

# Grammatical Change in a Not So Dying Dialect: Genitive Mutation in Uist Gaelic

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## 1 Introduction

It is well documented that language shift and reduction of grammatical systems often go hand in hand (Schmidt 1985, Dorian 1981, Sasse 1992a, 1992b), but language shift is not the only possible cause of grammatical restructuring in a language and while radical restructuring is likely to be the result of intensive language contact (Thomason and Kaufman 1988, Thomason 2001, McWhorter 2007), ‘local collapses in inflectional paradigms are commonplace in language change’ (McWhorter 2007: 8). Structural changes, as evidenced in morphosyntactic variation present in the speech of language users, as a result of natural, internally motivated restructuring can often appear similar to those features which appear as a result of, and which are therefore indicative of, impending language shift. The relationship between variation as a result of internal factors, language contact and language shift is not a continuum of change but rather the existence of similar observable features stemming from three separate but related sociolinguistic phenomena, each with its own group of factors and motivations. Establishing the origin of a variant or change-in-progress feature is therefore not an easy task, and relies on more than purely linguistic factors in isolation of social factors. Aspects of language contact, which must necessarily be present in cases of language shift as speakers need a language to shift *to*, go some way to explaining this complex interaction of factors, as do speakers’ competence in and attitudes towards the relevant languages. In this paper, I consider the nature and significance of language change in the variety of Scottish Gaelic spoken in the isles of Uist in the Outer Hebrides, and ask ‘does decay in a minority language always mean shift?’

The Gaelic-Arvanitika Model (GAM) of language shift, developed by Sasse and Dorian through their work on moribund varieties of Scottish Gaelic in East Sutherland and Albanian in Greece, has significantly advanced our understanding of the complex combination of factors which impact on a language in its final stages (e.g. Dorian 1977a, 1981, Sasse Cole, Beth. 2013. ‘Grammatical Change in a Not So Dying Dialect: Genitive Mutation in Uist Gaelic’. In Cruickshank, Janet and Robert McColl Millar (eds.) 2013. *After the Storm: Papers from the Forum for Research on the Languages of Scotland and Ulster triennial meeting, Aberdeen 2012*. Aberdeen: Forum for Research on the Languages of Scotland and Ireland, 117-39. ISBN: 978-0-9566549-3-9

1992a, 1992b), recognising that the *external setting*, *speech behaviour* and *structural changes* are all equally important factors. In isolation, any one of these elements would be insufficient, but in combination they form the basis of any understanding of language change. However, although figures from the 2001 Scottish Census show the number of Gaelic speakers across Scotland is dwindling, approaching an analysis of language variation and change in Uist in purely the terms laid out in GAM has the potential not only to miss features which do not fit the model, but also to fail to consider what other processes in language change they may represent. In this paper I consider morphological variation in Uist Gaelic without the assumption that it necessarily indicates language shift, but instead taking into account the contribution that language contact and language change approaches also have to offer.

Any sociolinguistic research into Scottish Gaelic in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century must take account of, and ideally try to reconcile, at least three separate issues:

1. Scottish Gaelic is undoubtedly in a *language contact* situation,
2. Scottish Gaelic is arguably in a *language shift* situation<sup>1</sup>,
3. Scottish Gaelic, like all languages, is subject to *internally motivated linguistic change*.

These three linguistic scenarios are all individually capable of producing strikingly similar structural outcomes, and in combination those outcomes may be so similar that a clear source is impossible to determine, if indeed only one source was responsible for the changes. However, while it is well known that similar structural consequences arise from the three scenarios, there are also important differences, especially in the motivation for those consequences. My research in Uist aims to combine these three approaches in order to come to an integrated understanding of the most prominent factors in current, and future, structural change in Scottish Gaelic.

As a result of the different approaches available, a variety of possibilities arise:

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<sup>1</sup> A distinction is being made here between *social* and *structural* evidence for language shift. The former is undoubtedly present across Scotland for Gaelic, even in the traditional heartlands, with low rates of intergenerational transmission and daily usage both features of the present position the language holds in society (cf. Mac an Tàilleir, Rothach and Armstrong 2011). However, in order for a solid conclusion of language shift to be reached, the structural state of the language as well as the social state must be considered, and this parameter has yet to be fully explored for Scottish Gaelic.

- a) Structural change is motivated by the merger of grammatical categories in contact languages to produce one system with two forms (Sasse 1992b).
- b) Structural change is the result of interrupted transmission of the language as the community shifts from the minority to the dominant language (Thomason 2001).
- c) Structural change is the result of the universal tendency for languages to drift in a particular, predictable direction as a result of, for example, analogical levelling and extension, grammaticalisation and loss of final unstressed syllables (Sapir 1921, McMahan 1994), and would be likely to arise regardless of external factors.
- d) Structural change results from a combination of a, b and c.

In this paper I consider data from eight native Gaelic speakers aged between 30 and 80 across North Uist, South Uist and Benbecula, gathered from translation tasks during semi-structured interviews.

While Gaelic in Uist is in a somewhat similar situation to the Gaelic of East Sutherland that Nancy Dorian studied, it should not be considered entirely comparable. Gaelic in Uist is in a contact situation with English and Scots, and the number of Gaelic speakers across Scotland in general is indeed receding each decade suggesting a probable process of language shift, with no monolingual Gaelic speakers over the age of three left on the islands according to the 2001 Census. In other heartlands areas such as Shawbost in Lewis, intergenerational transmission of the language has not yet completely ceased although it is far from the norm (Mac an Tàilleir, Rothach and Armstrong 2011) and it is reasonable to assume a similar situation for Uist. However, in Uist the number and proportion of Gaelic speakers remains high, with 67.3% of residents in South Uist and Benbecula and 68.6% of residents in North Uist self-reporting an ability to speak the language in the 2001 Census. This creates a particularly interesting situation where the minority language is not in fact a minority in the area in which it is being studied. How this impacts on the types and rates of change in the language is an extremely interesting question.

Underpinning this paper is the complex interaction of: the underlying tendency for Indo-European languages to drift from synthetic to analytic, the dominant language contact situation in which Gaelic finds itself in relation to English, and the influence of factors involved in language shift such as interrupted intergenerational transmission. It will not be assumed

that Uist Gaelic is inevitably dying, but rather the data will be analysed to see which of the possible sources of language change most accurately describes the situation as it stands today.

## **2 Previous Research**

There is an abundance of previous research into morphosyntactic change, from the variety of perspectives which are of interest here. Considering structural changes in the first instance as an internally motivated phenomenon, previous research into English and German has shown that restructuring of, and indeed reduction in, grammatical systems is entirely possible without causing language shift. German, for example, seems to be in the process of reorganising its case system so that prepositions which take genitive marking in Standard German increasingly take dative marking in line with many other prepositions in spoken German, in particular those which lack an element of movement (Petig 1997). While language contact may also be a factor in this case<sup>2</sup>, the argument for an externally motivated cause is not strong as the development lacks features consistent with remodelling on the contact language or significant imperfect learning. Therefore, although this change could be described as a ‘decay’ in the system, internally motivated change provides a more convincing explanation. German is far from a minority language and shows no other signs consistent with language shift, and yet its case system is showing evidence of disintegration. Language shift can therefore not be the only explanation for this type of change. English also showed radical disintegration of its inflectional system (Millar 2007), and although language contact was also almost certainly involved in this process, the catalyst for the series of adjustments which brought about English’s change from a synthetic to an analytical language seems to have been the internal loss of vowel distinctions in final syllables and the loss of the majority of final consonants. Again, this radical change in the grammatical structure has not yet brought about the death of English.

Even in other Celtic languages, restructuring of systems has been a feature without causing widespread disintegration of the languages themselves. Welsh, for example, lost all trace of its case system at around the time it separated from British and began its journey towards the language we know today (Koch 1981), and Breton is losing its characteristic

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<sup>2</sup> For example, 56% of the population of Germany also speaks English, cf [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_243\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_243_en.pdf)

VSO word order in favour of dominant Indo-European SVO (Varin, 1979, Timm, 1989).

It appears, then, that grammatical change, even radical change, is not sufficient in itself to bring about language shift and in many cases does not even point towards that possibility. We know that research into language shift, e.g. Dorian (1981) on Gaelic, Schmidt (1985) on Dyirbal, Sasse (1992a, 1992b) on Arvanitika, and Gal (1979) on Hungarian, has highlighted structural changes as an important part of the processes. However, radical grammatical change can also be a feature of language contact; indeed, for some (e.g. McWhorter 2007) the only explanation for this level of change is significant external pressure from interrupted transmission and sustained and widespread non-native acquisition. Whether or not the linguistic effects of change through contact and change through shift are significantly different from each other is still being ferociously debated.

While language contact does not always cause language shift, language shift is ‘almost always the result of intensive language contact’ (Thomason 2001: 233) and as a result it can be extremely difficult to determine which phenomenon is at work in a given situation. When the language under investigation is more conclusively in a language shift situation, separating any linguistic changes into those which arose through contact and those which point to shift is perhaps not so important, but for the present paper, which focuses on a variety which is not conclusively dying, teasing apart the features to see which are the more potentially worrying is essential. Several, at times competing, approaches to an explanation of the difference between the two phenomena are available, and the lack of cohesion between them may in fact simply be indicative of the complexity of the issue.

Thomason (2001) outlined three possibilities for how features can be transferred from one language to another – loss of features, addition of features, and replacement of features – in a variety of contact situations across the globe. For example, Semitic languages in Ethiopia have lost dual-number as a result of contact with Cushitic languages which lack such a number distinction; Marathi and Bengali have added a distinction between inclusive and exclusive *we* through contact with Dravidian languages; and many French loan words in English eventually replaced the earlier Germanic word, with the original either being lost altogether or remaining but with a much restricted meaning, e.g. stool/chair, deer/animal.

Replacement in language contact is particularly interesting as it highlights the parallels between internal and external change. For an element to be replaced there must necessarily be a certain amount of competition for a time before one variant overthrows another. However, both variants may be native, as in the case of English plural suffixes. For a time *-en* and *-s* were equally productive, but eventually *-s* became dominant (Thomason 2001: 89) just as the loan word *chair* became the dominant term for something to sit on, with *stool* being relegated to its much more restricted sense.

The aspect of language contact with perhaps the greatest relevance to the linguistic effects of language shift is whether or not imperfect learning of the target language has occurred. However, even this is not an inevitable feature of language shift, and it may also be a feature of the maintenance of contact languages. Although Thomason (2001) views imperfect learning of the dominant language as the direction of change, it may in fact also work in the other direction. For example, it cannot be said that Gaelic speakers have experienced imperfect learning of English, the dominant language, and therefore the substratum interference that Thomason would predict as a result of imperfect learning is not relevant in this situation. However, imperfect learning of Gaelic itself, through a failure of intergenerational transmission and the increasing social dominance of English is undoubtedly a feature. There then develops a context of superstratum influence, but with more than simple borrowing.

At this point the theories have taken us as far as they can and we are reminded of Weinreich's (1953) observation that at the centre of any linguistic change are the individual speakers. Understanding the dynamics of the speech community, and if possible the organisation of the languages in the minds of bilingual speakers, becomes central.

One approach is to highlight the importance of a distinction between two types of threatened language speakers, who both display an imperfect level of competence to some degree (Sasse, 1992b). The difference between *forgetters* and *semi-speakers proper* is the stage at which the linguistic deficit developed. Forgetters, or rusty speakers, have simply forgotten elements of the language through lack of use over time, while semi-speakers experienced interrupted transmission of the language to such an extent that an imperfect command of it developed to a pathological degree from the outset (Sasse, 1992b: 61). This develops Dorian's original division between fluent speakers and semi-speakers which only identified one group of imperfect speakers. However, this may have been due to the types of

speakers that were available to Dorian and Sasse rather than a lack of awareness on Dorian's part that variation existed in the semi-speaker group.

The distinction between types of semi-speakers is central to understanding what types of features they may incorporate into the language under consideration, with semi-speakers being responsible for Thomason's shift induced interference involving imperfect learning, and forgetters bringing about changes which do not result from imperfect learning. For Sasse, this difference is key to understanding how decay which leads to language shift and decay which reflects language contact develop.

What features, then, can we expect as a result of these two types of speakers? Armenian, while not threatened with extinction, lost gender through contact with Turkish, while Ulaghatch was seen to remodel its entire morphological system on that of Turkish to such an extent that a one-to-one morphological correspondence developed (Sasse, 1992b: 66-68). This can hardly be considered simplification or decay in these languages' systems, but it would have been unlikely to develop without language contact. These types of changes were brought about by bilingual speakers and forgetters, motivated by a desire to develop a correspondence between the two languages so that two forms reflected one system. Parallel structures (or lack of) must therefore exist in the two contact languages if bilingual speakers are the driving force behind structural change. Any changes which develop are then transmitted to the next generation as part of the language itself through the, still intact, process of intergenerational transmission. Semi-speaker features, however, show no such motivation; the changes in their language lack clear correspondences in the contact language, and in some cases even lack a logical, internally motivated cause (Sasse 1992b). Loss of morphology in itself does not therefore mean the language is defective; it is the motivation behind the changes and the type of speakers making them that carries greater importance.

While there are certain predictions that can be made in language shift situations, with certain features being more likely to be borrowed than others, the logic of the theory is not always found in the observable features. Andersen (1982) (cited in Campbell and Muntzel 1989) for example identified three likely outcomes of language shift – a) bilingual speakers would make fewer phonological distinctions than monolingual speakers, b) distinctions which are common to both languages would be preserved, and c) distinctions with a higher functional load would be preserved for longer, all of which can equally be applied to morphological and syntactic change as well. While Dorian (1981) found evidence of fewer distinctions being

made between her fluent and semi-speakers, the patterns did not strictly follow Andersen's other two predictions.

In her work in East Sutherland Gaelic (ESG), Dorian (1981) not only found a difference in the types of Gaelic speakers available but also the types of morphological and syntactic features they produced. While the variation found in fluent-speaker and semi-speaker speech has formed much of the basis for our understanding of language shift, not all the features conform to Andersen's predictions. For example, Dorian (1973) found that initial mutation following certain lenition-triggering adjuncts such as *glè* (very), *ro* (too) and *dhà* (two) remained strong in East Sutherland despite the mutation carrying no grammatical significance. However, constructions where substantial ambiguity was a risk if the standard mutation was not applied were highly variable for semi-speakers, e.g. passive constructions which require two mutations – lenition and suffixation – where the failure of either results in an entirely different category being produced. Similarly, Andersen's (1982) prediction that distinctions common to both languages will be more resistant to change was not observed in ESG, where genitive mutation in possessives were moribund despite English having a strong and productive genitive marking system (Dorian 1981). ESG did however retain the original genitive word order, maintaining some grammatical relationship marking in the dialect's final stages (Dorian 1981).

In particular, Dorian (1973) found marked difficulties among semi-speakers in the application of lenition<sup>3</sup> and the expected mutation of feminine nouns. This was especially salient in the genitive case, with avoidance of genitive-triggering constructions also a strong feature of semi-speaker speech (Dorian 1973), suggesting it may be a particularly vulnerable structure for Gaelic.

It seems, then, that internal linguistic features and commonalities between the languages in question cannot be the only, or even most important, factor in predicting the outcome of language shift. Indeed, the importance of speaker proficiency and attitudes towards the threatened language has been particularly highlighted (e.g. Sasse 1992b, Thomason 2001). Sasse (1992b), for example, found that the presence of elders with high proficiency *and* a positive attitude towards the language produced the most favourable outcomes in terms of the type of speaker and, therefore, the types of variation which developed.

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<sup>3</sup> Slenderisation as a productive mutation in ESG had already disappeared at the time of Dorian's research.



Most research into language shift and language contact has shown that the patterns of change are very similar in both, and while we have developed a good understanding of what *can* happen in contact situations, what marks language shift out as different has been difficult to pinpoint. The same variety of changes is possible, and the same level of vagueness about what happens in which situation is present for the two situations. Obviously, any language shift situation must necessarily involve language contact as the speakers of the moribund variety must have another language to shift to. But nonetheless, there is something special about language shift and so far a wholly satisfactory description has not been reached. Language shift is not simply language contact or language change without contact speeded up; not all dying languages show high levels of borrowing; not all dying languages involve significant structural change; and not all dying languages involve imperfect learning of either the minority or the dominant language. Clearly there is an element of this issue that linguists have yet to find. According to Sasse (1992b) there *is* a difference between the two phenomena, and it *is* possible to find it: ‘in principle borrowing and interference on the one hand, and irreversible reduction in the system of an obsolescent language on the other, are quite different things’ (Sasse, 1992b: 60). The answer is not in the way the languages structure *themselves* but rather in how different types of speakers structure their language and language use. Language attitudes, therefore, play an important role in determining the likelihood that a minority language will remain in a language contact situation rather than progressing towards language shift.

### **3 The Gaelic Case System**

Before we consider the data for morphosyntactic variation in Uist Gaelic, it is first important to present an overview of the Scottish Gaelic case system to highlight the mutations under consideration.

Gaelic operates a 4-case system consisting of nominative-accusative, dative, genitive and vocative. Although this paper focuses on the realisation of the genitive case in a variety of syntactic environments, a brief summary of the whole system for singular nouns is presented below:

	Nominative	Dative	Genitive
Masculine <i>Boy</i>	Am balach	A' bhalach	A' bhalaich
Feminine <i>Girl</i>	A' chaileag	A' chaileig	Na caileige
Irregular <i>Sheep (fem)</i>	A' chaora	A' chaora	Na caorach

**Table 1 – Summary of the Scottish Gaelic Case System for Singular Nouns<sup>4</sup>**

In the genitive case, standard Gaelic grammar predicts three mutation options, which apply variously depending on the gender and initial and final consonant of the noun – lenition, slenderisation, and addition of final –e [ə]. It is expected that the majority of masculine nouns take lenition and slenderisation (palatisation of the final consonant) where possible, while feminine nouns take slenderisation and, in many cases, add at least an orthographic final <-e> although [ə] that this represents may not always be audible in informal speech. The form of the article also varies according to gender and number in the genitive case, with masculine singular nouns taking *an* (*a'* before lenited consonants), feminine singular nouns taking *na* before consonants and *na h-* before vowels, and plural nouns of both genders taking *nan* (*nam* before labials).

Previous research into the Gaelic case system has identified particular difficulties among semi-speakers in using expected genitive mutations, especially in feminine nouns, as well as an overgeneralisation of the lenition rule to apply to both genders in unexpected environments and the avoidance of genitive-triggering constructions wherever possible (Dorian 1973, 1981).

## **4 Methods**

The data were collected from eight native Gaelic speakers across North Uist, South Uist and Benbecula during three field trips between November 2011 and June 2012. Due to the size of the potential sample pool, opportunistic and self-selecting sampling methods were employed by necessity. Initially informants were sourced through advertising in the local

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed description of the Gaelic declension system see, for example, MacAulay 1992, Gillies 1993.

paper and using the mailing lists of the local history societies of North and South Uist (Comann Eachdraidh Uibhist a Tuath and Comunn Eachdraidh Uibhist a Deas, respectively). Once the fieldwork had commenced, placing adverts in local businesses and using existing participant recommendations became the most successful sampling methods.

Speakers ranged from age 30 to 80 and were later divided into two age groups – younger (30-50) and older (60-80) – with equal gender distribution in each group. A lower age cut off of 30 was used to rule out the possibility that speakers learnt Gaelic through the education system, which was felt to be a potentially significant confounding variable.

In addition to age restrictions, speakers were selected according to their place of upbringing. Although data on parents' place of upbringing were not gathered in the initial data collection stages, follow up research relating to language use and attitudes, and including questions relating to parents' place of birth, have been gathered as part of the wider intention to describe language use, variation and change in Uist. This further research serves the purpose of gathering as much social data as possible to account for any anomalous results in the linguistic data.

The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews which included the presentation of 48 elicitation sentences followed by informal conversation with the interviewer. In most cases, the interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, but in two cases pairs of interviewees were recorded talking to each other as well as to the interviewer. As the interviewer was not a native Gaelic speaker it was felt that more natural Gaelic would be captured if participants were speaking to people they already knew and were used to speaking Gaelic with. This technique was also designed as a means of overcoming Labov's (1972) Observer Paradox. However, during the course of the fieldwork it became clear that it was almost impossible to arrange and facilitate joint interviews without a much more detailed understanding of the dynamics of the community. As a result, joint interviews were conducted where possible but removed from the overall research design.

The elicitation elements of the interviews were transcribed using Transcriber version 1.5.1 following which noun phrases were extracted and coded according to the presence of expected mutations.

The elicitation sentences were developed from Nancy Dorian's battery of close to 250 sentences which she used in East Sutherland in the

1960s and 1970s<sup>5</sup>. Dorian (1978: 593) observed that translation of English stimuli into Gaelic posed few problems for her fluent speakers and as the position of Gaelic in Uist is rather more favourable than it was in East Sutherland no objection was found with assuming this was accurate for the present community. Sentences which specifically elicited noun phrase mutations as part of the dative, genitive and vocative case were selected and in most cases were used unaltered. Certain changes did have to be made, however. Dorian's work related to an eastern mainland area, with very different demographics from an island heartland community. Sentences which were specific to a small fishing community on the east coast were either reworded to reflect the outlook of Uist speakers, or were dropped altogether. 50 sentences were left covering close to the full range of desired variables.

During the course of the fieldwork it became apparent that certain of the sentences were inappropriate for the chosen community. For example, one sentence which had to be removed from the list after the first two interviews asked for the Gaelic for 'they lost their lives in the storm'. Asking this, in a very stormy week, to members of a community which recently lost a whole family in an accident in a storm was clearly inappropriate and the decision was therefore taken to remove it from the list. Two further sentences were so regularly met with such confusion that they were also removed after the interviews had started. Despite these alterations, a good deal of comparability still remains between these results and those gathered in East Sutherland.

The wealth of research above from Gaelic and other language shift contexts details the extent to which particular linguistic features are vulnerable to change in a community which is shifting from one language to another. The decision to focus on morphophonological mutation was taken as this has already been shown to be a salient feature of Gaelic in its final stages, but also because morphological (including morphophonological and morphosyntactic) change regularly appears as a result of internal linguistic change and language contact, thus providing an opportunity to investigate the interaction of these factors in a minority language context.

## **5 Results**

The results of genitive case marking in Gaelic will now be presented from a variety of perspectives, considering whether the data show large scale

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<sup>5</sup> Special thanks are extended to Nancy Dorian for kindly supporting this research by allowing me to use her original sentences.

avoidance of genitive-triggering constructions, and differences according to age, gender or syntactic environment. The data in this paper have been approached through proportional analysis as the size of the sample makes rigorous statistical testing impractical and potentially less meaningful that it would be for a larger sample set. Future analyses of these and other data in relation to variation in the Gaelic mutational system is likely to lend itself to statistical analysis more satisfactorily.

### 5.1 Genitive Avoidance

Seventeen of the elicitation sentences used had the potential to elicit a genitive triggering construction, for example: ‘*the girl’s knees* were cold’, ‘the boys were kicking *the ball*’, he built a church *for the village*’, ‘*the boy’s coat* is dirty’. This produced a potential total of 109 tokens. Analysis of the data showed that a genitive triggering construction was used in 92 of those cases, a total of 84.4% (see Table 2). This result suggests that speakers are not showing excessive avoidance of the genitive case in structures where it is usually triggered. Furthermore, those responses which did not produce a genitive triggering construction were not unnatural or contrived, and were not produced following long hesitations or self-corrections. For example, the sentence ‘he built a church for the village’ could be translated using either the genitive-triggering preposition *airson* or the dative-triggering preposition *do* with equal naturalness. Regularly, these non-genitive structures involved the use of a preposition following a gerund, producing a dative triggering structure instead: *bha na fir a’ feitheamh na h-eisg* (gen) / *bha na fir a’ feitheamh air an iasg* (dat) (the men were (a)waiting the fish / the men were waiting on the fish).

	All speakers
Potential genitive triggering constructions	109
Total genitive triggering constructions	92
% genitive triggering constructions	84.4%

**Table 2 – Comparison of potential number and actual number of genitive-triggering constructions**

For the following results, the total number of genitive triggering constructions produced (92) will be taken. As the results did not discretely fall into either full genitive marking or no genitive marking, a third category of partial genitive marking was created. Responses in this category contained at least one expected feature of genitive mutation, indicating an attempt by the speaker to produce an expected genitive, but failed to achieve full marking of the case in the expected manner. Further, to be included in this category rather than the non-genitive mutation category, the responses given needed to not include a combination of mutations which would make that response consistent with dative or nominative mutation instead. The categories therefore broadly correspond to ‘definitely genitive’, ‘definitely not genitive’, ‘everything else’.

## 5.2 Gender

According to Table 3 below, no gender differences were found in terms of production of genitive-triggering constructions. When data for code-switching and nouns whose dative and genitive forms are identical were removed, leaving only those involving active mutation, only small differences were evident, with women showing slightly higher rates of full or partial genitive marking. For both gender groups, responses which contained non-genitive mutation were often consistent with dative marking instead. Where partial genitive mutation was given, the lack of slenderisation, especially of final /k/, was a particularly common feature, e.g. *far na h-uinneag* / *far na h-uinneige* (off the window).

	Male	Female
Number of genitive triggering constructions	46	46
%	50%	50%
Total involving active mutation	31	28
%	67.4%	60.9%
Full or partial genitive marking	20	21
%	64.5%	75%

**Table 3 – Genitive mutation by gender**

### **5.3 Age**

No age-grading similar to that found by Dorian (1981) and which could be interpreted as consistent with a language shift scenario was found in the Uist data (see Table 4). In fact, younger speakers showed both higher rates of production and higher rates of accuracy in genitive marking than the older speakers. This is a particularly interesting result and will be considered in more detail below.

A further age related result came from two of the oldest speakers in the sample, who consistently returned possessive constructions using dative word order and mutation. An explanation for this striking result has not yet been achieved but it should be noted that the speakers in question were a married couple and the furthest north of all the informants.

	<b>Older</b>	<b>Younger</b>
Number of genitive triggering constructions	44	48
%	47.8%	52.2%
Total involving active mutation	28	31
%	63.6%	64.6%
Full or partial genitive marking	18	23
%	64.3%	74.2%

**Table 4 – Genitive mutation by age**

### **5.4 Syntactic Environment**

Three syntactic environments were considered for this paper – NPs following genitive-triggering prepositions, NPs as direct objects of gerunds, and NPs in possessive constructions. Each of these environments triggers the genitive case in standard Gaelic grammar; however, it does not necessarily follow that any variation present in these environments necessarily stems from only one linguistic process. As a result, four possible outcomes exist:

1. Structural change is the result of Gaelic modelling its structure on English.
2. Structural change is the result of failure of transmission producing grammatically imperfect semi-speakers.

3. Structural change is the result of internal remodelling, unrelated to any contact language's structure or imperfect learning.
4. Structural change is the result of a combination of 1, 2 and 3.

#### 5.4.1 Summary of Results by Syntactic Environment

In terms of rates of full genitive marking, loss of the genitive is most advanced following genitive-triggering prepositions, with only one response conforming to expected genitive mutation (7.7%): 'the men are waiting for the fish' – *tha na fir a' feitheamh airson an eisg*. 76.9% of responses were fully consistent with dative marking, e.g. *tha na fir a' feitheamh airson an iasg*.

In possessive constructions on the other hand, full genitive marking was elicited in the majority of responses (61.1%), and partial genitive marking in a further 27.8% of responses. These sentences included the elicitation of the irregular feminine genitive 'the girl's knees' which was returned in its standard form – *glùinean na h-ighne* – in the overwhelming majority of cases despite the expectation that constructions of this kind would be more susceptible to decay. By contrast, in the sentence which elicited 'the sheep's foot', the expected response of *cas na caorach* was not given by any of the participants, while the variant forms *cas a' chaora* and *cas na caora* were regularly produced.

Gerund constructions produced the most variable results, with speakers producing full genitive marking in 42.3% of cases. A further 34.6% of responses involved partial genitive marking while 23.1% involved mutations which showed no consistency with standard genitive marking. For a summary of these results, see Table 5.

	<b>Full genitive mutation %</b>	<b>Partial genitive mutation %</b>	<b>Non-genitive mutation %</b>
<b>Following Prepositions</b>	7.7%	15.4%	76.9%
<b>Following Gerund</b>	42.3%	34.6%	23.1%
<b>Possessive</b>	61.1%	27.8%	11.1%

**Table 5 – Genitive mutation by syntactic environment**



#### 5.4.2 Syntactic Environment Detail

A more detailed analysis of the results for prepositional constructions, where nouns which require no active mutation or where the genitive and dative forms are identical were removed along with instances of code-switching, revealed that all the responses in the ‘non-genitive mutation’ category were consistent with dative marking. Those responses with partial genitive mutation (two responses) both involved a lack of slenderisation as the only deviating feature; otherwise, one response – *far na h-uinneag* – was consistent with genitive marking and the other – *airson an tidsear* – with dative marking. Plurals following *airson* (for) were returned as dative by all speakers.

Only 2/20 responses for possessives showed an avoidance of genitive case by converting the sentence to a prepositional (dative) construction: *bha na glùinean aig na nighean fuar* (the girl’s knees were cold) and *tha a’ chas aig a’ chaora goirt* (the sheep’s foot is sore). Interestingly, both of these responses were from the oldest speakers in the sample, one of whom showed the most consistent genitive avoidance across all environments, converting sentences to non-genitive triggering constructions wherever possible. This was a particularly unexpected result for someone with this speaker’s age and socioeconomic position (a former teacher). The responses with partial or non-genitive mutation in possessive constructions all included irregular, feminine nouns.

Gerund constructions have proved the most difficult to analyse. While there is almost certainly a change in progress from genitive to non-genitive marking, both the motivation and the precise direction of the change have been difficult to determine. Historically, the genitive is triggered after gerunds (which take the form *ag òl* drinking, *a’ coimhead* watching, looking (at), *ag ràdh*, saying) because the cliticised element *ag/a’* attached to the verbal noun is a contraction of the preposition *aig* (at), rendering the sentence *bha am ball a’ bualadh na h-uinneige* ‘the ball was (at the) hitting (of) the window’. One possible explanation for the lack of genitive mutation following gerund constructions is that the process of grammaticalisation of ‘*ag*’ is now complete in Gaelic, with the particle carrying only the functional meaning “non-finite verb” and no longer triggering genitive mutation through semantic meaning. However, there seems to be a resistance among the Gaelic speakers I studied to produce nouns in their radical form in this construction. It is as if the trigger for genitive has been lost but speakers feel uncomfortable using no mutation at all. As a result, the majority of responses involved a variety of mutational

devices, producing a mixture of dative-, genitive- and nominative-like forms. For example *a' losgadh a' fhraoiche* (mixed) (burning the heather), *a' breabadh a' bhall* (dat) (kicking the ball) and *a' marbh an caorach* (mixed) (killing the sheep).

If age is included as a factor in the analysis of gerund results, no age grading is found, with younger speakers, again, showing slightly higher rates of full genitive production than older speakers (see Table 6).

	<b>Older</b>	<b>Younger</b>
Full genitive mutation	41.7%	42.9%
Partial genitive mutation	33.3%	35.7%
Non genitive mutation	25%	21.4%

**Table 6 – Genitive mutation in gerund constructions by age**

## **6 Discussion**

Now that we have seen the results of genitive mutation in Uist, we turn our attention to a consideration of these results in the context of other language shift and contact research. While it is clear that some level of change is in progress in the mutational system of Gaelic in Uist, the patterns presented here do not conform wholly to any of the approaches discussed above. In particular, they deviate from Dorian's (1981) findings in several important ways:

1. The use of genitive marking is evident to some extent for all speakers across all expected syntactic environments in Uist.
2. Slenderisation remains a productive marker of genitive case although its application is variable.
3. Serious avoidance of genitive constructions is not a feature of Uist Gaelic.
4. No age-graded variation in accuracy was found, with younger speakers in fact showing higher rates of standard or near standard genitive mutation than older speakers.

Few similarities between the data presented here and Dorian's (1981) results from East Sutherland exist. While the lack of expected mutations, particularly slenderisation, is a noticeable feature of Uist Gaelic, the application of a particular mutation in environments where it would not have been expected was in fact rather rare. This contrasts even with older fluent speakers in East Sutherland who, for example, lenited attributive adjectives following masculine nouns in 37.5% of cases (Dorian 1981: 127). The only examples of the addition of a mutation involved the irregular feminine noun *caora* which becomes *caorach* in the genitive. Occasionally slenderisation to *\*caoraich* was present but while this represents a deviation from standard genitive formation for this noun, in any other feminine genitive context it would have been acceptable. An overgeneralisation of marked features (with slenderisation being a marked feature for feminine genitive constructions) is one possible explanation for this and similar results. Further investigation into the Gaelic gender or mutational systems as a whole is likely to shed more light on these developments.

The widespread failure of lenition which Dorian (1977b) found among her speakers was not a feature of the Uist Gaelic speakers presented here. However, in ESG, this feature followed the loss of slenderisation as a productive mutational device; it is therefore possible that the results from Uist are showing that loss of productive slenderisation is in progress, i.e. the results may represent the stage before failure of lenition takes hold. It is possible that a hierarchy of mutational devices exists, with suffixation and slenderisation in the genitive disappearing before lenition. While it is plausible that this weakening of slenderisation is a sign of potential language shift, the lack of more salient features associated with this phenomenon means this conclusion is tenuous at best. It is equally possible that Gaelic is experiencing the reduction of final syllables which is so familiar in internal linguistic change, and which the Celtic languages themselves have already undergone (Koch 1981). Longitudinal research into morphophonemic changes in Uist Gaelic would be needed to determine the direction of changes in the variety and the motivations behind them.

The assertion that Gaelic in Uist is dying in the same way that ESG was is therefore not appropriate, but changes are clearly underway. While decay to some extent is evident, particularly for feminine nouns, slenderisation and suffixation, the data do not conform to typical patterns of language shift, especially considering the absence of age grading and the apparent tendency for younger speakers to, in fact, display the most accurate use of standard genitive mutation. If language shift does not fully explain

the results, are other explanations available? The next step, therefore, is to consider these results in the context of internal change, language contact and language shift to assess which, if any, can provide an appropriate explanation for the variability found in Gaelic genitive mutation.

Certain developments in the data provide some support for an explanation according to internally motivated language change. The result for prepositional environments, for example, mirrors that of German so closely that it is difficult to attribute it to anything other than natural, internally motivated grammatical change. While multiple causation is far from impossible, in this case no obvious contact based motivation is present – English lacks any form of noun-internal grammatical marking following prepositions and yet the results for Gaelic show a clear tendency to mark nouns with mutations consistent with its own dative case. There is a clear shift in the system here, not a reduction or a simplification, but the development of consistency in a pattern which already exists.

Considering the data from a language contact perspective, the results do not fit one coherent pattern either. The genitive is maintained in possessives, a structure which English shares, and lost after prepositions, a structure which English lacks. In this respect the changes can be interpreted as remodelling on English to achieve one system with two forms. However, English does not use case marking after prepositions at all, so the consistent shift to dative marking instead of genitive cannot strictly be explained in language contact terms. Similarly with gerund constructions: there is no noun-internal marking of grammatical function in English in these constructions except in pronouns, and yet the Gaelic speakers who were interviewed for this study did not show a shift from full genitive marking to no marking at all, but rather to a mixture of the available markings with no one standing out as the preferred form.

In terms of a language contact explanation for the variation presented above, although English has a genitive case it is important to remember that it does not appear in the same syntactic environments. The use of genitive marking in Gaelic has a much broader reach, and even in possessive constructions where there is a parallel in English, the methods of marking the case in both languages are different. For a language contact explanation of the data to be upheld, we would expect to find evidence for the development of one system with two forms. The only syntactic environment for which an explanation of language contact is a contender is the Gaelic gerund but even here the data are so mixed that at best they suggest only a possibility for the direction of change. In my opinion the

mixed results show clear evidence of speakers' discomfort around using no mutation (i.e. nominative marking) in this environment. An internally motivated increased grammaticalisation of the progressive particle *ag* which limits the semantic logic of using the genitive in direct objects, in combination with a contact induced progression towards 'one system, two forms' is the most likely driving force behind this development. While it is not unreasonable for this to develop in isolation of any external influence (cf Ronan (2012) on the grammaticalisation of aspect markers in Irish), it is equally reasonable to assume increased pressure from a corresponding structure in the contact language to be a factor in the development of this feature.

One further environment where genitive marking would be used in standard Gaelic is in compound nouns. These were not deliberately elicited but were produced on a few occasions. One particular sentence asked for the Gaelic for homework (in a sentence where the main focus is actually a vocative) and I was startled by the variety of responses. The most interesting of these variants was the genitive compound *obair-taighe* 'work of the house'. When questioned, the response from one of the youngest speakers was 'oh, it's what I hear the kids at school saying these days'. Although anecdotal, this is a very interesting insight into how Gaelic is seen and how it functions on these islands. If language shift is involved we would rightly expect the children to be the least likely to be using the dying language, and certainly the last people to be generating new coinages with standard *genitive* mutation. And yet, this is exactly what was found. If Gaelic *is* dying in Uist, it is refusing to conform to the expected patterns of a moribund language. Even if this research comes a few decades too early, the features which are present in this dialect and the changes which seem to already be underway seem unlikely to be indicative of a terminally ill dialect yet to be diagnosed.

I believe that what we have in Uist is something else, and assuming the language is dying in this area fails to give credit to the resourcefulness and determination of Uist speakers to keep *their* language alive. Language change is normal and expected, and even radical grammatical restructuring is not uncommon among languages in intimate contact. But what is important is that neither of these linguistic scenarios is inherently or necessarily negative. If this research had been conducted with the aim of 'finding evidence for language shift in Uist', the richness of variation present in the dialect would never have been uncovered. There is much more to the study of minority languages than simply recording them before

they die, and assuming they are all inevitably ‘not long for this world’ necessarily blinkers us to what they have to tell us.

## **7 Conclusion**

In conclusion, then, the variation present in the application of the mutational system in the genitive case in Uist Gaelic does not show terminal levels of decay and cannot therefore be used to support the idea that the variety is in a language shift situation. This does not mean that language shift is not still taking place but rather that linguistically the evidence for it was not present in the Gaelic of the informants used in this study. Any minority language in a potentially shifting situation presents a very complex problem for sociolinguistics, with a variety of conflicting yet inter-related factors to consider. This paper represents the first steps towards developing an integrated understanding of how these factors are impacting on language change in Gaelic in Uist.

In terms of the continued development of our understanding of the nature of language shift, the results presented here should not be taken as contradicting the invaluable contributions made by the likes of Dorian (1981) and Sasse (1992a, 1992b). Where other work on language shift has tended to concentrate on communities with a minority of speakers of the language under investigation, Uist is unique in having a majority population which speaks an otherwise minority language. As a result, these findings represent an extension of the study of language shift to include the unique sociolinguistic microcosm of a language which is a minority but not a minority, endangered but not endangered. This preliminary investigation has shown that this dynamic may be a significant factor in our understanding of the linguistic processes involved in language shift, and may increase that understanding at least as much as the study of communities in more imminent danger.

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