OPEN ACCESS

University of Dundee

SOILLSE 2016

Kanaki, Argyro

Published in:
OGMIOS

Publication date:
2016

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal

Citation for published version (APA):
Kanaki, A. (2016). SOILLSE 2016: Saving the Gaels? OGMIOS, (60), 5-7.

SOILLSE 2016: Saving the Gaels?

By Argyro Kanaki

University of Dundee

This article is about multilingualism and how promoting it as an asset in society can provide new ways of understanding language learning which help Gaelic sustainability. The paper that this article derives from was presented at the SOILLSE Conference 2016 in Glasgow. The conference topic was "Small Language Planning, Communities in Crisis", and the aim of the paper was to bring closer those new perspectives offered by multilingualism. I aim here to present to readers of Ogmios a 'plurilingual' perspective which could be used to favour Gaelic sustainability. This article first presents some facts about Gaelic language use in Scotland, and, then, points to some ways that plurilingualism can assist Gaelic sustainability.

Gaelic has become more prominent in Scotland in recent decades, especially since the Scottish Parliament passed the Gaelic Language Act in 2005. Broadcasting, Gaelic medium schools and public affairs all mean that the language use is increasing. However, although Gaelic seems to be playing a more lively role in Scottish society, there is little research evidence about the attitudes of people in Scotland to Gaelic. During the last few years and after the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSA) had collected some data about public attitudes towards Gaelic in Scotland in 2012, some new research reports have appeared. In Phipps and Fassetta's report, we see that people put strict geographical barriers in their heads about Gaelic language. "In Scotland, the language issue is seen in narrow geographical terms – it's spoken up there – North West Highlands" (Phipps and Fassetta, 2015:18). According to Paterson and O'Hanlon (2015) Gaelic is seen more as a Scottish symbol rather than a communication tool, a language that can still be used. Gaelic is seen as cultural heritage, but, unfortunately, people seem not to link this heritage with language use, or language revitalisation.

In another report, in 2014, Milligan Dombrowski et al. present the issue of teacher shortages for Gaelic Medium Education, and they reminded us that teacher shortages result in restriction to language provision, and discontinuity in individual learning experience. At the same time, the Curriculum for Excellence (the new national curriculum for Scottish schools) and 1+2 Approach (a research informed European initiative that promotes the learning of two foreign languages for all children, in addition to their own mother tongue) are encouraged and supported by the Scottish government. Despite good efforts from some teachers to encourage language learning in general, and to promote Gaelic learning through the 1+2 Approach initiative, neither CfE nor 1+2 Approach policy initiatives allocate sufficient

time to satisfy language proficiency goals, or promote language progress. Language teachers are hampered by time restrictions and curriculum overloading.

The adoption of a multilingual theory of language teaching in education, the plurilingual approach, could be a solution to these issues. It is time to shift how we see language, and how we sensitise our society to language issues and cultural perspectives. Scotland is a monoglot habitus, and having a home in English only, prevents Scottish people, first, from a full appreciation of language. Logically, as well as practically, it is not possible to have a rounded perception of 'language' if you are only at home in one. Focussing on **all** existing language skills in a community rather than on a particular language, helps people abandon monolingual assumptions and practices, and predispose themselves to favour language learning and use in the community. According to the 2011 UK census, the most popular place of birth for adult residents of Scotland born outside the UK was Poland, around 55,000 people and more than twice as many folk as were born in Ireland. The General Teaching Council for Scotland has just started efforts to licence the teaching of Polish in Scottish schools despite the large number of unofficial Polish schools in various parts of the country (Martowicz and Roach, 2016). This is another set of observations about monoglot theorisations of language and their use in Scotland that should make us think more seriously about Gaelic revitalisation and sustainability. Education systems which demonstrate the complex and technical resistance which Scotland has presented to Polish, effectively acting against languages in their own communities, cannot be expected to institute relevant and effective continuation and support measures for smaller languages, especially those without a reservoir culture for their immediate support.

Schools are the first places for adopting a plurilingual approach. All of what we learn at school amounts to new words, and new ways to use them. Teachers could raise student awareness in classroom learning and be more explicit with language teaching by analysing, comparing and contrasting mother tongue with the second language that students learn. Students should also be encouraged to reflect on their own language development, and competence, cognition and metacognition in their mother tongue, in their second language, and for all their school subjects. This is about understanding the subtle differences between concepts in science as much as in history, learning experiences which are much more readily available to students who understand how concepts work in their own and other languages. Students beginning to cope with levels of abstraction in the wider curriculum can most directly be encouraged to a closer and deeper analysis of language by identifying links with previous learning experiences in another language. Language, in a plurilingual sense, should become the learning and teaching centre, enabling focus on cultural aspects, historical and social development, on grammar competence, on vocabulary learning, on text analysis, and on communication. Studying any language cannot on the plurilingual view, be considered as an old fashioned, boring or out of date task for the schoolroom. On the contrary, it should be considered as a mediating tool that

links with the culture and the wider community. Learning Gaelic does not allow you to talk to one additional person, but on the plurilingual view it radically alters **how** you can talk to them and must change **all** of what you can talk about. It will also give you new insight as to how your own mother tongue actually works, and what you can and cannot say with it.

Apart from schools, there needs to be a shift in teachers' language training. Teachers should be made aware of a multilingual educational context where they can use the mother tongue as well as a second language (any language they teach) as tools for the development of learning competences and positive school experiences. Teacher language training should also be focusing on contemporary and innovative language approaches such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (teaching school subjects such as science, history etc through the medium of another language); vocabulary work as part of literacy development; story-telling and drama through another language and its cultural possibilities. This shift in teacher training would allow the introduction of a true multilingual and multicultural educational context, particularly in schools where teachers and students accept language diversity as a real phenomenon in their community, not a marker of fatal difference. They will see themselves as active parts of a plurilingual and multicultural community away from practices and mentalities that a preponderant single languages establish.

A plurilingual approach requires that we abandon the monolingual organisation of school environments and educational institutions. It promotes the integration of all community languages into the canon of **officially accepted** and **taught-legitimate** school languages. In this way, people will be sensitive to linguistic matters and will not only accept but promote all languages in the community. Gaelic language speakers will then have guaranteed ownership of their own language capital. Plurilingualism could work as tool for revitalisation and sustainability of Gaelic in the Scottish communities.

References:

General Teaching Council Scotland (undated) Registration in Polish, http://www.gtcs.org.uk/mygtcs/messages/mygtcs-registration-in-polish.aspx

Martowicz and Roach (2016) *Polish Language Learning in Scotland Key facts and opportunities*, Cross-Party Group on Poland at the Scottish Parliament, Education Subcommittee, http://www.appla.org/pliki/polishlanguagescotlandreport.pdf

Milligan Dombrowski, L., Danson, E., Danson, M., Chalmers, D. and Neil P. (2014) Initial Teacher Education for Minority Medium- of-Instruction Teaching: the Case Study of Scottish Gaelic in Scotland, *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 15:2, 119-132.

Paterson, L. and O'Hanlon, F. (2015) Public Views of Minority Languages as Communication or Symbol: the Case of Gaelic in Scotland, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 36:6, 555-570.

Phipps, A. and Fassetta, G. (2015) A Critical Analysis of Language Policy in Scotland, *European Journal of Language Policy*, 7:1, 5-27.

Scotland's Census (2011) National Records of Scotland, http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/

Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (2012) *Public Attitudes to Gaelic in Scotland*, http://www.scotcen.org.uk/media/176045/public-attitudes-to-gaelic-in-scotland-2012.pdf