The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community: A Comprehensive Sociolinguistic Survey of Scottish Gaelic
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This book presents the results of a substantial study completed by a team of colleagues, most of whom are at the University of the Highlands and Islands. The analysis considers the use of Scottish Gaelic and the extent of its transmission, drawing largely upon quantitative survey-based data collected from people in the north-west of Scotland – including the Western Isles, Staffin (north Skye) and Tiree. Since the research was conducted under the banner of Soillse, a government-funded sociolinguistics research network for Scottish Gaelic, the team had access to support from relevant councils and schools. This facilitated community buy-in to their work. The overall message here is that community use and transmission of Gaelic in the area studied are very limited, and that analysis of census data alone may paint an overly optimistic picture. The book concludes with some recommendations for a sea-change in policy and the creation of a community trust for Gaelic. It has received much attention in the media in Scotland (and beyond), and has sparked lively debate in the Gaelic-speaking community and the Scottish political sphere.

The book rests upon analysis of the 2011 national census data (Chapter 2), a survey dealing with children in pre-schools (Chapter 3), a survey with secondary-school pupils aged 15-18 (Chapter 4), and detailed case-study surveys of three small islands in the Western Isles (Chapters 5 and 6). A strength of the research is that the authors surveyed both Gaelic-speakers and non-Gaelic-speakers, so as to give a holistic account of Gaelic among all inhabitants in the survey area. The findings from their surveys allow the authors to flesh out responses to census questions, of which only a few relate to Gaelic. Focus group discussions with teenagers and community meetings allowed some qualitative data to also be considered. Another strength of the work is the response rate in surveys, which is at near ceiling levels. As well as quantifying Gaelic use and self-reported abilities across locations, the authors also quantify affiliation with ethnolinguistic identity categories such as ‘Gael’, a useful addition to the literature.

The main findings of the work will come as little surprise to those working in Scottish Gaelic, or to those familiar with similar community studies, but the extent of the surveys conducted here and the engagement with the community are to be applauded. It is also notable that, since publication, the authors have continued to engage with the communities via consultations, media involvement, social media and a website. Much of the media attention to the book produced alarmist headlines such as 'Scottish Gaelic language "could die out in 10 years"' (CNN 2020). This refers to a prediction made about the changing nature of elderly networks of Gaelic speakers who acquired the language through family transmission in particular island communities. The headlines seemed dramatic, and it must be noted that the claim is somewhat more muted in the book itself.

When engaging with the detail of the book, I was struck by some shortcomings, with particular regard to (a) the representation of previous literature; (b) the explanation of quantitative methods and their links to qualitative findings; (c) data visualisation; (d) methods presented in Chapter 6.

(a) Representation of previous literature

Ó Giollagáin *et al.* term their research approach as mainstream minority-language sociolinguistics, which appears to refer to quantitative, survey-based work. Qualitative approaches are considered 'divergent' (9) and, in particular, the authors do not agree with work conducted within the new-speaker framework. They see this paradigm as a 'chronic example of a socially dissociated academicism' (415) and 'superficial' (305). Further, they suggest that such work normalises the decline of communal use of Gaelic as well as 'ignoring or obfuscating the implications and realities of that same decline' (10). This interpretation is, I feel, misleading and misrepresentative. An alternative view of work conducted with new speakers would be that revitalisation has led to different kinds of speakerhood, which can be recognised in a positive light. This reflects an inclusive approach that recognises the differing linguistic needs of speakers in contemporary minority-language settings.

There is little recognition in this book that different perspectives on minority languages are valid approaches with contributions to make. This is ironic – especially in the case of minority-language revitalisation, where everyone is presumably working towards the

same goal. Clearly, there is a need for scholarly debate and it is often helpful to criticise and revise terminology. However, I think that this book crosses a line separating scholarly debate from needless insult; consider, for example, the dismissive reference made to O'Rourke and Ramallo (2013) on page 305.

(b) Explanation of quantitative methods and links to qualitative conclusions

The authors have sometimes chosen to use inferential statistics to compare various results against one another, to test correlations, and to model trajectories. The methods used are not adequately justified, or not explained at all. For example, the authors write that 'all six correlations in Table 4.10c are statistically significant' (147), but no indication is given of the method used to ascertain this. Further, χ^2 tests are carried out (presented on page 175), but not on all possible combinations – just a sub-set – and no correction is made for multiple comparisons across the same data-set. The multiple-comparisons problem is also an issue in the series of χ^2 tests reported on page 355; see Winter (2020) for a discussion of this problem, and Austin *et al.* (2006) for illustration.

When modelling trends across time, several methods are employed. For example, in Section 2.4.5, the authors use a series of adding or subtracting percentages to predict future numbers of Gaelic speakers. It would have been helpful to use a more robust modelling strategy here (such as regression analysis). Figure 5.32 aims to model language use in apparent-time and shows a 'polynomial linear trend line' fitted to the data. There is no explanation or justification for the use of this method.

Finally, the analysis presented in Chapter 2 uses Standardised Incidence Ratios (SIRs) to compare the number of Gaelic speakers in an area to the population of that area, via an age-adjusted ratio. SIR is usually used to predict and monitor disease prevalence – considering whether an area has a disproportionately high cancer rate, for instance. I have not seen it applied to sociolinguistics before, aside from some previous work on Irish presented by Ó Giollagáin *et al.* (2007). Cluster analysis is then performed on the SIR values and communities are labelled as 'Moribund', 'Interstitial' and 'Residual' (66). These terms reflect very emotive qualitative judgements, and are used thereafter to refer to the state of

Gaelic in particular places. Evidence would be needed to provide a link between a certain SIR value and qualitative conclusions such as ‘moribund’.

(c) Data visualisation

The book contains numerous representations of the data collected from the surveys, and also analysis of previous censuses. In a work of this size, it is perhaps inevitable that there will be occasional typos. However, at times the figures are difficult to interpret. For example, Figures 3.4 and 3.5 compare the languages pre-school children speak to staff, and to each other, respectively. Both use a percentage scale on the y-axis. But the scale in Figure 3.4 extends to 90% and the scale in 3.5 to 100%, which makes the two figures difficult to compare. This is the case for numerous figures throughout the book. Similarly, y-axis labels are missing in Figures 2.2 to 2.5. Several of the line graphs contain multiple sources and levels of information, as well as averages, making them difficult to interpret (e.g. Figures 6.15 and 6.16).

(d) Methods in Chapter 6

As stated above, this is a wide-ranging piece of survey work. The triangulation of multiple data sources is an excellent approach to the research questions. However, I find it impossible to review this work without commenting in some detail on the methods used in Chapter 6. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the entire population of three small islands, chosen as case studies because of a high proportion of Gaelic speakers. The islands are specifically named, and each is home to about 100 to 200 people. Chapter 5 presents useful analyses of self-reported Gaelic abilities and attitudes to Gaelic. We then read, in Chapter 6, that the authors appointed one ‘well-informed local advisor’ (308) for each island. This person was asked to assess the Gaelic ability of every resident on their island (on a scale) and to categorise speakers into one of six types – such as ‘native speaker’, ‘semi-speaker’ and ‘learner’ (309). This method is problematic at best, and ethically concerning at worst.

First, there is no explanation of the prior background and training given to the advisors. Designing and administering proficiency scales is not a trivial matter, and their

users will understandably bring their own prior experience and expectations to ratings, even when given training; see Kuiken and Vedder (2014). There is some indication in the text that advisors did not understand or use the full scales provided for speaker types. The data presented in Figure 6.6 (assessments of Gaelic ability), and Figure 6.27 (assessment of speaker types) are almost identical, which suggests that advisors conflated the two to a large extent. Second, advisors were asked to predict the future language abilities of infants aged 0-1, which seems nonsensical. Third, these are small communities with very few children. Advisors were asked to make judgements about relatively personal matters concerning a family's language practices and the linguistic abilities of children, seemingly without parental consent. I was very surprised to see no space dedicated to discussing the clear ethical implications of this method. In my opinion, the whole work would be stronger without this chapter.

Chapter 7 brings together the findings arising from the different methods, Chapter 8 contextualises them with models of revitalisation, and Chapter 9 suggests some policy changes for the future – namely, setting up a community trust in the Western Isles to be responsible for Gaelic revitalisation. It is helpful that the book provides suggestions for the future as well as outlining challenges for the present. The intense focus on familial transmission in the north-west of Scotland could lead to criticism that other parts of the Gaelic community are not represented – including speakers living in the lowlands, Nova Scotia and other locations – particularly since the word 'comprehensive' in the book's sub-title does suggest a broader coverage. Perhaps the work would be better seen, however, as providing an analysis of one context of Gaelic speakerdom without detracting from other locations in a zero-sum game. The book is an important wake-up call for Gaelic development in the north-west of Scotland, and will be widely used as a data source.

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