

## Reading Island Voices: Issues around the primacy of speech and the privileging of literacy, from a Hebridean viewpoint.

Paper by Gordon Wells for the Reading Aloud in Britain Today (RABiT) symposium “Everyday Reading: Explorations in Literacy and Oracy” at UCL Institute of Education, 17/11/18.

### Abstract

Divergent views on the relative value or status of spoken and written language skills may contribute to a disconnect between lay community members and language professionals, activists, or academics, and conflicted approaches to language support, teaching and/or revitalisation. Taking the bilingual Outer Hebrides as a case study, an online language capture and curation project is described which attempts to engage with these issues, acknowledging an important place for Reading Aloud in the range of strategies employed.

### Introduction

I’m going to start with one of Sam Duncan’s quotes, and a couple of others in order to set the scene. I will then outline the local language situation in the Hebrides, and describe the Island Voices “community broadcasting” project in which I’m involved. I will finish with some generalised reflections stimulated by a focus on Reading Aloud. That will complete this paper, which – in the spirit of the event – I propose to “read aloud”!

Are you sitting comfortably?

First, I got this quote from Sam, following her talk in Skye about the RABiT project. It was from her pilot study, from a man who talked to her about reading aloud in various contexts: to his son; to learn songs as a musician; to write – both songs and anything else; to learn a language; and sometimes for his own reading of any text when he was alone.

He said, **“It feels more real that way. When I can feel it in my mouth, say it and hear it.”**<sup>1</sup>

I’ll repeat that – for effect!

**“It feels more real that way. When I can feel it in my mouth, say it and hear it.”**

Call me partial, but I find that a nicely affirmative and common sense way of asserting the Primacy of Speech, a fundamental principle of modern European, or Western, linguistics since at least the first half of the Twentieth Century<sup>2</sup>. It’s axiomatic that spoken language really is “more real”.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Duncan (2018), personal correspondence, quoting anonymous participant in the Reading Aloud in Lewisham pilot study, 2013-2014

<sup>2</sup> Eg. Chafe, Wallace and Deborah Tannen (1987) The relation between written and spoken language. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 16: 383-407.

By contrast, my second quote is reconstructed from memory after a community meeting I attended in Benbecula in the late nineties, at which concerns over the state of Gaelic development were being discussed. This came from a middle-aged lady:

**“Bidh sinn ga bruidhinn, ach cha do dh’ionnsaich sinn leughadh is sgrìobhadh. Ach an-diugh bidh a’ chlann a’ faighinn Gàidhlig san sgoil, agus mar sin tha iadsan nas fheàrr sa chànan na tha sinne.”**

I’ll repeat that also, but this time in English, for the benefit of any non-speakers of Gaelic.

**“We can speak it, but we didn’t learn reading and writing. But children today get Gaelic in school, so they’re better in the language than us.”**

Let’s call the underlying sentiment here optimistic. I offer it as an example of the “privileging of literacy”. I mean by this a tendency to accord higher status or respect to reading and writing skills than to speaking and listening. As I’ll explain in more detail later, twenty years down the line, concerns over the state of Gaelic have hardly abated – if anything, they’ve intensified. This impels me straightaway to feel the need to qualify the “optimistic” label here with “naively”, or perhaps even “wildly”.

My third quote is contemporary, dating from June this year, 2018. And while conversational in style, it’s actually a piece of written English submitted as a comment by a self-identifying but anonymous Gael on the Bellacaledonia website. It was posted in response to an article by an adult learner of Gaelic, which was itself written in defence of the language in the face of hostile media coverage:

**"ANOTHER Gaelic learner presenting themselves as us. Joke. Sick of Gaelic learners. They’re not US. You just went to some evening class and are a TOTAL joke. You’re a bunch of hipsters that STOLE our language to get jobs and attention. You’re not US."**<sup>3</sup>

I don’t think I need to repeat that one. The sentiment is clear.

If the first quote was affirmative, and the second optimistic, the third, taken at face value, is plainly angry. In all cases emotions are engaged, but how do we make sense of the deeply felt discord in the last? Do we put it down to individual animus? We don’t know the author, so the question of representativeness is fair. But I believe I have an explanation which doesn’t depend on pathologising either the writer or the community, but which does require an acknowledgement of the values commonly associated with spoken and written language and their implications, both in the local context and at a more generalised level.

### The Outer Hebrides and Gaelic

So, we need some sort of facts and figures to give a picture of the language situation in the Hebrides, for which I turn to the 2011 Census<sup>4</sup>, always bearing in mind that these figures are

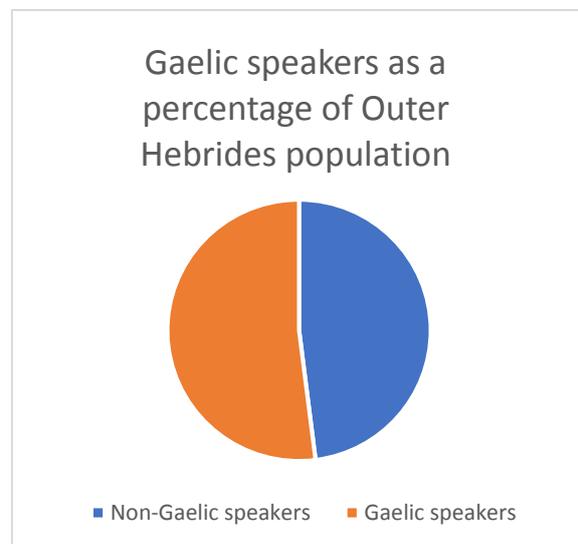
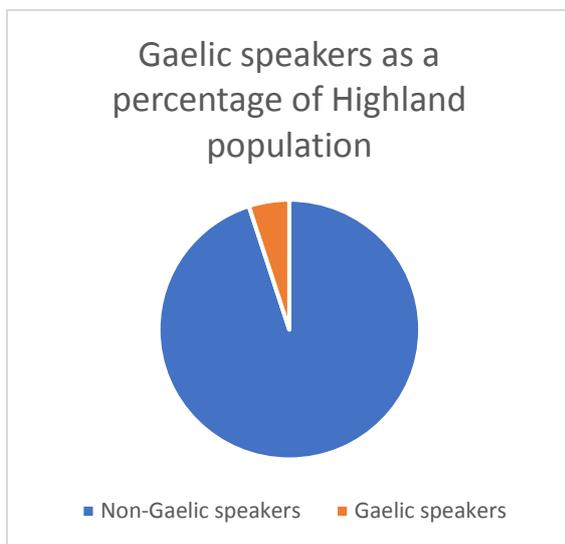
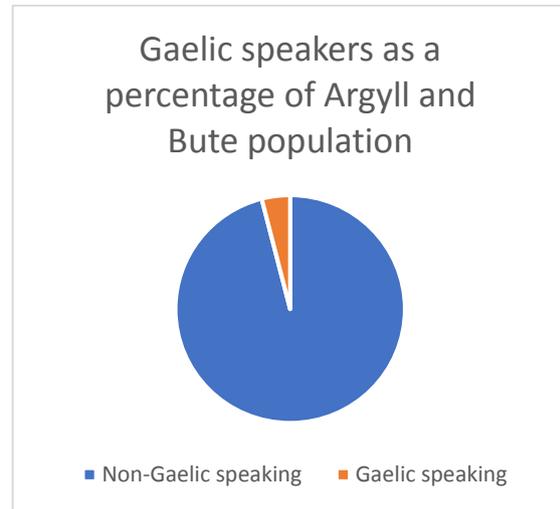
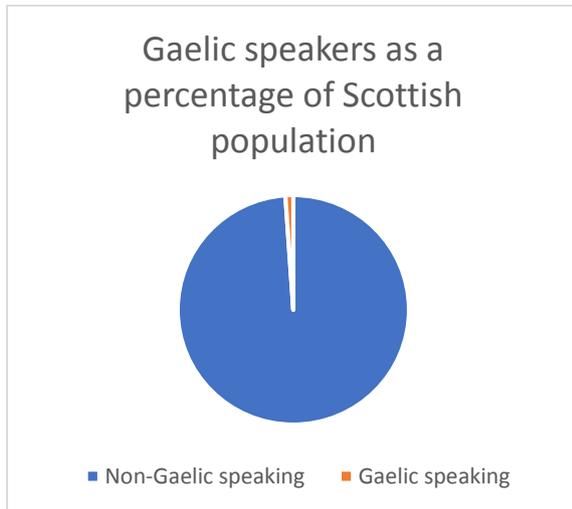
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<sup>3</sup> <https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2018/05/31/a-response-to-the-scottish-mail-on-sunday-anti-gaelic-agenda/>  
Accessed August 2018

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/documents/censusresults/release2a/StatsBulletin2A.pdf> Accessed August 2018

based on self-report answers to fairly simple questions about language behaviour. There are two key points I would wish to highlight.

Firstly, for Scotland as a whole, the proportion of the population aged 3 and over able to speak Gaelic was 1.1 per cent (58,000 people). The council areas with the highest proportions able to speak Gaelic were Na h-Eileanan Siar – the Outer Hebrides – (52 per cent), Highland (5 per cent) and Argyll & Bute (4 per cent).<sup>5</sup>



Secondly, the proportion of the population aged 3 and over in Scotland who could speak, read, write or understand Gaelic was 1.7 per cent (87,000). Within this group, the number of people who could speak, read and write Gaelic in 2011 was 32,000, 0.6 per cent of the population aged 3 and over.

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<sup>5</sup> The forthcoming Ó Giollaáin et al report on the Islands Gaelic Research Project, following the principles of the Ó Giollaáin et al (2007) 'Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht', will provide fine-grained information on Hebridean Gaelic use at a level of detail not accessible through Census data: <http://www.cogg.ie/wp-content/uploads/Linguistic-Study-of-the-Use-of-Irish-in-the-Gaeltacht.pdf>



The key points to emphasise are firstly, the stand-out nature of the proportion of Gaelic speakers in the Outer Hebrides – still over half the population – in comparison with all other regions of Scotland, and secondly the discrepancy in number between those who speak, read, write, OR understand, and those who speak, read, AND write. As we’ve heard, reading and writing are generally a function of educational experience, and Gaelic literacy did not form a significant part of the education of many of the older – and better – Gaelic speakers. I should stress that point. Despite the optimistic view I quoted earlier, the clear consensus is that the best Gaelic-speaking skills are found in the older generation<sup>6</sup>. Heroic efforts are now being made to turn the tide, but, even in the Outer Hebrides, Gaelic is no longer the language of the playground, and hasn’t been for a generation or two. In other words, a large chunk of the discrepancy between the two figures quoted is down to fluent speakers of the language who either don’t, or feel they can’t, read it.

Does that mean they’re illiterate? Absolutely not. Literacy rates are as high in the Western Isles as anywhere else, perhaps higher than most places. But it’s a literacy gained and practised in English, not in Gaelic.

So, here’s a problem, or at least a “mismatch”, if I can sum up the picture so far. Whether your concern is Gaelic revitalisation from a cultural or political point of view, or indeed simply the maintenance of a “Healthy Linguistic Diet”<sup>7</sup> in educational or broader cognitive or welfare terms, the indications are troubling, or conflicted. What is felt to be “good Gaelic” is largely the preserve of an older generation who speak it comfortably. By contrast, their children and grandchildren may actively engage with it mainly as a part of formal education, and their success or failure in the language (including any literacy they acquire) is viewed mostly as a function of formal schooling. This means, in experiential terms, that it must feel “less real”, even if, as recognised educational attainment, it outshines the apparent achievements of the older generation. This is a discomfiting social dynamic, or disconnect,

<sup>6</sup> Ó Maolalaigh, R et al (2014). *Dlùth is Inneach – Final Project Report Linguistic and Institutional Foundations for Gaelic Corpus Planning*. (Bòrd na Gàidhlig) <http://www.gaidhlig.scot/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/%C3%93-Maolalaigh-et-al.-2014-Planadh-corpais-CR12-03-Corpus-planning.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Bak, T, & Mehmedbegovic, D (2017), ‘Healthy linguistic diet: the value of linguistic diversity and language learning across the lifespan’ <http://www.meits.org/policy-papers/paper/healthy-linguistic-diet>

in which the privileging of literacy arguably serves to obscure or indeed undermine the primacy of speech. Now, add to this mix interventions in the language planning or activism sphere from seemingly clever, probably well-meaning, outsiders who have learnt Gaelic formally (often as adults, perhaps at a mainland university), and thus mastered a writing system which remains a mystery to the untrained eye. If these people aspire to speak, often in strangely accented Gaelic, on behalf of the language and its speakers, without having personally experienced its internal community tensions and having been seen so to do, it should not be too difficult to appreciate how their efforts may not be greeted with uniform enthusiasm, or felt to have much immediate relevance for ordinary speakers. The potential for planning dysfunction to result is then evident.

If this description gives at least a taste of the problems with which those who take to do with socially relevant language scholarship and action need to engage, the next question is naturally about solutions. Bluntly speaking, are there any? Well, there may be, but the problems are complex, so we should beware of pat answers. There is certainly no silver bullet that will simultaneously sort every layer of issue, from the macro to the micro. Having said that, I would like to talk a bit about the Island Voices project and its own rationale and potential contribution, and highlight how the new insights that Sam and her project have stimulated have served to refine our thinking on the role of Reading Aloud in particular.

### Island Voices and Reading Aloud

Island Voices started in 2005 as a contribution to, and later a spin-off from, a two-year European Leonardo Project for language learners and teachers, and it's been going ever since. Broadly speaking, we call it a "language capture and curation project". It is now multilingual, though the main focus is still on Gaelic and English. The emphasis is on the production of short recordings (generally 3-5 minutes long) which are placed online for open access. In the early years most recordings were created by project staff, and they were of two kinds – what we called "documentaries" and "interviews". The documentary clips give a plain language or "teacher talk" introduction to a local topic or event. These, crucially, are complemented with more challenging authentic speech interviews with actively involved community members. These give the viewer a closer and more personal insight into the subject at hand.

Here are some examples:

<b><u>Peatcutting</u></b> <i>Clilstore Unit 624</i>	<b><u>Buain na Mònadh</u></b> <i>Clilstore Unit 724</i>
Interview: Peatcutter Archie Campbell (Process) <i>Clilstore Unit 625</i>	Agallamh: Eairdsidh Caimbeul (Buain) <i>Clilstore Unit 725</i>
Interview: Peatcutter Archie Campbell (Social practices) <i>Clilstore Unit 626</i>	Agallamh: Eairdsidh Caimbeul (Cleachdaidhean) <i>Clilstore Unit 726</i>

In later years, the project has gone on to encourage community members to create and contribute their own pieces to the collection. This has resulted in a wide variety of themes and genres being explored and shared. In addition to the original Series One and Two, we now have pages and pages of links ranging through [Bonnie Prince Charlie](#) to [The Great War](#), and from the reciting of short stories to long and detailed sessions of individual reflection and reminiscence. And in the latest twist, under a “[Sharing Gaelic Voices](#)” slogan, we have encouraged the re-purposing of the original documentaries to incorporate newly scripted and translated voiceovers in other languages than English and Gaelic, taking the number of languages now represented into double figures.

Here's a Polish example:

## Kopanie torfu: Peatcutting in Polish

23/04/2016

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Krótki film dokumentalny w języku polskim dla uczących się języka o kopaniu torfu w Uist.

Film aithriseach goirid ann am Pòlainnis airson luchd-ionnsachaidh mu dheidhinn buain na monadh ann an Uibhist.

Short Polish documentary for language learners about peatcutting in Uist.

While you watch and listen you can read a transcript with online dictionary access to every single word on this [Clilstore unit](#): <http://multidict.net/cs/4130>

In terms of rough metrics, the website and social media have thousands of followers, and YouTube hits sailed past quarter of a million in the middle of this year. Still more pleasingly for me as the project co-ordinator, over the course of the project so far, scores of local groups and organisations, and hundreds of community members have participated and contributed. This suggests to me we must be doing something right. What is it? And what's it got to do with Reading Aloud?

My answer to the first question lies in the title of the project – Guthan nan Eilean, or Island Voices – and the priorities or ethos which it is intended to signal. From the start, we were fully signed up to the Primacy of Speech, wishing to explicitly profile the highly developed vocal resource embedded in ordinary community members, while also accommodating the written word as an optional supportive accompaniment without according it “special privileges”.

In the 150 Series One and Two videos, unscripted authentic speech interviews outnumber the scripted “plain language” documentaries by two to one. This reflected our initial conviction of the need, not just to provide access for learners to naturally spoken language, but also to underline to community contributors how important and valuable their spoken language skills were, irrespective of whether or not they could also read and write. As the project moved on to welcome more community contributions we were pleased that they came from many corners in a process, we would like to think, that encourages islanders to assert their own “ownership” of their own language. But it would be disingenuous not to

make particular mention of the massive contribution of the late and famous Norman Maclean. Such was the volume of his output he has his own page on the Island Voices website, which includes three and a half hours of free-wheeling conversation and reminiscence – as well as a hilarious collection of short stories, written and recited by himself:



This collection of six Gaelic stories (plus an introduction) was created by Norman Maclean – Tormod MacGill-Eain. The recordings were made during visits to his house by Gordon Wells in October 2015. In the “links” column you can click on “Youtube” to go directly to the recording of the appropriate story. A “Clilstore” link will take you to a wordlinked transcript. You can click on any word to take you directly to an online dictionary to find its meaning.

So the project has undoubtedly had its successes, which validate its underlying purpose to give greater exposure and prominence to the spoken word – particularly when it’s unscripted, “authentic speech”. However, the fact that illiteracy may lead to an undervaluing of one’s own spoken linguistic skills does not lead to the conclusion that the REvaluation of oracy should depend on a DEvaluation of the written word. The RABiT focus on Reading Aloud has thrown this false opposition into clear relief. And I find ample examples in the body of Island Voices work to challenge this polarisation. What is Reading Aloud, RABiT forced me to ask myself, if not the voicing of written, i.e. scripted, language? And what, then, is the voiceover commentary on a video documentary, or the recording of a story in one’s best “Listen with Mother” style, if not an example of Reading Aloud?

Drawing to a close, it seems to me that this Hebridean case study that I’ve sketchily presented here, even if it doesn’t offer off-the-shelf solutions to other people’s problems, may nonetheless prompt some general questions that could be usefully asked in a range of Applied Linguistic concerns. In the context of language teaching and learning there are issues around learner involvement, use of technology, the balance between authentic and scripted materials and so on. And at a more general language planning level, particularly in minority language contexts, deeper reflection may be called for on some fundamental assumptions and expectations in respect of speaking and writing skills, and perhaps even some closer self-examination on the part of researchers and activists in relation to the links and linguistic power relations between academy and community.

Obviously, there are significant differences between spoken and written language, not least in terms of the density of argument each can effectively carry in the same number of words, and the different ways they do that. This is not a controversial point, I believe, and one of

which I have been forcibly reminded while preparing this script for reading aloud. Professional broadcasters, of course, know this well and good ones have perfected the skill of obscuring the distinction. In summing up I thus find myself confronting the question of whether, in my mission to defend and promote linguistics' assertion of the primacy of speech I may reinforce a false dichotomy. Yes, spoken language is an immensely powerful human tool, and should be understood thus on its own terms, complete in itself. This fact should not be used to take away from the additive value of written language, properly viewed as a useful adjunct. The problem occurs if the juxtaposition of speech and writing comes to be framed as a polarising opposition. The practice of Reading Aloud, and the study of it through projects such as this, for me at least expose the fuzziness of the boundary between supposedly discrete skills, and throw into relief the applied value of blurring the lines.

Perhaps this is a topic worthy of further research in greater depth in coming years?

### Further Reading:

#### Research/Reports

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In addition to pursuing practical community-based actions the project maintains a research and reporting perspective, particularly in relation to language learning, bilingualism, and languages and digital media.

The reports, articles, and other papers listed below have been produced in collaboration with a range of organisations or institutions with an interest in language research and development. Some focus on Island Voices specifically, while the others draw on the work of the project as part of a wider topic or debate of local or more general interest.

Perceptions of Gaelic Learning and Use in a Bilingual Island Community: an Exploratory Study (2011)	<a href="#">Full report here</a> <a href="#">Am Pàipear summary here</a>
ESOL in the Hebrides and Island Voices: “Hey, hang on a minute, tha mise bilingual!” (2012)	Chapter 12 (p153) in <a href="#">this book</a>
Gaelic Digital Literacies in a Bilingual Community: a Sampling of Practices and Preferences (2013)	<a href="#">Full report here</a> <a href="#">Am Pàipear summary here</a>
CALL Support in Context: Contrasting Approaches in Irish and Scottish Gaelic (2014)	<a href="#">Full report here</a>
Sharing Gaelic Voices: Peat-cutting in Polish, or Surfing in Sindhi? (2016)	<a href="#">Full report here</a>
Saoghal Thormoid – Norman’s World: Synopses and Transcripts, and Foreword by Conchúr Ó Giollagàin (2017)	<a href="#">Full volume here</a>