



Local Language Patterns: Uist's Extra Dimension



Between January and June this year Gordon Wells spent some time talking to people throughout the Uists about the way they use and think about language, and Gaelic in particular. His research report is now online. Here, Gordon highlights the main points.

A WORD about myself first – I'm proud to have good Gaelic-speaking Uist connections, (my mother was Anna Sheonaidh 'ic Ghilleasbuig from Balemòr), and I've been living in this community now for over 15 years. It really feels like home to me. Also, although I wasn't raised Gaelic-speaking, I've made a reasonable fist of learning the language as an adult – to the point that on most occasions I feel pretty comfortable speaking it, and so, crucially, do most of the people to whom I'm talking – or so I like to think!

So, I make no claim, as a researcher, to being intellectually or emotionally 'detached' from the subject of study here. Far from it. I suppose if I was to sum up my basic philosophy in a couple of sentences it would be

this: Language is good for you. It's what makes us human. So, the more linguistic power we each of us have, the better off we are! The question then is, how do we make best use of the particularly succulent language broth from which we can feed here in Uist?

The full title of the research project was 'Perceptions of Gaelic Learning and Use in a Bilingual Island Community: an Exploratory Study'. In plain language I was trying to find out and document how people feel about Gaelic and the way it sits alongside English. And why Uist? Because, as we know fine, more people speak Gaelic here, as a proportion of the total population, than virtually anywhere else on earth. If it's to undergo a revival in Scotland, then places like Uist should have an important part to play.

The research centred on three main issues – bilingualism, writing, and speech. The first is important because virtually everyone who speaks Gaelic today also has at least one other language at their command, the one I'm writing in now. Around the world large numbers of people are bilingual. They have 'two windows' onto their daily lives. Some would say it's like watching a film in 3-D. And recent research suggests it's actually good for your brain – it might even delay Alzheimer's!

So do folk here think about that much, and really value their extra advantage? Well, no, not necessarily. People who were

brought up speaking two languages might not actually have given it a second thought. As someone said: 'The ordinary Joe – nan tòisicheadh tu bruidhinn riutha mu dheidhinn bilingualism cha chreid mi gum biodh a' chuid mhòr aca ag ràdh hey hang on a minute, tha mise bilingual!'

It's partly a question of what we mean by 'bilingual'. The word maybe conjures an image of a 'perfectly balanced' competence in all skills in two different languages, whereas in fact nearly everyone who uses more than one language will tend to do different things in each of them. But that doesn't mean they're not bilingual, and with good reason to be positive about the additional skills they possess.

That leads onto the question of writing, as some people might feel that their Gaelic is in some sense 'incomplete' if they don't read or write it. But that's really not a cause for personal shame. In times past the educational system was scarcely very supportive. And on the positive side, some of the best Gaelic speakers I know, and have known, would never read or write a word of it from one year to the next. I'm sure everyone here can think of similar individuals. However, if that insecurity about writing means that perfectly good Gaelic speakers don't use it in front of other folk who've maybe had some lessons – learners like myself, for instance – then that's a loss to us all. It may be

unrealistic to expect good Gaelic speakers of mature years to start learning to read it – though they say you're never too old to learn – but that really doesn't mean they have nothing to offer. Quite the contrary. Everyone recognises that for 'blas' and 'siùbhlachd' you can't beat the senior members of this community!

And so to the third point – speaking, and how people choose which language to use when talking to neighbours and friends, and indeed strangers. Rightly or wrongly it's now evidently pretty much a 'universal rule' here, as in other Gàidhealach communities, not to start a conversation with a new acquaintance in Gaelic. This can pose problems for Gaelic learners in particular, who naturally want to practise their newly acquired skills. Some can easily lose confidence or even take offence if they don't feel their efforts are being reciprocated – probably too easily, because it's become clear that, for the fluent speaker, using Gaelic with someone who doesn't know it very well is not necessarily an easy thing to do. Professional language teachers spend years developing the skill of speaking a language at just the right level for their learners to be able to take a meaningful part in a conversation. I've taught in various countries around the world. Believe me, I know what it can be like! So it's perhaps a tad unreasonable for a learner to think that they can just start up

with whatever little Gaelic they know with just anyone they meet, and expect to have a good conversation.

In point of fact, the learners that I spoke to were very positive about their experiences of using Gaelic in Uist. With a little tact, some ingenuity, and a degree of patience, they found it possible to gently negotiate their way into Gaelic conversations with willing members of the community. And they were grateful for those opportunities, which they found very rewarding. Significantly, all the fluent speakers I spoke to also said they were very willing to help learners – to the extent that they felt they could. And that last bit is important. We're not all born to be teachers – but then the Island Voices experience (see <http://guthan.wordpress.com>), with over 50 community members throughout the islands contributing interview material, shows you can still make an important contribution, even if it's just by recording your own voice! (Take a look at Donald Mackinnon talking about Craigard, for example. You could spend a few nights watching Gaelic TV before you heard better, more natural Gaelic than that!)

In sum, there are undoubtedly really serious challenges ahead for efforts to revitalise Gaelic, even within this community. We need to develop new and positive ways of thinking about bilingualism, taking heart from the additional benefits it brings,

instead of viewing, say, less than perfect writing skills in a 'glass half-empty' kind of way. We need to think about literacy, and put it in its proper place. There's no reason, for those who wish to, not to learn new reading and writing skills. But there's no reason, either, not to think of your ability to speak fluently as a real asset that can be shared with others if you've a mind to – *comas sgrìobhaidh ann no às*. And, crucially, we need to be realistic in our expectations of ourselves and of others when it comes to speaking. Rome wasn't built in a day, but the evident good will in this community towards the language and those who wish to learn and use it should surely be considered the best foundation for reconstruction that we're likely to find anywhere.

The Cothrom Language and Culture group plan to host an event in the New Year at which the report will be discussed. Keep an eye on the Island Voices website at the address above for news of that. The full research report can also be downloaded from that site – and while you're there take a look at some of the many recordings featuring local events, and local people speaking good Uist Gaelic. (And their English isn't bad either!) Gordon Wells lives in Benbecula and is a Projects Officer with Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. The research project was conducted through Cothrom on behalf of the *Soillse* inter-university Gaelic research project.

POOLS gu TOOLS: An rathad air adhart gu iomadach cànan le SMO

From POOLS to TOOLS: Sabhal Mòr Ostaig leads the multilingual way

THA SMO air leantainn air co-brachadh le colaistean eile san Roinn Eòrpa leis an naidheachd gu bheil iartas airson pròiseact ùr, "TOOLS", air soirbheachadh. Bidh am pròiseact a' tòiseachadh san Fhaoilleach 2012. Bidh a' cholaiste ag obair cuide ri colaistean san Danmharc, Lithuania, an Spàinn, Portugal agus Ulaidh gus bathar bog a leasachadh, air a bheil na h-ainmean Wordlink agus Multidict, a bheir cothrom dhut facal sam bith air duilleag air-loidhne a lorg ann am faclairan airson barrachd air ceud cànan eadar-dhealaichte, Gàidhlig na h-Alba agus Gaeilge na h-Èirinn nam measg.

'S e Dr Caoimhín Ó Donnafle, Àrd-Òraidiche ann an Coimpiutaireachd aig SMO, a nì a' chuid as motha dhen obair ann an leasachadh a' bhathair sa phròiseact, a tha a' gabhail a-steach foghlam airson inbhich aig diofar ìrean. Thuir e, "Thòisich sinn air an obair seo ann am Pròiseact eile – POOLS-

T – agus sheall sin dhuinn cho feumail 's a tha e a bhith ag obair gu h-eadar-nàiseanta. Le bhith ag obair ann an iomadach cànan dh'ionnsaich sinn dè tha ag obair agus dè nach eil. Tha barrachd air 100 cànan againn san t-siostam a-nis, agus bidh dùbhlain ùra romhainn sa phrògram ùr, Arabais nam measg. Nì sinn bathar bog ùr gus am bi e nas fhasa do thidsearan stuthan-teagaisg measgaichte, no "blended", a chruthachadh agus an uair sin an cur air-loidhne, le ceangal aig gach facal gu faclair."

Bidh uallach sònraichte air SMO airson am bathar fheuchainn le luchd-ionnsachaidh nach eil air an clàradh air cùrsaichean foirmeil ann an colaiste no oilthigh. Bidh an t-oifigeir phròiseactan, Gordon Wells, a tha air a bhith ag obair le buidhnean sa choimhearsnachd sna h-Eileanan Siar fad còig bliadhna air pròiseactan bhon ainm "Guthan nan Eilean" a' coimhead airson

dòighean gus am prògram ùr a chur gu feum. Thuir e, "Thàinig am pròiseact Guthan nan Eilean fhèin a-mach às a' phròiseact Eòrpach POOLS. Tha e math a bhith ag obair fhathast leis an aon cholaiste san Danmharc as dèidh sia bliadhna, ach math cuideachd a bhith ag obair le colaistean ùra, agus gu sònraichte le Oilthigh Uladh, a tha air tòrr obair a dhèanamh le Gaeilge na h-Èirinn agus coimpiutaireachd."

Bidh am pròiseact TOOLS a' ruith airson dà bhliadhna gu leth. 'S iad na colaistean eile a bhios an sàs ann mar a leanas: Colaiste Teicniceach SDE san Danmharc, Oilthigh Danmharc a Deas, Oilthigh Teicniceach Valencia san Spàinn, Ionad Trèanaidh Marijampole ann an Lithuania, Oilthigh Uladh, agus Oilthigh Evora ann am Portugal. Bidh barrachd fiosrachaidh air fhoillseachadh air làrach-lìn a' phròiseact aig www.languages.dk. Faodar Wordlink agus Multidict fheuchainn aig www.multidict.net.

SABHAL Mòr Ostaig's record of collaboration with colleges and universities around Europe has taken another step forward with news of the approval of a new "TOOLS" project, due to start in January 2012. The college will work with partners in Denmark, Lithuania, Spain, Portugal, and Ulster to develop further its groundbreaking Wordlink and Multidict software programs which enable instant word-by-word access from any webpage to dictionaries in over 100 different languages, including both Scottish and Irish Gaelic.

Dr Caoimhín Ó Donnafle, Senior Lecturer in Computing at SMO, will take the lead role in software development in the partnership, which covers the Higher, Further, and Adult Education sectors. He said, "Experience on the previous POOLS-T project, in which we first started developing this idea, has shown the value of transnational work like this. Testing the program with a range

of languages gives you a good idea of what works and what doesn't. We have over 100 languages in the system now, and we will be testing the new program against some new challenges, including Arabic this time. We will develop a new tool to make it easy for teachers to create blended learning teaching materials and place them online, with each word linked to dictionary.

Sabhal Mòr Ostaig will have a special responsibility for trialling the project with adult learners not necessarily enrolled on full-time academic or vocational courses. Projects Officer, Gordon Wells, who has been working with community groups in the Western Isles for the past five years on various projects under the Guthan nan Eilean/Island Voices title, will be looking to add the new dictionary access function to this ongoing community-based development work. He said, "The Guthan nan Eilean project was itself born out

of the earlier European POOLS project. It's good still to be working with the same Danish college six years on, but also encouraging to be working with new partners. We are particularly looking forward to collaborating with the University of Ulster, who have done a lot of work with Irish and computer-assisted language learning."

The TOOLS project will run for two and a half years. The other project partners are The SDE Technical College in Denmark, The University of Southern Denmark, The Valencia Technical University in Spain, The Marijampole Vocational Education and Training Centre in Lithuania, The University of Ulster, and The University of Evora in Portugal. Further information will be published as it becomes available on the project website at www.languages.dk. Wordlink and Multidict are openly accessible via www.multidict.net.