1991, 1997; Newton 2005) – whose findings are rather vitiated by small samples and, more importantly, by mixed and sometimes haphazard methodological procedures – we can note here the paucity of reports that have substantial research components. A Gaelic steering group commissioned, for example, the ‘impact study’ produced by Kennedy in 2002 – a lengthy and useful historical and contemporary overview. This report includes an insightful section on Gaelic organisations which ‘have come and gone in Nova Scotia’ (ibid.: 232), adding to an earlier observation that revival efforts themselves have come and gone over the years – all involving ‘culture and identity, the authentic and the ersatz, right and wrong. There are clashes of ideology, egos and financial interests’ (Dembling 1997: 2). Kennedy’s description of organisations, of conferences and of gatherings of activists, enthusiasts and stakeholders mainly serves, however, to highlight the triumph of enthusiasm over cooler assessment. In a report commissioned by the provincial Gaelic Affairs Office, Dunbar (2008) also provides a useful overview; he goes further than Kennedy inasmuch as – drawing heavily upon the insights and opinions of Fishman (1991, 2001) – he makes some specific recommendations for language revitalisation. Like the Kennedy report, however, this later one provides no new research findings.

A more thoroughgoing investigation was reported in my own study (Edwards 1991); it involved three groups of informants, and probably remains the most detailed (relatively) recent study of Gaelic abilities, attitudes and usage in Nova Scotia. The first group (‘G’) – fluent and
near-fluent Gaelic speakers – had already participated in a folklore project undertaken by the Celtic Studies Department of St Francis Xavier University. A list of 89 potential respondents was drawn up, of whom 50 completed questionnaires. The second group (‘GS’) was comprised of members of the Cape Breton Gaelic Society, and included Gaelic speakers as well as those with an interest in the language and in Scottish heritage. Drawing upon membership lists and upon meeting attendance registers over the previous five years, a total of 251 names was assembled; of this number, 30 proved impossible to contact and 132 failed to return the questionnaire. Completed forms were therefore received from 89 informants. The final group (‘GL’) was drawn from those members of the New Glasgow and Antigonish Highland Societies who were actively studying Gaelic – 20 in all.

The following topics were covered in the questionnaires: demographic information and Gaelic background, Gaelic competence and use, evaluations of Gaelic, the current status, transmission and survival of the language, and (for the GL group) information dealing with language learning. Respondents were encouraged to add comments, either of a general nature or relating to specific questions. Depending on the format of the question, results were assessed with chi-square and analysis-of-variance techniques. Limitations of space mean that only the most salient findings can be reported here.

The first thing to note is that, while their ages ranged from 22 to 89, most respondents were at least 60 years old. Men and women were equally represented in all three groups. The language learners were the best-educated: almost half had at least some third-level education and a number of them were teachers. Many in the G and GS groups simply described themselves as ‘retired’, and most were born in Cape Breton. Only three of the learners were born there, however, although all the others were mainland Nova Scotians. More than 80 per cent of all respondents knew where their forebears originated, the great majority being of Highlands and Islands ancestry. Most knew, too, when their families had emigrated (mainly between 1810 and 1830). More than half in group G were native Gaelic speakers, about 16 per cent in GS and 11 per cent among the learners (GL group).

Fluency in understanding, reading and speaking Gaelic was of course significantly greater among G informants. As well, the three groups were differentiated in terms of immediate forebears speaking Gaelic: 96 per cent of those in group G reported that their parents and most or all of their grandparents knew Gaelic, about 78 per cent in GS and 60 per cent among the GL informants. No differences across groups were found, however, with regard to the possession of Gaelic-language reading materials at home (about 70 per cent reported having such material). The linguistic superiority of the G group did not extend to writing in Gaelic: there were no group differences here, and the general level of writing ability was not great. Gaelic-language usage, as well as basic language preference, was correlated with reported linguistic ability. In no instances, however, were respondents able to report extensive or even regular daily use.

A number of questions were of course directed to opinions of the current status, the transmission and the survival of Gaelic in Nova Scotia. More than 80 per cent of all informants agreed that older people tend to see the language as more important, but it was also generally agreed that, in the future, Gaelic would continue to be an important feature of the linguistic landscape. Indeed, there appeared a very slight tendency to view Gaelic as increasing in importance. Further probing revealed that this was largely based upon hope, although many respondents mentioned various agencies, classes and programmes that they believed were active and to some degree successful in sustaining the language. When asked to list reasons that could be given to those thinking of learning Gaelic, about half mentioned its role in preserving a distinctive heritage, while another (and not unrelated) half cited enjoyment, knowledge for its own sake and
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the beauty of Gaelic. Fewer than one in ten argued for the use of Gaelic in conversation.

When those in the GL group were probed a little further about their current reasons for studying Gaelic, we discovered that no one mentioned actually speaking the language. However, when questioned about possible future use of their acquired competence, about half (again) did say that they hoped to be able to converse with other Gaelic speakers. As well, about 17 per cent mentioned learning Gaelic so as to be able to read in the language.

Here are some of the more interesting comments added by informants; in each case, they represent the views of several in each group.

I would like to see a revival in the Gaelic language in Nova Scotia but I do not think there is enough interest among the younger people.

(Group G respondent)

When I attended school in 1915–20 you got a strapping with a leather strap if caught speaking Gaelic.

(Group G respondent)

Emphasis upon the school as central to the survival of the language was commonly expressed. A frequently expressed opinion was reflected in these words from two GS group members:

Sorry to say, but I believe that Gaelic will continue to decrease without the language being spoken in the home. I don’t see much future for Gaelic even when a few short courses are taught in schools … the home use is what counts.

(Group GS respondent 1)

In my youth, people speaking Gaelic were considered backward and were discouraged from speaking it.

(Group GS respondent 2)

While several respondents seemed a little dismissive, on the grounds that the language now has only ‘cultural value’, some other comments on the intertwining of Gaelic with other social features were more positive. One wrote that ‘in the interests of religion, music and culture, I commend the valiant efforts that are being made to preserve the Gaelic heritage’. And the long comment of another on the same matter seems worth reproducing here:

It seems your questions are directed wholly at the Gaelic language. The continuance of Scottish culture will not be promoted or should not be promoted on Gaelic language. It is not where it is at with the prevailing interest … Language is the living culture of a people. However, for the Scots many other aspects of their culture are near and dear to their hearts. Emphasis on the Gaelic language will I feel bring small returns. Studies in Celtic history I think are very important. Music (pipes, drums, fiddle) – all this is part of the make-up of our culture.

Discussion

While it is true that more research is desirable, on both sides of the Atlantic, the case studies presented in this chapter suggest a number of generalities that seem to apply in both contexts. These are based upon the findings that we do have, informed by historical analysis and reinforced by
our knowledge of minority-language settings in other parts of the world. This chapter has been unable, of course, to do more than hint at the relevant literatures here. With appropriate caveats in mind, then, here are some rough conclusions that may reasonably be drawn.

Gaelic is a seriously threatened language, many of whose chapters — perhaps most — have already been written. While sporadic attempts have been made to teach the language, generational transmission is now very fragile. The general and, one imagines, largely sincere goodwill that is easily documented remains a passive quantity. One is reminded of what Nancy Dorian (1986: 561) — the scholar of East Sutherland Gaelic and a strong supporter of language maintenance — once pointed to: ‘the deliberate non-transmission of the ancestral language to young children … a theme repeated with dreary frequency’. She has also said that parents may now sometimes be criticised by their children for not passing on the linguistic torch (see Crystal 2000: 106). In fact, regrets in this connection are commonly found in small-language communities and may be understood as a linguistic variant of the idea — popularised by Marcus Lee Hansen in his studies of immigrants in America — that ‘what the son wishes to regret, the grandson wishes to remember’ (Edwards 1995: 112). While ‘wish’ may not be quite the mot juste here, the pattern is familiar in both immigrant and indigenous minority-group settings.

While Gaelic may no longer be so widely dismissed as an uncultivated rural variety associated with ‘toil and scarcity’ and while many of its speakers — especially ‘secondary bilinguals’ — are now city folk, its heartland remains on the periphery. In the eyes of many, it remains on the fringe, both geographically and sociologically. While commentators in a polite Canada have not generally expressed themselves very forcefully in this matter, their transatlantic counterparts have often been blunter. Scottish journalists, among them Allan Brown (2000), Peter Clarke (1995) and Allan Massie (1998), have been regular and acerbic critics of renewed attention to the language; while I won’t reproduce their intemperate remarks, titles like ‘Who needs the Gaelic?’ and ‘From Gael force to farce’ are indicative of their attitudes. While writers like these seem to have been given a rather smaller podium lately, a potent combination of ignorance and indifference continues to dog Gaelic, as indeed it does for many threatened varieties.

Even the most committed of language activists would not argue for Gaelic monolingualism: bilingual or diglossic arrangements, perfectly theoretically plausible, are the obvious ways in which an at-risk variety can be maintained without jeopardising full participation in the majority-English mainstream. However, as this and many other minority-group contexts show, ‘bigger’ languages often steadily eat away at the domains of ‘smaller’ ones: a sort of linguistic Gresham’s Law is at work. An important distinction highlights what might be termed ‘domains of necessity’: meeting every Wednesday evening to speak German is not quite the same as having to speak it to earn a living. Many commentators have pointed out that hope always remains for minority varieties as long as they continue to predominate in the family domain. But even this most intimate of settings is susceptible to the linguistic pressures just beyond the garden gate (see Edwards 2009). So, while diglossia is certainly the norm in some situations — largely in those where neither of the languages in contact has a clear and broad dominance across domains — in many contact scenarios, it seems that people will not keep up two languages indefinitely when one comes to serve more and more across all those ‘domains of necessity’.

An awareness of history coupled with close examination of contemporary trends — supplemented and reinforced by such research as exists — suggests that halting the decline of Gaelic is an unlikely proposition. Historically, languages have frequently disappeared completely, and the very existence of some is confirmed only through classical reference. Nowadays, of course, even the most threatened variety is unlikely to vanish without trace (if sufficient documentation effort can be mustered). The difficulty here rests above all on a truth which is not as universally
acknowledged as it ought to be (with apologies to Jane Austen): the decline of a language is a symptom of larger social forces and, without attending to the latter, it is unlikely that much of a permanent nature can be done to shore up the latter. You don’t treat measles by putting sticking plaster on the spots.

It is also the case that, on both sides of the Atlantic, revival efforts have been in the hands of a minority within a minority. Dorian (1986: 560) observed that native speakers of languages in decline often exhibit quite low levels of ‘language loyalty’, and she mentions a ‘lightly regretful pragmatism which gives rise to general protestations about the regrettable loss of the language unaccompanied by efforts to halt that loss’. There is often a deeper, if vaguer, ‘cultural loyalty’. There are obvious reasons why ordinary people are unlikely to be activists, and one is reminded, in fact, of Gellner’s (1964: 1962) observations regarding nationalistic revitalisation efforts: while ‘the self-image of nationalism involves the stress on folk, folklore, popular culture [and we could of course highlight the ancestral language here] … genuine peasants or tribesmen … do not generally make good nationalists’. Citing ‘peasants and tribesmen’ may not strike quite the appropriate note here, but if we bear in mind the frequent revivalist use of words like ‘genuine’ and ‘authentic’ to describe linguistically beleaguered populations, then the sense remains. It is also worth noting that the behaviour of such groups does not always support simplistic black-and-white pictures of dominance and subordination. Those same Gaelic speakers who largely acquiesced in the English education of their children in the nineteenth century were, as Withers (1988) has pointed out, strongly opposed to the imposition of catechists and ministers who knew no Gaelic. He goes on to say that ‘many Highlanders actively sought English through schooling as a means “to get on in life” yet they would petition the General Assembly for Gaelic-speaking clergy and protest at any shortage’ (ibid.: 165). More generally, the history of protest and agitation concerning matters of the land, of farming and of crofting again suggests the inaccuracy of many naive assessments. (I do not mean, of course, to downplay the broad-brush effects of domination but rather to point out that, while some developments provoked reactions, others did not. And these ‘others’ generally included language matters.)

Summary

This chapter has given an overview of the history of Gaelic in the Old World and the New, surveyed a number of case studies examining language attitudes to Gaelic in Scotland and Nova Scotia and examined the relationship of Gaelic, as a language, with Scottish identity. The history of the Gaels on both sides of the ocean suggests that language shift – and a lack of general interest in revival efforts – has come to sit quite easily with a strongly continuing sense of Scottish identity. This in turn suggests that such linguistic interest as remains is of a symbolic nature for the great majority of people. Valuing ancestry, and maintaining a sense of ‘groupness’ – while at the same time engaging in vernacular-language shift – is by far the most common arrangement that both indigenous and immigrant minority groups come to.

Related topics

Historical perspectives on language and identity; Identity in variationist sociolinguistics; Language and ethnic identity; Identity in post-colonial contexts; Styling and identity in a second language; The future of identity research: impact and new developments in sociolinguistics.
Further reading
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