

Sharing Gaelic voices: peat-cutting in Polish, or surfing in Sindhi?

Preamble

Twenty years and more have passed since NATECLA's 1995 Scotland-focussed "Language Issues" was published, in which Anne Lorne Gillies wrote forcefully about Gaelic as a "mother-tongue" in her introductory article, so immediately placing affective issues centre stage. My own short piece in the same issue dwelt rather more drily, though still with some optimism, on institutional support for the language, particularly with regard to the place of CLI (The Gaelic learners' organisation) in the labyrinthine tangle of semi-quangos and voluntary sector groupings with an interest in the subject. That's twenty years in which two more censuses have matter-of-factly traced the ongoing numerical decline of the self-reporting Gaelic speaking population (though activists and optimists hail an upturn of 0.1% amongst young people in the 2011 figures). Twenty years is also plenty time for once healthy-looking organisations to both blossom and fade, or even disappear completely.

However, while life undoubtedly does go on and new shoots spring up where older growth has withered, I'm reluctant to over-develop analogies with living organisms. The notion that languages themselves also live (and die) is an interesting, even seductive, and certainly pervasive metaphor, but it's perhaps over-used to the point that we have ceased to observe the distinction between figurative meaning and literal truth. If we obsess on the linguistic object, even to the extent of imbuing it with life itself, we in the Gaelic development world may be in danger of relegating its actual users to a secondary role whose main value is judged primarily by the strength of their contribution to the greater goal of language maintenance or "revitalisation". That looks like a self-defeating and backwards prioritisation in the end, because if languages do indeed come close to "living" in any sense of the word, it is surely on the lips of the human subjects who use them, and unless we understand and take account of the pressures, problems, and opportunities that present themselves in speakers' (or would-be speakers') ordinary day-to-day lives, then the revitalisers' cause is lost from the outset. Placing the cart before the horse is not the best way to get either very far along the road towards their shared destination.

Given a readership of UK ESOL and community language teachers, who, in my experience, tend to be pretty firmly grounded in the everyday, and often stark, social realities of their students, I'm perhaps labouring the point about the importance of locating language learning and practice in functional purpose and lived experience. While a functional perspective can, at times, seem rather narrowly utilitarian, there really is no denying the reality and force of current material conditions that impel speakers of other languages to acquire and adopt English. But I'm old enough

to remember when NATECLA was still NATESLA. That striking change which imported Community Languages into the organisational title took place probably thirty years ago, but remains well motivated, in my view. It speaks to a significant acknowledgement of both the fact and the value of bilingualism and genuine cultural diversity, it validates the ties that distinctively bind families and communities together in a multicultural society, and highlights the social justice agenda which so clearly underpins many of its members' sense of mission.

The formulation of dry policy statements and tinkering with institutional structures are, no doubt, all part of the means by which chosen goals are achieved. But the affective dimension to language learning and teaching, which Anne Lorne Gillies highlighted in her 1995 piece, rightfully has a central place in the healthy success of the bilingual development enterprise that second language acquisition properly constitutes, and the "Community Languages" written into NATECLA's title is a telling reminder of the imperative to maintain an appropriately holistic perspective on the matter from both an individual and collective point of view.

So, the intentions are good now (as they were then), and the Community Languages focus of this particular issue of Language Issues is to be welcomed. Of course, admirable stated intentions without supporting actions may lay themselves open to the charge of tokenism. One might note with some concern, for example, the current Language Issues strapline on the NATECLA website as simply "The ESOL Journal", perhaps wondering how far the commitment to support for Community Languages actually extends. Is that subtitle in some sense a "truer" encapsulation of fundamental priorities? On the positive side, however, I for one am pleased to see the UK's Celtic languages included in NATECLA's definition of Community Languages, and I aim to show how the "Island Voices" project in which I have been involved for just over 10 years now, offers an example of inclusive and holistic practice that is based on the same solid fundamental principles I discern in the NATECLA mission. While I offer it here primarily as an example of Community Language practice in relation to Gaelic, I contend that it also entails intrinsic and attendant benefits in relation to ESOL, and hope to demonstrate there can be practical spin-offs from this example for other Community Languages also.

Project

There's a fairly detailed description of the "Guthan nan Eilean" (Island Voices) project, written from an ESOL perspective, in the 2012 British Council collection on "Innovations in ELT for Migrants and Refugees" edited by David Mallows (Wells, 2012). While noting in passing that the entire book is freely available

to download (for example via <https://guthan.wordpress.com/research/>) – itself a mark of how analysis and ideas can be so much more easily shared now than was the case 20 years ago – I don't propose to repeat in detail the points made there in this piece. However, a brief summary of the project, and an update on where it now stands, may be in order before I pick out some key themes in relation to the Community Languages interest specifically.

The first point is that, while it is very much a community-based exercise, it seeks, as a language “capture and curation” project, to exploit the opportunities that new and social media internet technologies afford. So, a ready-made summary is already available on the project's “About” page (<https://guthan.wordpress.com/about/>), which I reproduce here:

“Island Voices – Guthan nan Eilean. Slices of Life and Work in the 21st Century Hebrides – for language learners and anyone else!

This website hosts pages of links to video and other materials in the Guthan nan Eilean/Island Voices Series, and carries news about the project. It is also a means of communicating ideas and suggestions from local and remote users, who may be teachers or learners of English or Gaelic. Comments are invited on any of the posts, and will be moderated before publication.

Over 150 videos in English and Gaelic can be accessed by clicking on any of the “Series One”, “Series Two” or “Extras” tabs at the top of the page. These pages also give links to full transcripts for each clip, formatted as “Clilstore” units (thereby also granting one-click online dictionary access), as well as catalogues for each collection which list topic, level, and language content of the films. The “Playlists” tab gives access to “feature-length” compilations.

Users are invited to browse through the pages, and pick on anything that particularly engages their interest. The documentary clips give a plain language introduction to a topic or event. These are complemented with more challenging authentic speech interviews with actively involved community members, which will give the viewer a closer and more personal insight into the subject at hand.

This project remains work in progress, as the homepage blog continues to record ongoing activity in the community that relates to the language work presented in the core videos, and adds to it. Users are invited to browse through past posts to learn about the history of the project, and see examples of more work by learners and other community members. Alternatively, you can view selections of this work gathered together thematically in the pages titled “Bonnie Prince Charlie”, “The Great War”, “Gaelic Journeys” and “Storytellers”. And comments and suggestions are always welcome!

And if you want to dig deeper into some of the community and linguistic issues that surround the project, take a look at the Research/Reports page, which gathers together a range of associated research projects and articles.

The project is bilingual and aims to collect slices of life and work in the Hebrides, primarily for language learners. The work is islands-based, and has included provision for training for tutors and others, with a view to encouraging further community-based recording. If you would like to try your hand at this kind of work and want some help getting started you can phone or text Gordon Wells on 07879 644984.”

The first video clips were produced, with a single camera and laptop, in 2006 and the project had the support of a part-time co-ordinator (myself) until April 2015, since when any new contributions have been the result of unpaid voluntary work. This has, predictably, resulted in some slowing of the rate of new posts and productions. Nevertheless, the site remains active. As I write, the following metrics give some numerical indication of the extent to which both local and wider communities have engaged with the project to date:

- Over 100 local individual and group participants
- 200 Clilstore units created
- 160,000 hits on YouTube
- 1,800 followers on Facebook
- 2,200 followers on Wordpress

Wells 2013, also available via the project's Research/Reports page, offers a more detailed analysis of online metrics from that particular year, as part of a wider discussion of digital literacies in a bilingual community.

Discussion

Arguably, I've taken something of a risk in the above project description by copying and pasting text from a webpage into an article intended for publication. For example, the text immediately loses some of its functionality when the originally highlighted (and hyperlinked) words “homepage blog” and “Research/Reports” no longer offer one-click access to the resources in question. Nor can I embed the link to the exemplifying YouTube video showing the midsummer party in community-owned Grogarry Lodge where ESOL and Gaelic learners came together to share food and songs. But I hope that highlighting this very lack serves to reinforce one important message about the new technology that now infuses our daily lives. In the space of a single generation it has revolutionised everyday communicative practice in terms of the ease with which we now expect access to supportive or complementary information, and the modes in which it can be delivered. Community Language teachers and learners will naturally feel the need to avail of this facility in the same way that everyone else does.

In particular, in a language teaching/learning context, it may be worth first elaborating on the Clilstore platform referred to briefly in the text above. The name “Clilstore” was born out of the work of a series of collaborative European projects in which my college, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (Scotland's Gaelic College), played a pivotal role. We were charged, through the agency of computing specialist Caoimhín Ó Donnaille, with the creation of the software on which the online platform runs. Its purpose is essentially to enable language teachers to create

online multimedia resources on which learners can listen to recorded speech (in either audio or video format), while at the same time following a written transcript in which every single word is clickable to give instant access to a dictionary translation in another language of your choice. And the number of languages in which this resource is available is, literally, in the hundreds.

So, an ESOL teacher, faced with an evening class of students who between them read, say, a mixture of Urdu, Polish, Punjabi (Gurmukhi), and Spanish, can present them all with the same English video and text, and let them all work on it with the assistance of their own immediate L1 vocabulary translation access as appropriate. Or, a Hindi teacher, dealing with a class of teenagers in, say, a weekend community class, can equally present them with a Hindi video clip and transcript which will also offer the same facility of translating any unknown or difficult words into English (or another language). This immediately opens up all sorts of possibilities, not just for classwork, but also (and perhaps even more so) for stimulating independent study and practice in the home and wider community. And it's all done by copying and pasting, much in the same way as you would create a link to, for example, a favourite YouTube video in a post to your Facebook or Twitter account.

So far, so easy and user-friendly. There are, of course, issues around finding appropriate source materials and using them without restriction, in addition to perhaps having to create transcripts in cases where they don't already exist. These can easily become time-consuming obstacles. Island Voices was lucky in that, in the initial years, there was staff-time allocated to creating both video materials and supporting transcripts, which enabled us to pre-stock the site with some ready-made examples of what can be done, as a means of encouraging local community members to experiment for themselves with producing User Generated Content which they could also contribute to the project. And, in the spirit of the Internet age, we made a point of ensuring that all content uploaded to the site was free of constraints in relation to Intellectual Property Rights, so that access would be free and open to all.

That can be quite a challenging ask, in some respects, but in a context of provision for Less Widely Used and Taught Languages, where resources are often scarce, we found that there was support for systems which allow the easy re-purposing of materials created for one language so that they can be used again with another. With Scottish Gaelic, for example, there are relatively close geographical and cultural links with Irish, and we have already worked with Irish language teachers to produce resources that are shared between the two languages. Examples can be found on the "Gaelic Journeys" page on the project website (https://guthan.wordpress.com/gaelic_journeys/), in which the same video sequence is used with both Irish and Scottish Gaelic commentaries to produce two separate films. But in fact, three separate films were created, as another commentary in English was also added to the video sequence. And once the commentaries are written and the films edited and uploaded onto YouTube, it takes just a few clicks of a mouse to also create three separate Clilstore units offering the learner-friendly facilities described above. So

the creative effort required to create one picture sequence has been rewarded (so far) by the production of learning materials in three different languages.

Are there further implications or applications here for less closely related Community Languages? Well, perhaps so. There's no technical reason, for example, why any of the scripted documentary pieces in the Island Voices Series One and Two collections, which already exist in English and Gaelic, could not be turned to use for other languages too. "Day care in Dari"? "Community journalism in Cantonese"? In principle, and given an understanding that all Community Language practitioners stand to gain by sharing ideas and resources, all it needs is for a commentary in the new language to be scripted and recorded, and then edited into the original picture sequence. That still entails a fair bit of work, but it's a lot less than would be required to create a whole new film from scratch.

I concede, of course, that many of the topics and situations from a Scottish island community will transfer across to a rural Irish context rather more easily than, say, to an urban English one. One size categorically cannot fit all. I may claim that one of the strengths of the Island Voices project is its rootedness in the lives of real community members, but if I change the language of presentation to one from outside that community I may simultaneously change and distance the observational stance from an internal to an external one. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does alter the nature of the viewing experience, which in turn has implications for the claims I can make for it. While "Peat-cutting in Polish" might speak to a degree of social reality, given the make-up of the ESOL population in the Western Isles, "Surfing in Sindhi" would probably be quite a few steps further removed! Nonetheless, the model of producing or adapting and sometimes re-purposing community-based User Generated Content may be one which could be adopted and developed further in other Community Language contexts. Similarly interesting collaborative work could surely be done, for instance, between Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi language interests in a mainland urban context, which would feel equally grounded and "real".

Furthermore, there is no need to view such a DIY method of materials production as some sort of second best, "make do and mend" approach, suitable only for languages not deemed worthy of receiving the kind of high end pedagogic support that, for example, English attracts. Particularly when the materials creation process is undertaken by learners themselves, or other community members, it really becomes an exciting and communally creative process, worthy indeed of the title "innovative". Younger people who have grown up with the new media technology are often far more adept at using it than older teachers like myself. If we can find the confidence to cede the requisite degree of responsibility to them to play a part in the creation and shaping of their own language learning paths we may well find they respond with genuine enthusiasm.

Conclusions

In summing up, I find myself wondering if we have yet fully appreciated the significance of the truly transformational change that has overtaken communicative practice in the past twenty years, particularly in relation to the new media and the multimodal choices they offer. Traditional newspapers, even broadcasters, struggle to hold onto their readerships or audiences as we increasingly move online for a more selective and interactive experience, aiming to produce as well as consume. We can all aspire to be “citizen journalists” now, in both print and broadcast formats.

And as with news media, so with education. The University of the Highlands and Islands (of which Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is a constituent part) prides itself, as a relatively new institution, on having overcome “the tyranny of distance” as it seeks to deliver its services across a landmass roughly half the size of Scotland, together with scores of offshore islands. From its very inception it has engaged with new communications technology, with the aim of connecting disparate rural communities not just with a central hub but also with each other. While I very much doubt it is “out on its own” ahead of the rest in respect of harnessing the new media for educational purposes, I’d be surprised to find that it is way behind either, which perhaps offers a refreshing counter-example to the traditionally expected pattern of initial urban innovation followed some time later by rural adoption. By the same token, a “metropolis and periphery” model, with cultural leadership and innovation assumed by the “centre”, is probably not a healthy way to conceptualise Gaelic development, and I venture the same may be true for other Community Languages too, especially where present-day multilingual urban communities in Britain are the relatively recent result of migration from localities some distance away. With the advent of Internet and mobile technology, that geographical distance may be much less of a barrier now, in terms of continuing links between “heartland” and “diaspora”, than was the case even two decades ago, back in the Twentieth Century. The latest musical fusion experiments in Pushtu or Baluchi, for example, are instantly available on the Coke Studio Pakistan YouTube channel all over the world (including the Outer Hebrides!), and easily enjoyed, appreciated, and passed on via social media to friends and family irrespective of their physical location.

Nor should we conflate “urban” with “cool”. Clearly, young people can have an important part to play in ongoing language maintenance if only because, from any particular day forward, they are going to have more time on this earth potentially speaking the language than those who are older. That is a statement of the obvious, but it is far from clear to me that that necessarily or effectively translates across into top-down language planning or teaching strategies which may seem to fetishise youth, or try to appear trendy by jumping on a “metrolingual” bandwagon. I personally may well be too old and institutionalised to have an idea of what is, or can be, currently cool, but I suspect that any organised attempt to predict, shape or co-opt coolness “for official purposes” ends up being very uncool indeed. I make this point not in order to dismiss the possibility of valid insights or contributions from

an urban context or perspective, but to warn against an easy or complacent assumption that the metropolis is necessarily the “happening” place in which new thinking must start.

Having uttered those words of caution, I do still wish to end on a positive note. Looking ahead, the picture for Gaelic is certainly not without its challenges, particularly if the situation is viewed solely through census-style numerical eyes. The “numbers game” has its place, no doubt, particularly in the political sphere where actors balance and juggle diverse interests and imperatives, assessing the weight of support for competing demands for action and resources. But it is a crude game, and nobody really believes that all of life’s complexities can be fully represented, explained, or catered for from a purely quantitative perspective.

In my preamble I made reference to the strong affective pull that a language like Gaelic can exert on those of us who find more in language than just the utilitarian communication of functional, transactional messages. I think the same may well hold true for other Community Languages too, as they naturally carry associations with familial connections or other cultural identities which the English language on its own may reflect only inadequately. These are issues with broad societal and political implications, as we continue to wrestle with big questions around migration and cultural diversity within and across national boundaries, and appropriate educational responses to those circumstances. So we who care about the language learning exercise as a healthy and holistic experience can remain confident, in my view, that all the clear-eyed and appropriately targeted support we can muster for building true and continuing bilingualism is intrinsically worthwhile, no matter how counter-intuitive it sometimes seems. Yes, it’s complex, but so are people, and it’s by committing to engage with human complexities, I would suggest, that we stand the best chance of bringing ongoing “life” to all our languages in a meaningful way, through their continued and valued use in our society. And if we can support each other in that endlessly challenging task, even in the smallest of ways, so much the better.

As a final postscript we may note that work of this nature can also make a worthwhile research contribution beyond the world of language teaching. To quote Professor Conchúr Ó Giollaigáin at the University of the Highlands and Islands, “Guthan nan Eilean may also be seen as creative initial steps in an emerging agenda of documentation of natural language in the socio-cultural context of minority language fragility. The project demonstrates how the community of speakers can take a pro-active and productive role alongside language researchers in this vital task.”

So, would anyone like to produce a new film on “Furniture repair in Farsi”? You know where to find me, but who knows where it might lead? ;-)

References

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