Gaelic language erosion and revitalization on the Isle of Skye, Scotland.

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Gaelic Language Erosion and Revitalization on the Isle of Skye, Scotland

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the language loss of three generations of a Gaelic-speaking family located on the Isle of Skye, Scotland. Participants' linguistic skills were assessed via language ability tests. We focused on plurals, passives, and tense, and we examined synthetic forms. The results confirmed that erosion is occurring in all areas investigated; in particular, the synthetic nature of Gaelic causes problems for younger generation speakers. This suggests weak language transmission through the generations as well as the dominance of English in the community. Through an interview with an expert informant, we also explored the implications of Gaelic education for the Gaelic-speaking community on Skye. Revitalization efforts are currently underway, but despite maintenance efforts such as Gaelic Medium Education (GME), English remains the language of the schoolchildren as well as the community at large. The authors feel that a concerted community revitalization effort is needed in congruence with the application of GME. Maintenance efforts should be directed towards sponsoring Gaelic-speaking community events so that GME students have the opportunity to speak Gaelic outside the classroom as well as experience the viability of the language for communication in different domains.

1. Gaelic Attrition and Revitalization

Many linguists have commented on the continuing assault on the world's linguistic diversity. Joshua Fishman (1989) even spoke of a "loss suffered by our collective 'quality of life' on this planet." Trudgill (2002) indicated that "what is different about the twenty-first century is the speed with which languages are dying out and the extreme improbability of their being replaced [...] because of modern demographic and communications conditions." The Celtic languages, of which Gaelic is one, are no different in this respect, and they, too, have long been in decline. The sense of loss is dawning on all generations of speakers and was brought to the forefront of the Scottish political arena in 2005 with the Gaelic Language Act, which granted the language official status for the first time and established the Gaelic Language Board, *Bòrd na Gaìdhlig* (McLeod, 2006). However, despite the gains made by this body, as well as earlier language shift reversal efforts, such as in the area of Gaelic education, there is evidence that such a shift is still taking place, even in relatively isolated areas such as our study's community, which is located on the Isle of Skye. Despite being relatively remote, many younger speakers on the Isle of Skye are unable to communicate to the full in Gaelic, while the older generations increasingly find themselves speaking the language of England with their children and not that of their native island, which is the language of their own youth. Through education, amongst others, efforts continue to be made to stop the decay and even regenerate this language. This decline of Gaelic and its semi-successful revitalization are the motivations behind the present study.

2. The Isle of Skye

The Isle of Skye (pop. 9,200) is the northernmost of the Inner Hebrides, a group of islands off the west coast of Scotland. The second largest island in Scotland (1,656 square kilometers), Skye is linked to the mainland by a bridge, which was opened in 1995. The capital of Skye is Portree, and the island is governed by the Highland Council, the seat of which is in Inverness. The village of Bernisdale, where the majority of this study took place, is located seven miles outside of Portree and has approximately 200 inhabitants. The village is comprised of 77 crofts (small tenant farms). The Skye community, like other Gaelic communities, is classified as bilingual (Edwards, 1994), and although English is increasingly the main means of communication, Gaelic is still strongly present in many ways. According to the 1991 census, 42.9% of the population of Skye and neighboring Lochlash said they spoke Gaelic (Oliver, 2002).

3. The Decline of Gaelic

Of the Celtic languages, Cornish and Manx Gaelic are dead, Irish, Scots Gaelic, and Breton are seriously endangered and Welsh is endangered (Oliver, 2002). Scots Gaelic (which will now be referred to as 'Gaelic') was once spoken throughout Scotland, but in the late Middle Ages sociopolitical factors caused a decline in the number of speakers in the Lowlands of Scotland; this resulted in

the language being restricted to the Highlands, the mountainous region located in the north of Scotland, which also includes islands such as Skye. Thus, since the fourteenth century, Gaelic has been primarily associated with the Highlands and has not played a significant role in the affairs of Lowland Scotland (McLeod, 2001). The heartland of Gaelic nowadays lies in the Hebrides.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, approximately thirty percent of the population of Scotland were Gaelic speakers. This percentage began to decline due to several factors, one of which was the diaspora of the Highlanders to primarily English-speaking nations (Krauss, 1992). Those who stayed in the Highlands were affected by the emergence of English as the language of the economy; young men were encouraged to learn English so that they had the option of emigrating later to find work (Campbell, 1950). Gaelic also suffered as a result of education. The Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge sought to provide education for Highlanders, whose native tongue was often Gaelic. The SSPCK gradually started teaching an increasing number of lessons in English. Eventually, pupils were physically punished for speaking Gaelic (Dorian, 1981).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the percentage of Gaelic speakers was a little more than five percent; over the course of the century, this number fell to a little more than one percent of the population (Oliver, 2002). According to the most recent census, there were reported 58,650 Gaelic speakers in 2001, which is an 11 percent drop in the last ten years. It is important to distinguish degrees of proficiency and to distinguish between perceived and actual proficiency. Census data usually reveal speakers' self-assessment and no distinction is made in degree of acquisition.

4. Maintenance Efforts

The awareness of the rapid decline of Gaelic and of reasons to protect it has led to considerable maintenance efforts, especially since the 1980s. In 1985 a Gaelic radio station was set up to serve the Highlands, and in 1997 this station became a national service (Cormack, 2000). Also in the 1980s, Gaelic Medium Education (GME) came into existence, in which students receive instruction through the medium of Gaelic (McLeod, 2006; Baker, 1997). Additionally, the Gaelic Language Act of 2005 and the establishment of the *Bòrd na Gaìdhlig* were important provisions for language maintenance.

5. The Research

The current study examines a language microcosm, and seeks to ascertain to what degree speakers within a family are undergoing language attrition - that is, to what degree certain features of the language are no longer available to them, possibly due to contact with the L1 (Seliger & Vago, 1991). After establishing the nature and rate of language attrition across three generations, we look at the steps taken towards language rejuvenation, and possibilities to improve the current situation through, amongst others, education.

To determine contemporary language shift, the language abilities of three generations of Gaelic speakers were tested. The research was done through (a) proficiency tests and (b) an interview with an expert informant. Twenty-three speakers, twenty of which comprise one extended family by marriage, were studied. First-generation participants ('Generation 1') ranged in age from 49 to 77, and Generation 2 participants ranged in age from 15 (youngest) to 44 (oldest). Generation 3 participants ranged in age from 4 (youngest) to 15 (oldest). (NB: The age-overlap is because we decided to classify speakers solely according to what generation they were in the family; i.e. if a speaker's grandparent was a first-generation speaker then the speaker was classified as third-generation, irrespective of their age.)

Cassandra Smith-Christmas stayed with the named Skye family from the 24th of March until the 3rd of April, 2007, and she returned from May 22nd-29th 2007. The expert interview was done through email in May and June 2008.

(a) The proficiency tests were based on Nancy Dorian's 1974 and 1976 batteries of East Sutherland Gaelic, which Smith-Christmas received from Dorian. In her study, Dorian found (1) plural morphology, (2) passive formation, and (3) tense morphology to have eroded, and thus the Skye tests focused on these three elements as well. In addition, we looked at speaker's command regarding (4) synthetic aspects of Gaelic and (5) a number of relevant other indicators of attrition. Some literal parts of Dorian's tests were used, with permission. As Gaelic spelling can potentially be inconsistent even among fully-proficient speakers, a fluent Gaelic speaker (one of the participants) verbally verified the written results.

(b) An expert (the fluent Gaelic speaker mentioned above) was contacted and asked for her views on the future of Gaelic in education in Skye society. The expert is labeled 'S1' in the interview results below.

6. Linguistic Results (1): Plural Morphology

Dorian (1981) found the plural morphology eroded, and noted that speakers tended to over-generalize plural rules, resulting in plurals incorrectly ending with *-an*. In her tests, as well as ours, participants were tested on eleven ways of forming the plural (cf. Dorian, 1981), amongst which were suffixation, suppletion (the use of one word as the inflected form of another word), and vowel alternation. Table 1 shows the three generations' abilities (percentage of test items correctly uttered across each generation) in forming correct plurals.

Generation (#)	participants (n)	plural (%)
1	8	99
2	8	90
3	5	64

Table 1: Plural proficiency.

The second and third generations have far less of a command of plural morphology than the first generation, but the command goes down most rapidly between generations 2 and 3. As was found in Dorian's study, the participants tended to over-generalize their plural morphology. This resulted in an application of the *-an* suffix to words where it should not occur; in one instance, the rule was so generalized that it resulted in a vowel combination that was not possible in Gaelic. The singular form of "cow" is *bo*, but the plural is *crodh*. One Generation 3 speaker wrote *boan* for his answer.

7. Semantic Narrowing Test

There is also evidence of semantic narrowing, as evidenced by the words *cearcan* ("hens") and *iseanan* ("chickens"), which appeared consecutively on the test. Seven respondents, all of whom were second and third generation speakers, put only one answer for both items (e.g. answering *cearcan* for "hens" and providing no answer for "chickens"). Respondents who left both items blank were not included in this total because it is assumed that this is a matter of lexical attrition as opposed to semantic narrowing. One participant reversed the two answers (i.e. *cearcan* for "chickens" and *iseanan* for "hens") and another wrote *cearcan* for "chickens," and gave no answer for "hens." One participant wrote *cearcan* for both items, and another wrote *cearcan* for "hens" and then quotation marks for "chickens." Two participants (mother and daughter) both left "chickens" blank and so did another participant. These instances tentatively suggest semantic narrowing rather than lexical attrition; when juxtaposed with the first generation's tests, it seems apparent that younger speakers blur the semantic distinction between "hen" and "chicken" in Gaelic, and for some speakers this distinction does not appear to exist.

This semantic narrowing does not seem due to L2 influence, as English distinguishes between "hens" and "chickens." One explanation is that the first generation's lives were often centered around the croft, and thus they would know the different words for "chickens" and "hens." However, as crofting has declined, so too have the words surrounding the croft, and so the second and third generations are less likely to know words specific to crofting. To corroborate this hypothesis that the second and third generation know less vocabulary associated with items such as crofting, a first generation participant was asked to write a list of words she did not think that her children would know. She completed a list of 39 words. The words were specific to activities such as crofting (*rùsgadh*; "shearing sheep"), fishing (*geòla*; "rowing boat"), harvesting peat (*poll monadh*; "peat bog"), and domestic chores (*a'fighe*; "knitting"). This ad hoc list was only administered to first and second generation participants (third generation participants were not likely to know any of the words). The highest score for a first generation participant was 34 words, compared with 9 words for the highest-scoring second-generation participants. This is obviously a steady drop. More research should be done to verify this semantic narrowing hypothesis but it is apparent that to a degree decline is due to a changing society.

8. Linguistic results (2): Passives

Participants were, first of all, evaluated on their ability to form correct passive sentences in Gaelic. All of the first generation speakers formed the passive using a form of *rach* ("go") as an auxiliary verb followed by the verbal noun (the non-finite component of the Gaelic verb). In the case of a noun (e.g. "house") as the subject of the sentence, the particle *a* is used, and the verbal noun is lenited. As in the case of a pronoun functioning as the subject of the sentence (e.g. "he"), a possessive marker precedes the verbal noun and the verbal noun may or may not be lenited, depending on the possessive marker (See Byrne 2004). Thus, as in the example below, the equivalent of the "bitten" component of the sentence literally translates to "her biting" ("His biting" would be translated as *a ghreimeadh*). The overview below shows this through the example sentence "She got bitten by a dog" (read the sentence from top to bottom):

Chaidh	went	[vrb.pst.]
a	her	[art.poss.]
greimeadh	biting	[verbal noun]
le	with	[prep.]
cù	dog	[noun]

as opposed to the same sentiment being expressed in the active voice ("A dog bit her"):

Ghreim	bit	[vrb.pst.]
cù	dog	[noun]
i	her	[3p.fem. pro]

The second component of the passive test was to see if they formed a passive in the correct manner, specifically regarding the verb *fhuair* ("get" [past tense]). The use of this verb indicates the influence of the L1 on the L2. Instead of using *chaidh* to indicate a passive, some of the speakers incorrectly used *fhuair* because they were

translating literally from English to Gaelic. The following chart gives the results for the passive test.

Generation (#)	participants (n)	passive ability (%)	correct passive (%)
1	8	100	89
2	9	59	65
3	6	30	43

Table 2: Passive proficiency.

The table reveals clear proficiency differences between the generations in both their ability to use the passive and to use it correctly. The whole of Generation 1 was able to form passives but not all of them did this in the required manner. A steady plunge in proficiency is visible in the results of the next two generations. These results support Dorian's (1981) findings that semi-speakers often lacked the ability to form the passive and when they did form a passive, often used the incorrect *fhuair*.

9. Linguistic Results (3): Tense

Lenition is an initial consonant mutation in Gaelic that fulfills a variety of functions in the language. In Gaelic orthography, an *h* occurs after consonants that can be lenited (*b, c, d, f, g, m, p, s, t*), thus representing the sound change from stop to fricative, or from fricative to another fricative, in the case that the consonant is already a fricative (Dorian 1981). For an example, the word *cridhe* ("heart"; /kri/) can be lenited in certain circumstances to become *chridhe* (/xri/). Lenition plays an important part in the Gaelic tense system. The past tense is indicated by lenition of the initial consonant. In cases where the verb begins with a vowel, the prefix *dh'* is used (e.g. *dh'òl*; "drink" [past tense]). For the future tense, no lenition occurs and a future ending is added to the stem. The conditional, however, is represented by leniting the initial consonant and then adding a suffix. For example:

thilg e	He threw
tilgidh e	He will throw
thilgeadh e	He would throw

Table 3 gives the results for the tense sentences in the three categories of past, future, and conditional formation.

Generation (#)	participants (n)	past (%)	future (%)	conditional (%)
1	8	100	92	100
2	9	81	84	73
3	6	57	30	18

Table 3: Tense proficiency.

The past proved the least problematic for all generations, which agrees with Dorian's findings. The future and conditional, however, show marked language loss, especially between Generation 2 and Generation 3. The latter generation has a limited ability with regards to the future, and an even more limited ability when it comes to the conditional.

10. Linguistic Results (4): Synthetic Aspects

Gaelic uses synthetic structures, which means that it has a relatively high average number of meaningful units per word. Functions which would require more than one word in English constitute one word in Gaelic (with a higher number of morphemes). The loss of the ability to accommodate the synthetic nature of Gaelic reveals erosion, yet in a subtle way. Not using the synthetic form to create the conditional was generally not counted as a mistake though, and therefore did not show in the results presented so far. The conditional is therefore looked at separately here.

Another way in which the second and third generations deviated from the first generation was in marking possession. In Gaelic, the third person possessive marker *a* is used for either gender (i.e. "his" and "her"). Gender distinction is made by either the presence of lenition (*a chridhe*; "his heart") or the absence therefore (*a cridhe*; "her heart").

Table 4 gives the results with regards to synthetic usage of the language.

Generation (#)	participants (n)	conditional (%)	possession (%)
1	8	88	100
2	9	70	78
3	6	0	17

Table 4: Synthetic usage proficiency.

The evidence corroborates Dorian's (1981) finding that the synthetic nature of the language is being eroded. The first generation is perfectly able to use lenition to show possession and uses no additional *ag* constructions, while this seems to cause some problems for the second and third generation speakers. The third generation speakers showed a complete inability to use a synthetic form of the verb to form the conditional. Although the second generation was able to use the synthetic form of the conditional, there was a lack of understanding of how it functioned. For example, "I would hear" is correctly written *chluinninn*. However, one respondent wrote *chluinninn mi* on his test, meaning that he did not understand that the personal pronoun was morphemically included in the construction/word.

11. Linguistic Results (5): Other Indications

Some ad hoc observations corroborated the results so far. There was one instance of possessive usage ("their keys"); only six of the twenty-four participants used the correct form of the possessive marker in the instance. Five of the eight first generation respondents used an incorrect possessive marker. It can therefore be concluded that erosion of the possessive marker began before the first generation's lifetime.

Other mistakes indicated the wrong usage of personal and prepositional pronouns in terms of gender and number (a first and second generation participant) and using the English word in place of the Gaelic word (two Generation 2 participants), such as in *measuridh* for *tòmaisidh* (future tense of "measure").

12. Overall Linguistic Results

The figure below shows the degree of command regarding the four aspects looked at; plurals, passives, tense, and synthetic forms. The average for each of the sub-aspects (visible in tables 1 to 4) is shown in the figure. This serves to give an impression of the decline of Gaelic within this speech community.

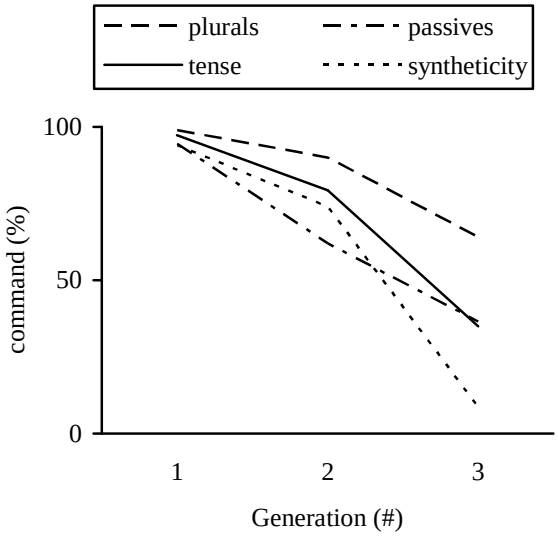

Figure 1: Summary of tables 1 to 4.

A few things become instantly clear. First of all, there is erosion only and no obvious revitalization effects on speakers' proficiency. Secondly, the rate of loss between Generation 3 and 2 is sadly surpassed by that between Generation 2 and 1, except perhaps for the passives. Also, for all of these four aspects, the Generation 1 participants had a perfect, or near-perfect, command, while attrition occurs in the subsequent generation. Finally, synthetic usage command in particular shows a transition to complete loss. This aspect is where the participants' first and second languages differ most.

13. Interview Results

We conducted an interview with S1, a female Gaelic Medium Education teacher for 12 years, now retired, and member of the Generation 1 group of participants. Not only has she taught GME, but she has attended several seminars concerning the subject as well as taught at *Sabhal Mòr Ostaig*, the Gaelic Medium university located on Skye. Comprehensive studies have been conducted pertaining to Gaelic Medium Education (See Stockdale, Munro & MacGregor, 2003), and the aim of this portion of the study is not to give a detailed assessment of GME on Skye, but rather to gauge the role it plays with regards to language maintenance, and gain insight into suggested improvements for GME.

14. Gaelic Medium Education (GME)

GME commenced in Scotland in 1985 (Baker, 1997); currently there are six GME schools located on Skye, in the communities of Portree, Kilmuir, Sleat, Dunvegan, Staffin, and Broadford. S1 notes that at first the advent of GME led to a brief resurgence in the language in the Skye community; previously, there were no provisions for Gaelic speakers in school. Gaelic had been actively

discouraged in schools until the 1930s (MacKinnon, 1974), but still remained the language of the playground for the first generation of speakers within this study (See Stockdale, Munro & MacGregor, 2003). For the second generation, however, English stopped being the language of the playground, which coincides with the dramatic shift occurring between the first and second generation. For the third generation, GME was available, but S1 noted that after the brief resurgence of the language with the introduction of GME, the language continued its decline. Our data corroborate this. The data become even more dire when one bears in mind that the family under investigation contains some active proponents of Gaelic.

15. Not the Playground Language

S1 indicates that the students through her 12 years of teaching seemed receptive to GME. However, even though the students were receptive and participated fluently in Gaelic during class, there was little, if any, use of Gaelic outside of the classroom. Even when students were given group assignments during GME class, the language in which they conversed to complete these assignments was primarily English. Use of the hegemon language as the playground language in minority language immersion situations is not uncommon, as noted by Nahir (as cited in Spolsky, 1991).

With the exception of the GME school located on Sleat, GME units are a smaller part of English-speaking schools (i.e. one school will have both English and Gaelic classes within the same building; Sleat, however, is a GME with an English Medium unit within). S1 notes that not only does this facilitate the almost-certain use of English outside the classroom, but she also mentions that sometimes friction occurred in these schools because of division of English and Gaelic classes.

16. Reversing Language Shift (RLS)

The creation of all-GME schools might help to alleviate these problems, but GME schools have been criticized for their lack of ability to significantly reverse language shift (MacKinnon, 2006). The problem herein, it seems, lies not so much in the application of GME (i.e. quality of the teachers, etc.), but rather within the community as a whole. S1 mentions the decline of Gaelic usage within the community, and it seems that here we find the crux of the problem. Lack of community use of the language would appear to be self-perpetuating: GME students learn the language, but as there are limited instances of use outside school, the students use English within the community. Not only do GME students have to contend with English as the language of society at large (e.g. media, etc.), but if Gaelic is rarely spoken in everyday life, it seems inevitable that they, despite their education, will adopt the community norm of speaking English in most situations. This means that motivation is present amongst young speakers, but practical opportunities for using the language are not.

S1 suggested that GME schools should offer more opportunities (i.e. social events) for Gaelic to be used as the language of communication. We would like to extend this suggestion by further advocating events that involve both the community and the school. Education can certainly be an important tool for RLS, but without the support of the community, the efficacy of this tool is greatly reduced. We would therefore like to advocate a community effort towards the language in conjunction with education. As well as increasing the viability of RLS, this suggestion might help to avoid the possibility of students solely associating the language with school, thus leading to a resistance to the language, as encountered in other language-learning situations (see Murtagh, 2003). At the end of this article, an activity is suggested which could help to move Gaelic from the school to the playground.

17. Conclusion and Discussion

There is clear evidence of language shift on Skye, across generations. The test results corroborate Dorian's conclusions with respect to the plural morphology, passive construction, and tense morphology. There is plenty of evidence pointing towards intergenerational lexical/semantic narrowing.

It is also important to consider the convincing evidence that the language is moving towards a more analytic form. This trend was perhaps already occurring before or during the first generation's lifetime, as tentatively suggested by their incorrect use of the conditional. In the second and especially third generation, we find a lack of understanding or ability to use synthetic forms. Dorian also noted in her study that the lack of ability to use such forms was a characteristic of her semi-speakers. We also find that one of the most important grammatical tools, lenition, is not fully understood by the second and third generation participants, as evidenced by their tendency to show possession more analytically.

Movement from a synthetic form to one that is more analytic is not unusual in the Indo-European languages (Schwegler, 1990). Thus, it could be argued that the language is simply following its natural historical course but in an accelerated way. However, when juxtaposing the second and third generations' tests with the first generation's, it seems more likely that the tendency towards more analytic forms is due to the influence of the L1 on the L2. There is evidence that participants are translating from English to Gaelic.

18. Cause for Worry

The loss of synthetic understanding and of shades of meaning in Gaelic suggests that the language is increasingly considered of symbolical rather than practical use. This sentiment was expressed in a letter to the editor of the West Highland Free Press, the local newspaper whose readership includes Gaelic speakers. One reader (called A. Campbell) wrote that

> "[...] in spite of colleges, radio, and other high-profile games [...] the language is totally dead on the ground and in our communities. Thus, if it's not in our villages and used there, especially in the heartland here in Uist, is there any real hope left?"

He then added that he was a true "Gael and islander," who knows the issues and has "a sore inner heart seeing what's happening" (West Highland Free Press, May 23, 2008).

This letter mentions several important issues that are pertinent to the language planning issues on Skye and endangered language communities as a whole. First of all, it illustrates that even though a language may have support and interest behind it (as was also the case with Jersey French), this support and interest, though vital, may carry the language's sustainability only so far. Second, the author of the letter alluded to what Fishman (1991) terms 'high order props,' something for which he criticized Gaelic for relying on too heavily. The authors would like to argue that since Fishman's admonitions, significant gains have been made in terms of L(ow)-function maintenance (e.g. GME primary schools), but further gains must be made. Finally, pertaining to Skye, this comment is particularly disturbing in that South Uist, an island in the Outer Hebrides not connected to the mainland by a bridge, is more remote than Skye; if, as the author of the letter claims, Gaelic is "dead" in the South Uist community, then it places the Skye community in a more precarious position.

19. Suggestions

Jones (2001) looked at the decline of Jersey French and the efforts towards revitalization. Despite its long history on the Island, the Norman dialect of Jersey ('Jèrriais') is now obsolescent. Corpus and status planning initiatives have been prompted by its decline in fortune, which, devoid of state support, lie in the hands of small, non-linguistically trained, groups of enthusiasts. Jones concluded that the revitalization of Jèrriais incorporates large-scale identity planning, yielding a paradoxical situation whereby the dialect is currently being fostered as a quintessential part of island identity, despite the fact that, at present, it is only spoken by some 3% of the population of Jersey. A similar situation exists on Skye. This example proves Fishman's 1991 thesis that once language shift begins to occur, it is difficult to reverse. It also illustrates that a communal feeling of goodwill towards the language in question is only one component of RLS ('Reversing Language Shift'); much more is needed to achieve success in sustaining a language.

There is an urgent need for more community-based language planning programs, as well as a need to better weld together language education (i.e. GME) with the community. One idea for a community-based language program would be the sponsoring of 'Gaelic teas' in which speakers gather together for a cup of tea and have discussions in Gaelic.

This idea was borne out of a close observation of community rituals; if one goes over to another person's house, even if the visit is intended to be a very brief one, the visitor is almost expected to stay for a cup of tea. Teas could be coordinated with the weekly Gaelic television programs; speakers could watch the program together and then discuss it in Gaelic (thereby also integrating an H(igh)-function facet of the language into an L-function setting). The motivations for Gaelic teas would be as follows: (a) that the informal nature of the event might encourage fluent speakers and learners (i.e. GME students) alike to attend and (b) at least provide a way for Gaelic speakers to recognize each other as such so that they can also use the language in other social settings, such as shops, etc. In our study, speakers commented that one of the reasons they believe that the language is in such a precarious position is because Gaelic speakers have historically been 'too polite' (i.e. if they were not sure if someone 'had Gaelic,' they would always use English with that speaker). The implementation of tea groups would hopefully allow more speakers to feel comfortable using Gaelic with each other. Skye has the distinct advantage of being home to the Gaelic college, *Sabhal Mòr Ostaig*, and certainly the tea groups could sponsor trips to the college's events, which in turn would strengthen the ties between the Gaelic community at large and Gaelic education.

Though this would be a small step, it would be in line with Fishman's (1991) suggestion that language planning efforts should focus primarily on L-functions. Our suggestion specifically took into account the culture of the Skye community, but it could hopefully be applicable to other language communities as well.

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