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The nature of minority languages: insights from Scotland

Abstract: The Gaelic language in Scotland presents a useful case study for the conceptualisation of minority languages. A key issue has been the extent to which Gaelic is understood as belonging to a discrete minority within Scotland and a bounded territory in the northwest of the country, or as a national language of significance to all of Scotland. Using the most obvious, demographic criterion, Gaelic is an extremely minoritised language, now spoken by barely 1.1 % of Scotland's population, and not spoken by a majority for at least five hundred years. Yet Gaelic was formerly the principal language of the Scottish kingdom, until processes of minoritisation began in the twelfth century. The concept of Gaelic as Scotland's 'true' national language has been retained and refined, but co-exists with other interpretations that see Gaelic as belonging only to the territory that retained Gaelic after language shift occurred elsewhere. In recent decades, revitalisation initiatives (loosely connected with growing awareness of Scottish cultural distinctiveness and moves towards self-government) have promoted Gaelic as a language of national significance, an important resource for all Scots. Contemporary government policies advance this understanding even as speaker numbers continue to decline and many Scots view Gaelic as distant or irrelevant.

Keywords: Gaelic, Scotland, minority language, national language

As this special issue demonstrates, varying definitions of the term 'minority language' have been developed, and indeed there are varying terms in circulation in academic and policy discourse: 'minority language', 'minori(ti)sed language', 'minor language', 'lesser-used language' and so on (Salcedo, this volume). Whatever term and definition are chosen, Gaelic in Scotland must surely qualify as one of the encompassed language varieties. Gaelic has lacked political, economic, social and discursive power for at least eight hundred years, and has not been spoken by a majority of Scotland's population for at least five hundred years;

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the most recent census data, from 2011, indicate that only 1.1 % of Scots can speak the language (National Records Scotland 2015). Nevertheless, both the historical situation of Gaelic and its current sociolinguistic and policy position reveal significant complexities that can help inform the conceptualisation and interpretation of the minority language phenomenon more generally. In twenty-first century Scotland, Gaelic is simultaneously understood as the patrimony of a distinct quasi-ethnic minority within Scotland, as a territorially limited language, and as an important aspect of Scotland's national cultural wealth, to be valued by all and made available to all. This article will examine some of the different elements that make up these competing ideas, with a view to clarifying the conceptualisation of minority languages more generally.

1 Gaelic as a minority language: power and demography

Demography and power are crucial elements in any definition or conceptualisation of minority languages and any assessment of the status of a particular language variety. In terms of both demography and power, Gaelic has clearly become minoritised, although the dynamics of this minority status have varied considerably over time.

Although a small country, Scotland has a complex linguistic history. During the first millennium in particular it was a multi-ethnic, multilingual land, in which Gaelic was spoken alongside several other languages (the now-extinct Celtic languages Pictish and British; Old English; and Old Norse). By the eleventh century, Gaelic had spread throughout almost all of what is now mainland Scotland, as the language of the first unified Scottish monarchy, the kingdom of Alba that emerged from the ninth century onwards (Woolf 2007). The linguistic situation was complex and dynamic, however; at no time was Gaelic the exclusive language of the country, and it came into use and fell out of use at different times in different areas (Clancy 2011).

Language shift in the south and east of Scotland from the twelfth century onwards, driven by a range of economic and political factors, meant that Gaelic was displaced as the language of institutional and socio-economic power. The royal court, aristocracy and trading class came to adopt Scots (the distinct Scottish variety that descended from Old English), which became the vernacular in what became known as the 'Lowlands', the most agriculturally productive and economically dynamic region of the country (Millar 2018). From the fourteenth century Gaelic was largely confined to the mountainous north and west of

Scotland (which became known as the 'Highlands' or *Gàidhealtachd*, meaning 'Gaelic language and culture area') (McLeod 2004: 15–18). From at least the late 1300s, Lowland commentators began to express strongly negative attitudes towards Highlanders (Gaels), who became stigmatised as backward, violent and even barbarous. These prejudices intensified in the later sixteenth century, when the Reformation transformed Lowland Scotland into a bastion of reformed Protestantism, and new ideologies of kingship and government gave new impetus to the imposition of 'civility' on the *Gàidhealtachd*. Increasingly repressive measures were adopted, notably the Statutes of Iona (1609), which placed strict controls upon Highland chiefs and required them to educate their heirs in the Lowlands (Withers 1984: 22–30). The Scottish Privy Council declared in 1616 that Gaelic was "one of the cheif and principall causis of the continewance of barbaritie and incivilitie amongis the inhabitantis of the Iles and Heylandis" and should "be abolisheit and removit" (Masson 1898: 671–672).

According to the most useful understanding of the term, then, which conceptualises minority language status in terms of power (Yagmur, this volume), Gaelic can be said to have become a minority language in Scotland in this late medieval period when the dominant social and economic strata of society ceased using Gaelic, and Scots became established as the language of government and commerce in the dominant regions of the country. Scots in turn yielded its dominant position to English following the Reformation and the Unions of 1603 and 1707, by which Scotland was united with England (Millar 2018).

An alternative, arguably simplistic conception of 'minority language' considers the term 'minority' in its conventional arithmetical sense (i. e. less than half) (Salcedo, this volume). It is not possible to give an accurate estimate of the proportion of the Scottish population that would have spoken Gaelic at the maximal point (probably around 1200), although it seems clear that it was a substantial arithmetical majority.[1] In some areas of southern Scotland in particular, Gaelic seems to have been used only for a relatively short period by the land-owning class (Nicolaisen 2001: 173–174) and it is not known how widely Gaelic would have spread throughout society. In the pre-modern period rulers were generally unconcerned with the language use of the labouring classes, however (Wright 2016: 28), and the issue of social diffusion is not addressed in the surviving sources which shed light on the sociolinguistic situation of Scotland at this time.

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[1] Note that the modern borders of Scotland were not fixed until the fifteenth century and a considerable portion of what is now 'Scotland' was not part of the Scottish kingdom at the time Gaelic reached its maximal spread.

A comment by the historian John Mair (Major), writing in 1521, suggests that even though it had long since been displaced as a language of national institutional power, Gaelic might still have been spoken by an arithmetical majority of the Scottish population until about 1500. Mair noted that "at the present day almost the half of Scotland speaks the Irish[2] tongue, and not so long ago it was spoken by the majority of us ..." (Mair [Major] 1892 [1521]: 48–49). In the centuries that followed the proportion of Gaelic speakers continued to decline. Since the middle of the eighteenth century, a destructive combination of military repression, dramatic economic change, heavy, sometimes forced emigration, persistent material deprivation, education in English and myriad cultural pressures have brought about ongoing language shift from Gaelic to English within the *Gàidhealtachd* (Withers 1984; MacKinnon 1991). The proportion of Gaelic speakers in Scotland's population has dropped very considerably, from about 20 % in 1806/8 to 6.3 % in 1891, 1.9 % in 1951 and a mere 1.1 % in 2011 (Withers 1994: 111; National Records Scotland 2015).

Another way in which Gaelic can be considered a minority language in quantitative terms is the fact that an increasing proportion of Gaelic speakers live in areas where they form a minority, often a tiny minority, of the local population. According to the 2011 census, only 24.3 % of Gaelic speakers were living in parishes in which more than 50 % of the population could speak Gaelic and 43.3 % were living in parishes in which less than 1.1 % of the population could speak Gaelic (National Records Scotland 2015: 7, 72–82, 2014: Table KS206SC). Such marginalisation limits the opportunities for Gaelic use and the potential for Gaelic maintenance and transmission; it also intensifies the perception of Gaelic as a minority language in terms of the lived experience of individual speakers. This increased dispersal of the Gaelic population makes territorial conceptions of the language – discussed in the next section – less meaningful and less workable in terms of policy and provision.

2 Gaelic as a territorial language

Speakers of minority languages are often concentrated in and associated with specific regions of a polity, typically far away from centres of population and

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2 The term 'Irish' (or 'Erse' in Scots) was used, exclusively, as the label for Gaelic in Scots and English sources from *c.* 1500–*c.*1750. This usage is sometimes depicted as an indicator of the marginalisation of Gaelic: that Gaelic was presented as belonging to a different country rather than to Scotland. Scottish Gaelic and Irish became distinct varieties during the Middle Ages, although there is an ongoing linguistic connection between the two, sometimes deliberately promoted by language activists (McLeod 2008).

power. The traditional territorial association of Gaelic speakers with the *Gàidhealtachd* provides an example. At the same time, the minority language may remain the principal variety in particular localities even as it is marginalised within the wider polity. In the centuries following the de-Gaelicisation of the 'Lowlands', Gaelic remained the dominant and often exclusive language of the *Gàidhealtachd*, a relatively large area some 500 kilometres from end to end. Although precise figures are unavailable, an overwhelming proportion of the population of this region would have been monolingual Gaelic speakers. Gaelic would have been the principal language of social and economic interaction, although in some domains, especially for purposes of writing, Scots (or English) played an increasingly important role over time (MacCoinnich 2008). In contrast to some other European minority languages, such as Breton, the aristocracy in the *Gàidhealtachd* continued to use Gaelic, although it became progressively anglicised from the seventeenth century onwards. It can thus be argued that in the *Gàidhealtachd* itself, Gaelic did not function as a minority language. As a result of the language shift within the *Gàidhealtachd* that began in the eighteenth century, and the increasing reach of state institutions, including schools (state-run from 1872 onwards), this dynamic began to break down. Emily McEwan-Fujita has summarised the consequences as follows:

> As English became the exclusive language of the state, the schools, and literacy in Gaelic-speaking areas, it seems likely that many Gaelic speakers in local community contexts gradually stopped seeing Gaelic as the language of knowledge, learning, and a wider Gàidhealtachd or Gaelic-speaking region, and instead began to see Gaelic as only a local, spoken language most suitable for interaction with kin and neighbours. (McEwan-Fujita 2010: 93)

Thus Gaelic become a minority (or minoritised) language within the *Gàidhealtachd* itself, and over time the trajectory of language shift meant that the Gaelic-speaking area became progressively smaller and increasingly distant from the main centres of Scotland's population. This language shift is now at an advanced stage, and even in the strongest rural districts where Gaelic was the normal language of social interaction until the 1960s and beyond, community use of the language has declined very considerably and intergenerational transmission has nearly ceased (Mac an Tàilleir et al. 2011). In some areas of the Western Isles (Outer Hebrides) more than 70 % of the local population can still speak Gaelic, but this narrow arithmetical calculation is the only metric by which Gaelic could not be classified as a minority language even in its 'heartland'.

3 Gaelic as an ethnic minority language

Minority languages are often linked to minority ethnicity, as the existence of a minority language in a particular polity is often the consequence of the absorption of an ethnically distinct population. Sámi in the Nordic countries and Sorbian in Germany provide useful examples here. There is an ethnic dimension to Gaelic in Scotland, but the dynamics are rather more complex, given that Gaelic was once the dominant language of the country as a whole. Lowland writers from the fourteenth century onwards depicted the Highlanders as distinct from other Scots not only in terms of language but also in relation to "ways of life and conduct", as John Mair expressed it (Mair [Major] 1892 [1521]: 48–9). There were fundamental differences between Highlands and Lowlands in terms of economy and social structure as well as custom and belief, although of course there was no rigid barrier between them and there were important points of variation within the *Gàidhealtachd* itself. In the most extreme expression of this discourse in the nineteenth century, the Highlanders were even conceptualised by some Scottish writers as belonging to a racial group distinct from the 'Teutons' of Lowland Scotland (Stroh 2017: 185–211). Although modernisation and assimilation have greatly diminished this sense of difference, some still perceive the Gaelic community as a distinct ethnic group within Scotland in terms of language, culture, sense of tradition and way of life (McLeod 1998; Scottish Government 2018: 52). This 'quasi-ethnic concept of the Gael' (Oliver 2004: 2) and bounded, essentialist sense of Gaelic as being embedded in (and confined to) a specific place and social context have weakened considerably in recent decades, however, as the language has declined in its last 'heartlands' and the social base of the language has expanded, in particular with the increasing presence of 'new speakers' of Gaelic who have learned the language in school or in adulthood, a phenomenon discussed below (Glaser 2007; Oliver 2004).

4 Gaelic as a national language

Minority languages tend not to achieve the status of national language, absent the redrawing of borders or some kind of regime change (typically through political upheaval) that fundamentally alters the demographic basis or social role of the language. Even so, Gaelic is often depicted as a national language in Scotland, but this status is ambiguous and contested. Although opponents of Gaelic promotion in contemporary Scotland sometimes argue that the significance of the language correlates directly with its current demographic strength

(a mere 1.1 % of the population), there are more sophisticated ways to assess the importance of the language in the national culture, identity and imagination. Gaelic clearly has relevance and resonance at a national level in Scotland, but these understandings and the attendant discourses have changed considerably over the centuries.

A long-standing theme in traditional Gaelic poetry is that Gaelic was the original and true language of Scotland, now abandoned and betrayed by the Lowlanders (McLeod 2003). The sixteenth-century poet Walter Kennedy declared, for example, that Gaelic "suld be all trew Scottis mennis lede [language] " (Kinsley 1979: 88). This traditional view continues to have some vitality in Gaelic discourses; for example, a pamphlet published by the Gaelic organisation An Comunn Gaidhealach argued that the Gaels 'were ... the first Scots ... and ... could well claim, as they did in the past, to be the most Scottish of all Scots' (MacKay 1976 [1966]) Such claims would not resonate with, and might indeed baffle or offend, the non-Gaelic majority in Scotland.

Gaelic began to receive greater respect from anglophone Scottish culture in the context of romantic movements that developed from the later eighteenth century onwards (Stroh 2017: 113–140). In an era when national pedigrees were valorised, Gaelic became venerated as the ancient and original language of Scotland. This romantic vision co-existed with competing, much more hostile discourses, however (Fenyö 2000), and indeed it was in this period of 'modernisation' that Gaelic-English language shift gathered pace in the *Gàidhealtachd* (Withers 1984).

From the late nineteenth century, some Scottish nationalists, in line with the language-centred variety of nationalism that prevailed throughout Europe at the time (Mar-Molinero 2000: 88), began to articulate arguments that Gaelic was the true language of Scotland and thus the potential vehicle of national liberation. The organisation Clann na h-Alba proclaimed in 1900 "[i]t is therefore the duty of all Scotsmen and Scotswomen to support in all possible ways the revival of that Scottish Gaelic tongue which, alone among languages, can mark us out as a nation apart" (Clann na h-Alba 1900). Scottish nationalism in this era was a very marginal movement, however, and these ideas about the role of Gaelic had little influence on policymakers or the wider Scottish public (Finlay 1994; Drost-Hüttl 1995). For most, Scottish distinctiveness and autonomy were successfully embedded and expressed in particular national institutions within the British state and empire rather than through a separate national language (Paterson 1994).

The Gaelic strain in Scottish nationalism then began to lose force from the 1930s, although some Gaelic activists continued to promote this idea of Gaelic as the national language of Scotland. A key obstacle was the Highland-Lowland

divide and most Scots' lack of awareness of, or refusal to accept, the claimed national significance of Gaelic. In frustration, the activist Seumas Mac a' Ghobhainn wrote in 1977 that

> the Scottish people have been almost completely alienated from their own language. There is a general and depressing lack of awareness that Gàidhlig is the ancestral Scottish language, that it was the majority language in Scotland until comparatively recent times, and that it still holds the key to both the personal and national identities. This ... is a condition of cultural amnesia. (Mac A' Ghobhainn 2000 [1977]: 16–17)

Perhaps surprisingly, strong versions of the idea of Gaelic as national language have occasionally found their way into mainstream political discourse in contemporary Scotland. In 2007, the then First Minister of Scotland, Alex Salmond, who does not speak Gaelic himself, expressed the hope that Gaelic could become "a truly national language", declaring that

> as we look to secure our ambitions for this nation's future, we must recognise that a vibrant Gaelic language and culture are central to what it means to be Scottish in the modern world.
>
> My Government's ambition is to see Gaelic emerge again as a truly national language — and to support a flourishing Gaelic culture and community as part of a resurgent Scotland. (Salmond 2007)

Strong, exclusionary claims about the national status of Gaelic are now rare in public discourse in Scotland, however. Since the 1980s, a more nuanced and inclusive depiction of the place of Gaelic in Scottish culture has prevailed. It has become commonplace to frame Gaelic as a key aspect of Scottish cultural distinctiveness, but without any claim of exclusivity or even pre-eminence. A small linguistic move demonstrates the rhetorical change. In 2011 Arthur Cormack, chair of Bòrd na Gàidhlig, the statutory body now charged with the promotion of Gaelic, told the Scottish Parliament's Education Committee that the Bòrd recognises the role of Scots and 'local dialects' in Scotland and "promotes Gaelic as *an* official language of Scotland. We have not, and will not, promote Gaelic as *the* language of Scotland" (Cormack 2011).[3]

The potential role of Scots as national language represents a confounding factor in relation to the national status of Gaelic. Scots is much more widely known and used than Gaelic is, but is hampered by a different set of constraints. The 2011 census showed that 30 % of the Scottish population claimed to be able to speak Scots (Scots Language Centre 2013: [1]), but there are perennial, indeed circular debates about whether Scots constitutes a language in its own right or

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3 'Local dialects' here refers to regional varieties of Scots such as Doric or Orcadian.

merely a (sub-standard) 'dialect' of English and about the appropriateness of standardisation (Costa 2017). These debates are familiar from many other so-called 'kin tongues' in Europe (Millar 2005: 54), such as Low German and Occitan, and the case of Scots might be considered typical rather than *sui generis*. Compared to Gaelic there is very little provision for the language, or expressed demand for provision, in fields such as education, broadcasting and public administration. The principal problem for Scots is the extent to which speakers of Scots, and the wider Scottish population, see it as a *language*, and as a unified language in particular (TNS-BMRB. 2010). In contrast, there is no real debate concerning Gaelic's status as a distinct, unified language, but the various ways in which it functions as a *minority* language are complex and can be interpreted in different ways. For some, Gaelic may serve more effectively as a national language for Scotland by virtue of its *Abstand* status vis-à-vis English: as the Scots activist Norman Easton commented ironically, "Gaelic is selectit for the 'true' language simply because it is sae obviouslie distinct fae English, the evil tongue o English pouer" (Easton 1982: 18).

Bòrd na Gàidhlig was established as a statutory body by the *Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005*. This legislation established a language planning frame-work, much influenced by the *Welsh Language Act 1993*, to provide structure and coherence to the various promotional initiatives that had been put in place since the 1980s, responding to a heightened level of awareness and activism that had begun to gather pace in the mid-1970s (Dunbar 2006).

A key feature of the Gaelic Language Act is its national, Scotland-wide reach. Earlier, unsuccessful proposals for legislation, in 1981 and 2003, had limited their scope to Gaelic-speaking areas of the country. The 2005 Act extends to all Scottish public bodies, any of which may be required to produce a Gaelic language plan specifying the measures it will take to promote the language. Gaelic campaigners were insistent on this national reach and the Scotland-wide status of the language. This principle is set out in the norm underpinning the Act, that Bòrd na Gàidhlig is to work "with a view to securing the status of Gaelic as an official language of Scotland commanding equal respect with the English language" (Dunbar 2006; *Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005*: preamble, s. (1)(3)).

The intersection of policy change and demographic change has also brought about a new dimension to the issue of territoriality for Gaelic. In effect, Gaelic is becoming a more national language in terms of the distribution of speakers and in terms of Gaelic activity. As discussed above, the traditional Gaelic-speaking area has become smaller and progressively less Gaelic over time. This language shift has had the side effect that the proportion of Gaelic speakers who live in the Lowlands has been increasing steadily. In 2011, only 52 % of Gaelic speakers

were living in the traditional *Gàidhealtachd* (most of which has long since shifted to English) and 48 % in the Lowlands. This trend is being accelerated by the rapid growth of Gaelic schools in the cities, especially Glasgow and Edinburgh, and by the growing phenomenon of urban 'new speakers' of Gaelic (McLeod, O'Rourke and Dunmore 2014). It is notable here that Gaelic promotional initiatives, especially in relation to immersion education, have been directed at all parts of Scotland. From the outset of Gaelic immersion education in 1985, it has been promoted to all and not just to Gaelic-speaking families or families with recent Gaelic heritage, thus serving to slowly break down the understanding of Gaelic as a quasi-ethnic language. Urban areas, especially Glasgow, are increasingly identified as 'energy centres' for the language. These shifts have changed the social base for the language somewhat, so that it can no longer be taken for granted that a Gaelic speaker will have family connections to Gaelic-speaking communities or identify with the traditional culture or way of life in those communities (Glaser 2007; MacCaluim 2007).

Several recent surveys of the Scottish population have found that a large proportion of Scots – far larger than the 1.1 % who speak the language, or indeed the rather larger proportion with a recent family history of Gaelic speaking – see Gaelic as an important element in Scottish culture, heritage or identity (West and Graham 2011; Paterson and O'Hanlon et al. 2013; Paterson and O'Hanlon 2015; Chhim and Éric 2017). Results vary substantially, of course, according to the precise question asked. West and Graham (2011: 41) found that 78 % agreed with the proposition that 'Gaelic is an important part of Scottish culture' and only 11 % disagreed, while Chhim and Éric (2017: 940) found that when asked 'How important is Gaelic for Scottish identity?', 13.3 % of respondents said 'very important', 34 % 'fairly important', 34.5 % 'not very important' and 18.2 % 'not important at all'. There is a significant mismatch between respondents' perception of the importance of Gaelic for Scotland and for themselves personally; in West and Graham's study only 22 % of respondents reported that Gaelic was important for their own personal identity (West and Graham 2011: 36), while O'Hanlon, Paterson, Ormston and Reid found that only 24 % of respondents saw Gaelic as important to their own heritage (although 76 % saw it as important to Scottish heritage generally) (O'Hanlon et al. 2013: [3]–[4]).

Although surveys have consistently showed that hostility to Gaelic is confined to a relatively small section of the population, rejection of the language is deeply ingrained in Scottish culture and can be traced back many centuries, as explained above. The issue of territoriality often comes into play here; support for Gaelic promotional measures in Gaelic-speaking areas is consistently higher than support for Scotland-wide measures (e. g. O'Hanlon et al. 2013: [4]–[5]). In this respect the decision in 2010 by the national railway company, First ScotRail,

to add Gaelic forms of the names of all stations in Scotland has been particularly controversial. This practice began in the 1990s but was confined to the lines serving the Highlands; complaints became much louder when Gaelic forms of Lowland place names began to appear, as it challenged established, if not necessarily historically accurate, understandings that Gaelic had never been spoken in these areas (e. g. Wilson 2017).

The conceptual difficulty of a minority language being assigned 'national language' status arises in a rather different way in the Republic of Ireland, where the Irish language has a much greater cultural importance and symbolic significance than linguistic demography would suggest. The ideological construction of Irish as the national language, following the language revival movement of the late nineteenth century, works to block the conceptualisation of Irish as a minority language, even though only 1.5 % of the population use the language on a daily basis outside the education system (Central Statistics Office 2017: 66) and the language has developed a strong territorial association with the small, scattered officially designated Irish-speaking areas (collectively known as the *Gaeltacht*) (Ó hIfearnáin 2006). In particular, this ideology of Irish as the 'national language' has led the Irish government to refuse to ratify the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages on the grounds that Irish is neither a regional nor a minority language (Ó Murchú 2016: 10), even though there is an obvious argument that it is one or the other, or indeed both.

5 Conclusion

The case of Gaelic in Scotland provides a useful test for the conceptualisation and definition of 'minority languages'. Superficially its status as minority language is obvious and straightforward, given its demographic fragility and historical marginalisation, but closer examination and different perspectives (both synchronic and diachronic) reveal considerable complexities and potentially incompatible interpretations. Taking into account the additional problems relating to Scots as a variety that presents quite distinct issues, the small country of Scotland constitutes a particularly useful site for analysis of these sociolinguistic phenomena.

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