

# **Dialectal diversity in contemporary Gaelic: perceptions, discourses and responses**

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## **1 Introduction**

This essay will address some aspects of language change in contemporary Gaelic and their relationship to the simultaneous workings of language shift and language revitalisation. I focus in particular on the issue of how dialects and dialectal diversity in Gaelic are perceived, depicted and discussed in contemporary discourse. Compared to many minoritised languages, notably Irish, dialectal diversity has generally not been a matter of significant controversy in relation to Gaelic in Scotland. In part this is because Gaelic has, or at least is depicted as having, relatively little dialectal variation, in part because the language did undergo a degree of grammatical and orthographic standardisation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with the Gaelic of the Bible serving to provide a supra-dialectal high register (e.g. Meek 1990). In recent decades, as Gaelic has achieved greater institutionalisation in Scotland, notably in the education system, issues of dialectal diversity have not been prioritised or problematised to any significant extent by policy-makers. Nevertheless, in recent years there has been some evidence of increasing concern about the issue of diversity within Gaelic, particularly as language shift has diminished the range of spoken dialects and institutionalisation in broadcasting and education has brought about a degree of levelling and convergence in the language. In this process, some commentators perceive Gaelic as losing its distinctiveness, its richness and especially its flavour or *blas*. These responses reflect varying ideological perspectives, sometimes implicating issues of perceived authenticity and ownership, issues which become heightened as Gaelic is acquired by increasing numbers of non-traditional speakers with no real link to any dialect area. In this paper I will be looking at contemporary perspectives on the dialect issue in Gaelic, drawing on a range of sources, including print, broadcast and social media sources as well as recent sociolinguistic investigations, some in which I was involved and some carried out by others.

## **2 Overview of Gaelic dialect relationships**

To help frame the discussion, a brief linguistic overview of dialectal variation in Gaelic, and especially the ways in which it has been characterised and presented by scholars, will be helpful. Grammars of Gaelic produced from the early nineteenth century onwards (e.g. Stewart 1801) presented a picture of a unified, nearly standard language and gave no real indication of diversity in grammatical terms. From the late nineteenth century, studies of individual dialects began to appear, together with some overarching analyses, notably Charles Robertson's substantial article on Gaelic dialects in the *Celtic Review* in 1906-08. Robertson argued that the dialects could be grouped most coherently into two divisions, northern and southern. His study was devoted almost entirely to phonological matters, identifying and classifying specific pronunciation features, and it is these aspects (along with lexis, to a much lesser extent) that has concerned almost all scholars working on Gaelic dialects up to the present (Gillies 1992). The general analytical framework followed by most scholars today was developed by Kenneth Jackson, who was the director of Gaelic Section of the Linguistic Survey of Scotland, which began its work in 1949. Jackson drew a distinction between 'central' and 'peripheral' dialects, which he summarised in the following geographical terms:

[I]t is possible to say in very broad terms [...] [that] the central dialect covers the Hebrides as far south as Mull and sometimes further, Ross exclusive of the north-east corner, Assynt, Inverness-shire, western Perthshire, and mainland Argyll roughly north of Loch Awe; while the peripheral dialects comprise Caithness and Sutherland exclusive of Assynt, the north-east corner of Ross, Braemar, eastern Perthshire, the rest of mainland Argyll with Kintyre, and Arran. Moray and the adjacent lower region of the Spey, the wide valley of Strathspey from Rothiemurchus to the Moray border, may go with the peripheral dialects, linking up with Braemar and east Perth (Jackson 1968, 67–8).

For most practical purposes, however, this classification has become essentially academic or retrospective, as there are now very few remaining speakers of 'peripheral dialects' (outside the island of Islay). Most of the concern about dialectal diversity that is expressed today relates to diversity within the 'central' dialect area.

This article is concerned not with the linguistic features of different dialects but rather with Gaelic speakers' perceptions of diversity within Gaelic and their attitudes towards dialectal variation. Nancy Dorian, renowned for her work on the peripheral dialect of East Sutherland, observed that 'it is an article of faith among Gaelic intellectuals that all dialects of Scottish Gaelic are mutually intelligible' (Dorian 1981: 92; cf. Hamp 1997: 8). One of the most influential scholars who has helped shaped such an understanding of Gaelic dialects is John MacInnes, who presents Gaelic as a 'remarkably uniform' language with little significant variation:

*Canaidh cuid de sgoilearan gur h-e slat-tomhais cainnt co-réir cànanain: òrdugh is tàthadh nam briathran. Nan gabhte ri sin is gann a tha roinnean cainnte idir sa Ghàidhlig . . . Chan eil ann [an eadar-dhealachaidhean a thaobh fuaimneachadh] ach rud a tha a' ruith air uachdar a' chànain: chan eil e prionnsabalach. A réir sin 's ann a tha a' Ghàidhlig againne faisg air a bhith a dh'aon ghnè an taca ri cuid mhath de chànanan eile air feadh an t-saoghail.*

(Some scholars say that the [key] linguistic criterion is syntax: the order and linking of words. If that is accepted that are barely any linguistic divisions in Gaelic. . . . [Differences in relation to pronunciation] are linguistically superficial; it is not a matter of principle. According to that our Gaelic is nearly uniform in comparison with a large proportion of the world's languages (MacInnes 2006c [1990], 123-4) [trans. WCM]).

A speaker of north-west Sutherland Gaelic can converse with a speaker from 'distant' Islay for example with consummate ease. To all Gaels regional variation is a question of *blas* – basically articulation and intonation – with word endings, especially in the verbal noun, ranking next. Over the whole area, syntactical variation is minimal. . . . In contrast to Irish, for example, Scottish Gaelic is remarkably uniform (MacInnes 2006b [1992], 110-11).

As against MacInnes's view, Dorian and others have supplied evidence that there can indeed be communicative difficulties between speakers of different dialects, at least in some instances (Dorian 1981: 92; Lamb 2011: slide 2).

Yet even when the differences between Gaelic dialects may not be significant in objective linguistic terms, they may be meaningful in social terms; ‘Gaelic speakers are keenly aware of dialectal distinctions at both local and wider levels’, as William Gillies has observed (Gillies 2008: 231). Nancy Dorian commented that

[R]egional variation is the obsessive interest of East Sutherland Gaelic speakers . . . Every East Sutherland Gaelic speaker is on the alert at all times for the intrusion of a variant characteristic of one of the other villages [in the dialect area] . . . (Dorian 2014: 163)

In such a linguistic culture, it is common for linguistically minor differences to be overstated. Donald MacAulay, like MacInnes a pre-eminent ‘Gaelic intellectual’, has criticised this response, describing exaggerated statements of dialectal differences as being ‘divisive and undesirable’.

Main Hebridean communication lines [...] have been between island and mainland, with interisland traffic much less important. This has led to a degree of compartmentalization of communities, which results in exaggerated statements of the dialectal differences between different areas and other divisive and undesirable consequences. Mainland [Gaelic-speaking] areas suffer from similar compartmentalization problems, being islands in an English milieu (MacAulay 1982: 43, note 18).

The assessments given by MacAulay, MacInnes and others might be understood as relating to the situation preceding *c.* 1960, when Gaelic was being maintained and transmitted in the ‘heartland’ island communities with little disruption and initiatives to promote and revitalise the language were inchoate. Processes of language shift and language change in the last half century or so have altered the situation considerably, as discussed in the following section.

### **3 Gaelic dialects: diminution, hybridisation and standardisation**

In recent decades a number of factors have converged to bring about a diminution in dialectal diversity in Gaelic and an increase in hybridisation and standardisation. Three main factors can be identified, all of them

connected either to the demographic decline of the language or to revitalisation initiatives aimed at countering this decline. First, language shift in many parts of the former Gaelic speech area has brought about the substantial or total disappearance of many dialects, especially on the mainland, so that only a few dialects, those of the Western Isles and Skye, are frequently heard today. Second, there appears to be an increasing degree of conscious or unconscious adaptation, accommodation and assimilation on the part of some dialect speakers, leading to a greater degree of linguistic convergence, through a form of communication accommodation (Giles 2008). Third, an increasingly wide range of people are acquiring Gaelic in institutional settings, especially schools, rather than home and community settings, and they are much less likely to acquire a traditional dialect in the manner of earlier generations of native speakers.

William Gillies has summarised recent trends as follows:

The main result of the contraction of the Gàidhealtachd in the present [i.e. twentieth] century has been to give greater prominence to the dialects of the Hebrides, whose speakers nowadays supply the great majority of teachers, broadcasters, writers and administrators. The Hebridean dialects are on the whole pretty homogeneous, apart from some rather obvious differences between Lewis and the rest in phonology and intonation patterns. The elimination of some of the more radically different dialects dotted around the periphery of the Gàidhealtachd has effectively decreased the amount of variation in the language as a whole. The Hebridean dialects are also relatively conservative, and this would appear to have had a stabilizing effect on the norms of public and written Gaelic at least (Gillies 2008: 298).

At the same time, other processes of linguistic contraction are apparent. In relation to the spoken language, the gradual emergence of an imagined central form known as ‘mid-Minch’ or ‘middle of the Minch’ Gaelic is often posited, drawing on the dialects most widely spoken today, those of the Western Isles and Skye, which are separated by the strait known in English as the Minch. The emergence of this quasi-standard form appears to be driven by increased contact between different kinds of speakers, principally by virtue of the broadcast media and the expansion of Gaelic education, but also to some extent by the development of Gaelic-medium workplaces and increased contact between the different islands of the Outer Hebrides since the 1970s,

when the Western Isles became a unified administrative area for the first time (McEwan-Fujita 2003: 82).

The current linguistic dynamic was well summarised by James Grant:

The centre of the Scottish Gaelic-speaking world now lies in the islands of the Northern Hebrides: Lewis, Harris, North Uist, Skye, Benbecula, South Uist and Barra. Amongst Scottish Gaelic speakers there seems to be a tacit agreement that Gaelic as spoken in and around the central districts of this island group should be accepted for most purposes as the standard form of the language. This is particularly apparent in broadcasting, where broadcasters, no matter their origin, seem unconsciously to adopt the pronunciations and usages which they think common to this area (Grant 2004: 70).

Alan Boyd has perceived a very similar process from a Tìre perspective (Boyd 2014: 337).

Broadcasting (especially radio) is widely recognised as having played an important role in unifying Gaelic, as it helped make speakers familiar with dialects other than their own and made them aware of the wider context of the Gaelic speech community as a whole. This process may have begun as early as the 1950s, as the BBC's Gaelic radio service developed, but intensified from the late 1970s. Not only did this mean that different Gaelic dialects were circulated more widely, as it were, but also, as Grant explained, broadcasters tended to modify their own linguistic production. In the late 1990s Will Lamb interviewed a number of radio broadcasters and reported that '[a]lmost all the news-workers asked replied that there was a "levelling out" of their own dialect and the transfer of lexical goods between the different dialects present at the station' (Lamb 1999: 160). One broadcaster has summarised her linguistic trajectory as follows:

*Ged is ann à Leòdhas a tha mise le dual-chainnt ga-rèir, cluinnear blas ioma sgìre eile nam Ghàidhlig. Ciamar, tha gun thogadh mi ag èisteachd ri rèidio Gàidhlig agus gu bheil mi air earrainn mhath de mo bheatha a chuir seachad ag obair anns a' mheadhan sin. . . . Tha craoladh Gàidhlig air luchd-labhairt na Gàidhlig a tharraing nas dlùithe ri chèile, agus tuigse a thoirt dhuinn air dòighean-labhairt càch a chèile agus nach math sin.*

(Although I am from Lewis with the corresponding dialect, the accent of many other areas can be heard in my Gaelic. Why, because I was raised listening to Gaelic radio and because I have spent a good part of my life working in that medium. . . . Gaelic radio has brought Gaelic speakers closer together and given us an understanding of each others' way of speaking and isn't that a good thing (MacLennan 2003: 68) [trans. WCM]).

Somewhat similar processes were reported by Emily McEwan-Fujita in relation to the Gaelic-medium office environments that have developed since the 1980s by virtue of increased promotional efforts on behalf of the language. Her account of '9 to 5 Gaelic' described in particular one office staffed by ten native Gaelic speakers representing six traditional dialect areas and two 'new speakers' of the language; thus the Comunn na Gàidhlig 'office was a place where Gaelic-English bilinguals speaking different Gaelic dialects mingled and spoke to one another face-to-face in Gaelic' (McEwan Fujita 2008: 84-5). Another important Gaelic-medium workplace is the Gaelic school: there is evidence that having Gaelic teachers from different areas working alongside each other can affect each other's Gaelic over time (Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech 2006).

#### **4 Responses to dialectal diminution, hybridisation and standardisation**

The aim of this paper is not to consider the linguistic evidence for accommodation or hybridisation but rather to consider Gaelic speakers' responses and reactions to these developments. The first matter to address can actually be considered to be a causal factor as well as a response: the role of dialectal diversity as an issue within initiatives and policies to promote the maintenance and development of Gaelic. The issue of dialectal diversity appears to have very little prominence in policy terms, whether in relation to development strategy in general, to corpus planning initiatives, or to education (acquisition planning). Gaelic appears to be conceptualised as a unified language, singular rather than plural, with the survival of the language as a whole understood as the key policy objective. To take one example, the term 'dialect' does not appear in either of Bòrd na Gàidhlig's two National Gaelic Language Plans (2007-12 and 2012-17), in its 2010 Action Plan, or in its most recent Corporate Plan (2014-17) (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2007, 2010, 2012,

2014). This omission extends to the sections of the National Plans that deal specifically with corpus planning matters; the term ‘dialect’ is nowhere used. In relation to education policy, there is no reference to dialects in the main national curricular documents that specify the ‘principles and practice’ and ‘experiences and outcomes’ for Gaelic learners or fluent speakers in the schools (Education Scotland 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d) or in the key recent policy documents concerning Gaelic education issued by Education Scotland and Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education (Education Scotland 2015; HMIE 2011). The previous curricular guidance document, in effect between 1993 and 2009, preceding the current ‘Curriculum for Excellence’, established the principle that teachers should take full advantage of Gaelic dialects in teaching language awareness (Scottish Office Education Department 1993: 6). So the expectation is that school pupils should become aware of and familiar with different Gaelic dialects, but this is quite different from attempting to ensure that they adopt a particular dialect as their own variety.

In relation to policy, there have been almost no attempts to codify either a standard form of Gaelic or any of the individual Gaelic dialects. There is nothing comparable to the Basque *batua* or Rumantsch Grischun standard, synthetic varieties that take in elements of different dialects, or even to the Irish *Caighdeán Oifigiúil* (Urla 2012: 90-109; Berthele 2015; ÓIfearnáin and Ó Murchadha 2011). The most important standardisation initiative was the Gaelic Orthographic Conventions of 1981, which have since been updated twice, most recently in 2009 (Scottish Qualifications Authority 2009), but these are simply minor adjustments to the spelling system developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Black 1994, 2010). The grammatical and phonological norms of ‘mid-Minch’ Gaelic remain implicit and thus somewhat ambiguous. One unofficial attempt to set out principles of pronunciation is given in Michael Bauer’s handbook *Blas na Gàidhlig: The Practical Guide to Gaelic Pronunciation*, which presents what it calls ‘Common Gaelic Pronunciation’, characterised as “‘somewhere in the middle’ between today’s dialects’, ‘a pronunciation that is recognisably good Gaelic to any native speaker and will be easily understood by most Gaelic speakers’ (Bauer 2011: 20).

Although the dialect issue has not been identified as a priority for Gaelic policy-makers (the great majority of whom are native speakers of the language), many Gaelic speakers express concern at what they perceive as the loss of dialectal diversity or the increasing homogenisation of the language.



To help frame these reactions, I would like to draw on Kathryn Woolard's concepts of *authenticity* and *anonymity* in relation to language variety:

The ideology of *Authenticity* locates the value of a language in its relationship to a particular community. That which is authentic is viewed as the genuine expression of such a community, or of an essential Self. Within the logic of authenticity, a speech variety must be perceived as deeply rooted in social and geographic territory in order to have value. For many European languages, these roots are in the mountain redoubts of peasant folk purity. [. . .] To be considered authentic, a speech variety must be very much “from somewhere” in speakers' consciousness, and thus its meaning is profoundly local. If such social and territorial roots are not discernable, a linguistic variety lacks value in this system [. . .]

In contrast to minoritized languages, hegemonic languages in modern society often rest their authority on a conception of anonymity. Anonymity is an ideological foundation of the political authority of the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere. [. . .] the language is idealized as a transparent window on a disinterested rational mind and thus on truth itself. By this reasoning, public languages can represent and be used equally by everyone precisely because they belong to no-one-in-particular. They are positioned as universally open and available to all in a society . . . (Woolard 2008: 304-6 (citations omitted)).

Woolard's framework helps us understand why the valuation of dialects in minority languages can operate somewhat differently than in relation to standardised, dominant languages, even if many of the factors and processes that work to bring about linguistic change are largely similar, such as the role of broadcasting (as in Italian, for example).

This ideological valuation of authenticity is readily perceptible in the Gaelic context. First, many observers identify dialectal diversity as a key aspect of the cultural wealth of the Gaelic language as a whole. Well-known singer Margaret Stewart has commented, ‘[t]here are still lots of lovely regional differences, and long may it continue. I'd hate to see total standardisation’ (2015). A native speaker working for a public agency commented as follows: ‘Tha na dualchainntean a’ crìonadh cus. Agus, mar

sin, na rudan as snoige is nas beartiche – bhithinnsa co-dhiù airson an glèidheadh’ (‘The dialects are declining too much. And with that the nicest and richest things – I for one would want to maintain them’ [trans. WCM]) (Bell et al. 2014: B160). Prominent broadcaster Coinneach MacÌomhair expressed a slightly stronger view: ‘Se an truaighe an diugh gu bheil sinn a’ call nan dualchainnt a dh’fhag air sinnsearan againn agus a thug beartas do ar canan [. . .] An uair a bhitheas i coitcheann bi i marbh’ (‘The tragedy today is that we are losing the dialects that our ancestors bequeathed to us and that gave richness to our language . . . when it is common/generic it will be dead’ (MacÌomhair 2014 [translation WCM]). The novelist and poet Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul has expressed such sentiments more lyrically, in a column in memory of Roy Wentworth, who had laboured tirelessly collecting material relating to the dialect of Gairloch in Wester Ross:

*B’ e sin, saoilidh mi, a bu mhotha a bha ga ghluasad: bàs nan dualchainntean brèagha a bha aig aon àm cho prìseil ’s cho blasta anns na diofar pharaistean. Na gnothaichean a bha a’ fàgail an t-saoghail cho dathach. Dh’aithnich agus dh’fhairich Roy gum b’ e anail nan dualchainntean a bha a’ cumail na Gàidhlig iomafhillteach, agus gur e claonadh agus tiormachadh a thigeadh air a’ chànain nan rachadh na dualchainntean a dhìth: mus tug an còrr againn an aire, bha e mothachail air an olc a bha ceangailte le dlùth-chruinneas. Ann an iomadaidheachd an t-saoghail, bha sgrios nan dualchainntean a-cheart cho marbhtach do Roy agus a bha sgrios coille mhòr an Amazon: gu dearbh, b’ e an aon sgrios a bh’ ann.*

(It was that, I think, that moved him most: the death of the beautiful dialects that were once so precious and so melodious in the different parishes. The things that made the world so colourful. Roy recognised and perceived that it was the breath [*sic*] of the dialects that kept Gaelic so diverse, and that it was decline and drying that would come upon the language if the dialects were lost; before the rest of us noticed it, he was aware of the evil that was connected to globalisation. In the diversity of the world, the destruction of the dialects was just as deadly to Roy as the destruction of the great Amazonian forest; indeed, it was the same destruction) (Caimbeul 2003)

Other commentators appear to be concerned not so much about dialectal diversity in general but about the consequences of standardisation or hybridisation for their own particular dialects. Such speakers may perceive the dominant, mid-Minch variety of Gaelic as being alien because they see it as belonging to a specific other place. Folklorist Margaret Callan has expressed the view that the Gaelic of Uist was being lost and the Gaelic of Lewis being imposed:

*Thathar a' call dualchainnt nan Eilean mu Dheas, agus am blàths, an ceòl agus an spionnadh a tha na dualchainntean sin a' cur ris a' chànain. Nam bheachdsa, tha seo mar thoradh air mar a tha ùghdarras foghlaim tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig a' cur romhpa cunbhalachd fhaighinn anns a' chànain Ghàidhlig. Ann a bhith a' coileanadh seo thathar a' cleachdadh Gàidhlig Leòdhais cha mhòr a-mhàin. [. . .]*

*Tha cuid dhen òigrìdh ann an Uibhist an-diugh nach aithnich an dualchainnt fhèin air sgàth 's gu bheil a' chuid as motha de leabhraichean sgoile agus de phrògraman rèidio sgoile stèidhte air Gàidhlig Leòdhais.*

(. . . the dialect of the southern isles is being lost, and the warmth, music and energy that those dialects add to the language. In my opinion, this is as a result of how GME authorities have decided to obtain consistency in Gaelic. To achieve this, Lewis Gaelic is almost always used.

Some young people in Uist today do not know/recognise their own dialect because the majority of school books and radio programmes are based on Lewis Gaelic (Challan 2012: 187, 188 [trans. WCM]).

Conversely, in her study of the sociolinguistic role of Gaelic-medium education in a Lewis community, Vanessa Will observed that when she 'asked one of the GME teachers if she thought there was a "BBC Gaelic" equivalent to "BBC English", she responded "Yes. Uist." (Will 2012: 123). As long ago as 1985, leading educationalist Dr Finlay MacLeod identified how pronunciations and vocabulary typical of other islands' dialects were affecting the Gaelic of Lewis – uniquely so, in his view (MacLeod 1985).

In contrast, some other commentators see versions of mid-Minch Gaelic as a disconcerting mixture that belongs to nowhere at all. For example, Ronald Black (Raghnaill MacilleDhuibh) commented as follows in a recent book review:

*Rud eile a dh'atharraich se a' Ghàidhlig. Mur eil mi eòlach air ùghdar, tha rudeigin 'nam cheann a bhios a' feuchainn ri obrachadh a-mach co às a tha e no i. Seo duine [ùghdar an leabhair] a sgrìobhas 'sìon' seach 'càil', 'dha Mòrag' seach 'do Mhòraig', 'mi fhèin' seach 'mi fhìn'. Cò an dualchainnt tha sin chan fhiosrach mì. Tha Gàidhlig mheasgaichte den t-seòrsa sin a' fàs glé chumanta. A bheil ainm againn dhi? Super-Ghàidhlig? Supraghàidhlig? (MacilleDhuibh 2015).*

(Something else that has changed is Gaelic. If I don't know an author, there's something in my mind that tries to work out where he or she comes from. This is a person [the author of the book under review] who writes "sìon" instead of "càil", "dha Mòrag" instead of "do Mhòraig", "mi fhèin" instead of "mi fhìn". What this dialect is I don't know. Mixed Gaelic of that kind is becoming very common. Do we have a name for it? Super-Gaelic? Supragaelic?)

## **5 The role of new speakers**

Although adaptation and approximation on the part of native speakers plays a role here, as discussed above in relation to the impact of broadcasting and Gaelic workplaces, the principal source of this 'Supraghàidhlig' is what we can call 'new speakers' of Gaelic. The term 'new speaker' is gaining increasing currency in contemporary sociolinguistics (O'Rourke, Pujolar and Ramallo 2015); here I use it to refer to people who did not acquire Gaelic in the home when growing up, but have nevertheless acquired Gaelic to a significant degree of competence and are now making active use of the language in their lives. In the remainder of this article I will look at some of the ways such new speakers perceive their own Gaelic, especially their relationship to traditional dialects, and how they are perceived by different kinds of native speakers. In doing so I will draw in particular on data from a study of 35 adult new speakers of Gaelic in Edinburgh and Glasgow carried out in 2013-14.

Before considering the question of new speakers and their varieties of Gaelic, it is helpful to explore in more detail prevailing attitudes towards more ‘traditional’ varieties of Gaelic and what might be considered the current ‘model’ variety. A recent project for Bòrd na Gàidhlig called *Dlùth is Inneach* investigated these issues by conducting 39 ‘focused conversations’ across Scotland, involving 184 participants, with a view to developing corpus planning principles for Gaelic, taking into account prevailing understandings of ‘good’ Gaelic or ‘model’ Gaelic. The prevailing view that emerged from these sessions was characterised as follows:

The accepted model for ‘good’ Gaelic (at both formal and informal levels) is the popular language of the 1940s and 1950s, with linguistic authority being conferred on fluent speakers who grew up during this era (i.e. the ‘model’ Gaelic speakers). The dominant ideology is thus a limited form of retrophilia, which we characterise as retro-vernacular—an attachment to the traditional form of the language still in use by fluent traditional speakers, in contrast to the evolving, English-influenced usages of the younger generation (Bell et al. 2014: [vii-viii]).

When focusing more specifically on dialects, it is important to bear in mind that the term ‘dialect’ as used in public discourse may not necessarily correspond to a linguist’s technical understanding of the term. Rather, ‘dialects’ may sometimes be better understood as ‘traditional ways of speaking’. *Dualchainnt* is the specific term for ‘dialect’ in Gaelic but a more meaningful one may be *blas*. When used of language (as opposed to food, when it means simply ‘taste’), *blas* is most readily translated as ‘accent’, but in her study of the role of immersion education in a community in Lewis, Vanessa Will gave a more elaborate explication:

*blas* may be described as a set of linguistic and paralinguistic elements, including dialectal and register variants, prosody, and the use of idiomatic expressions, which combine to bestow an almost palpable aesthetic quality to one’s speech.

The absence of *blas* is perceived to be a predominant marker of someone who has learned Gaelic, either as an adult, or increasingly, children who have acquired the Gaelic predominantly in Gaelic-

medium education . . . To adult speakers [i.e. older native speakers], the absence of blas manifests itself in a variety of ways including [1] the use of words and expressions that are either unfamiliar or uncomfortable to them, [2] inconsistent use of phonological and lexical elements of different dialects and registers, and [3] usage of Gaelic and English in manners and contexts that does not follow norms espoused by Gaelic-socialized speakers (Will 2012: 40, 44).

To these ‘manifestations’ identified by Will we can add straightforward interference from new speakers’ L1, almost always English.

Although such reactions can clearly be understood in terms of Woolard’s concept of authenticity, this summary includes several quite distinct elements. The second effectively relates to the dialect mixing of the kind suggested by MacilleDhuibh, while the first and third relate more to challenges to the diglossic usage patterns that have become established in Hebridean communities (e.g. MacAulay 1982). These different aspects are driven by different causal factors. Here I will concentrate on the more strictly linguistic aspects (i.e. ‘inconsistent use of phonological and lexical elements of different dialects and registers’) and not those which relate to the social contexts for Gaelic and English usage, which tend to raise issues of a more ideological nature (see McLeod and O’Rourke 2015: 166-8).

In relation to the mixing of phonological and lexical elements from different dialects, the key factor is mixed input. Both school pupils and adult learners typically learn Gaelic from several different teachers who may speak different dialects. A new speaker based in Glasgow who received Gaelic-medium primary education described her speech as follows:

F2: *Dh’ionnsaich mise Gàidhlig tron bhun-sgoil agus chan eil fhios agam cia mheud tidsear a bh’ againn agus ’s ann à diofar àiteachan a bha iad – ’s ann à Uibhist a Deas no Leòdhais [sic] no na Hearadh no ge bith de àite, Barraigh . . . .so mar sin, chuala mise diofar dualchainnt agus tha mi fhèin a’ cleachdadh diofar briathrachas.*

(F2: I learned Gaelic in primary school and I don’t know how many teachers we had and they were from different places – from South Uist and Lewis or Harris and whatever place, Barra . . .

so I heard different dialects and I myself use varied vocabulary) (McLeod, O' Rourke and Dunmore 2014: 39).

A similar summary was given by one of the Edinburgh participants, who began to learn Gaelic as a teenager:

F9 *Ach, bu mhath leam fhèin gum biodh mar blas sònraichte agamsa no dualchainnt agam. Ach air sgàth 's nach eil dlùth cheangal agam ri àite sam bith, cha d' rinn mi riamh mar taghadh! Bha tidsearan agam bho diofar àiteachean agus luchd-ionnsachaidh nam measg, mar sin, thog mi diofar pìosan.*

F9 (But I would like to have a particular accent or dialect. But because I don't have a close connection to anywhere [any Gaelic area], I never made a choice! I had teachers from different places, including learners, and so I picked up different bits) [focus group session for McLeod, Rourke and Dunmore 2014; extract not included in report].

This trajectory appears typical of Gaelic-medium education in Scottish schools. Partly for reasons of necessity, partly because of the prevailing understanding of Gaelic as a substantially unified language, schools tend to employ teachers with different linguistic backgrounds, so that pupils will typically have teachers speaking different dialects over the course of their schooling, including, to an increasing extent, teachers who are themselves new speakers without an identifiable dialect (Landgraf 2013: 103; Pollock 2010). Will Lamb (2011) demonstrated this pattern with a survey of the Gaelic-medium schools across Scotland, focusing in particular on where teachers came from. 25% were from Lewis, 18% from South Uist and Eriskay, 9% from Skye, 8% from Harris, 8% from North Uist, 7% from Barra and Vatersay, and 21% 'other', very likely learners of Gaelic. An important finding was the over-representation of South Uist and Eriskay speakers (11% higher than would be expected from census data) and the under-representation of Lewis and Skye speakers (26% and 11% lower than would be expected). In mainland schools, i.e. outside areas where Gaelic is widely spoken in the community, these disparities were greater still: 19% higher than expected for South Uist and Eriskay, 37% lower for Lewis and 19% lower for Skye, while 31% were 'non-dialectal' (i.e. 'new speakers'). This data gives only a general

overview of the situation, however. For example, not all speakers from a particular area necessarily maintain the traditional dialect of that area in its full form; this is particularly the case with younger speakers, and many of today's teachers were born in the mid-1980s or thereafter. Second, there is considerable linguistic diversity within some of the larger islands, most obviously Lewis, so that to speak of the 'Lewis dialect' may not be very meaningful. Finally, as noted above, there is evidence that teachers from different areas who work alongside each other tend to modify their language somewhat over time, often unconsciously (Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech 2004).

Lamb concluded from his data that perhaps only the Gaelic of Lewis and South Uist would survive as distinct dialects, while children in mainland schools were likely to develop a mixed variety, partly due to the influence of having teachers from different dialect areas, partly to the large (31%) proportion of non-dialectal teachers. Already there is evidence that younger speakers in 'heartland' districts such as Tiree may not retain the traditional lexis of the area (NicIlleDhuinn 2014). This aligns with the claim advanced by Challan in relation to Uist (quoted above) and confirms a pattern found by Mari Jones in different regions of Wales; children in Welsh-medium education were often unable even to identify the key linguistic features characteristic of their local area (Jones 1998).

Returning to the study of new speakers in Edinburgh and Glasgow, a few participants had family connections to a Gaelic-speaking area or had lived in Gaelic-speaking areas at some point, and so made an attempt to approximate their Gaelic to the dialect of those areas. The great majority, however, perceived no obvious connection linking them to any dialect or dialect area, so that choosing any one particular dialect might have seemed arbitrary or inauthentic. This difficulty is well illustrated in the following extract:

- A4: . . . *tha mi cinnteach agus tha mi an dùil gum biodh barrachd daoine cofhurtail bruidhinn rium nam biodh blas . . . umm . . . Leòdhasach neo blas Uibhisteach no fiù 's blas Sgitheanach .*  
..
- R: *Ionadail . . .*
- A4: *Yeah, blas ionadail orm an àite meadhan a' Chuain Siar no rudeigin mar sin. Ach chan eil mi cinnteach gum feum thu sin . . . Bha mi riamh a' faireachdainn gun robh rudeigin math dh'fhaodte rud beag inauthentic nam bithinn ag ionnsachadh*



*[dualchainnt] . . . b' urrainn dhomh a bhith air blas Leòdhasach ionnsachadh 's dòcha. Ach cha robh mi . . . 's e rud a bha mi faireachdainn, uill, cha robh mi ann an Leòdhas riamh, carson a bhiodh blas Leòdhasach orm, bhiodh sin gu math annasach. Carson a bhiodh blas Uibhist a Tuath orm? Cha robh mi ann riamh. Ach . . . bhiodh e math a bhith cunbhalach, tha mi a' smaointinn gu bheil e duilich do luchd-ionnsachaidh nuair nach eil blas cunbhalach aca. Mar sin tha mi a' feuchainn a bhith a' dèanamh am blas as fheàrr Uibhisteach agam airson [Gàidhlig] a theagasg. Tha mi a' feuchainn a bhith cunbhalach mu dheidhinn sin gus am bi m' oileanaich ag ionnsachadh blas reusanta cunbhalach agus cha bhi iad cho, fhios agad, nuair a tha thu a' cluinntinn cuideigin a tha air Beurla ionnsachadh agus chan eil iad air blas sònraichte ionnsachadh, uaireannan tha iad caran disembodied sounding.*

(A4: . . . I'm certain and I expect that more people would be comfortable talking to me if I had a . . . Lewis accent or a Uist accent or even a Skye accent . . .

R: Local. . .

A4: Yeah, a local accent instead of mid-Minch or something like that. But I'm not sure you need that . . . I've always felt it would may be a bit inauthentic if I was to learn [a dialect] . . . I could have learned a Lewis accent maybe . . . But I wasn't . . . the thing I felt was, well, I've never been to Lewis, why would I have a Lewis accent, that would be really strange. Why would I have a North Uist accent? I've never been there. But . . . it would be good to be consistent, I think it's difficult for learners when they don't have a consistent accent. So I try to do my best Uist accent in order to teach [Gaelic]. I try to be consistent about that so that my students learn a reasonably consistent accent and they won't be, you know, when you hear someone who's learned English and hasn't learned a particular accent, sometimes they're a bit disembodied sounding.) (McLeod, O' Rourke and Dunmore 2014: 42).

The most striking strategy for new speakers is to adopt a dialect that is effectively moribund. This is a challenging approach, particularly when the dialect is relatively divergent from ‘mid-Minch’ norms. It may perhaps be understood as an alternative strategy for achieving authenticity, analogous to what Ingrid Piller (2002) has described as ‘passing’ for a native speaker by adopting a non-standard variety which most speakers of the language are not familiar with. This tactic has received more prominence in recent years, particularly due to the efforts of a few high-profile activists, notably the musician Griogair Labhruidh, who has championed the dialect of Ballachulish in north Argyll (Indigenous People 2015), and Àdhamh Ó Broin, who has promoted the Gaelic of south Argyll, which he (neologically) styles ‘Gàidhlig Dhàl Riata’, adopting the name of the early Gaelic kingdom based in that region. Ó Broin and others have established an initiative called *Droitseach* (an uncommon word meaning ‘considerable quantity or number’; see [droitseach.blogspot.co.uk](http://droitseach.blogspot.co.uk)) to promote dialectal diversity in Gaelic (see Caimbeul 2013). In 2015 Ó Broin launched a crowdfunding initiative to ‘Save Dalriada Gaelic’, and successfully raised over £10,000 (Ó Broin 2015). He offered the following account of his experience ‘saving’ the dialect, working with the last native speaker, now aged 84:

I caught it from the jaws of death.

Several years ago I felt a real homesickness and an urge to find out more about the dialect of my area.

I travelled the length and breadth of Cowal and the rest of the Dalriata area to see if there was anyone left alive who spoke it.

Luckily, I found Robbie [MacVicar] and together we have saved the language from disappearing into history. [. . .]

It’s been like filling in a jigsaw. I decided to take the language and instead of just documenting it, I would learn it and live it.

It’s the most effective way of preserving it. My children all speak it fluently and consider it their first and main language – in a way they are guardians of the Dalriada dialect (*The Scotsman* 2015).

This is unlikely to become a common approach among new speakers, however, and there is as yet little evidence that dialects can be effectively revived through such means.

## **6 New dialects of Gaelic?**

As would be expected, most discussion of variation within Gaelic has focused on traditional dialects and accents in Gaelic. But to what extent are new dialects of Gaelic emerging, especially in urban areas, and how are they perceived? Probably the most common response to new Gaelic dialects is straightforward rejection, as some of the new speakers recounted:

*F4: Chan eil fhios agam cia mheud turas gun cuala [sic] mi daoine ag ràdh, ‘Chan eil blas agad.’ Agus, uill, dè blas a tha iad a’ ciallachadh?*

(F4: I don’t know how many times I’ve heard people say ‘You don’t have blas’. And, well, what *blas* do they mean?) (McLeod, O’ Rourke and Dunmore 2014, 40).

This remark provoked laughter from the rest of the group, probably because the speaker had a fairly marked Glasgow accent in her speech. This suggestion that some accents were more acceptable than others was echoed by a second Glasgow focus group participant.

*F2: Ma tha blas gu math Leòdhasach agad no rudeigin mar sin, chan eil iad [daoine aig a bheil a’ Ghàidhlig bho dhùthchas] a’ smaointinn dad mu dheidhinn agus tha e ceart gu leòr, ach ma tha thu à Inbhir Nis le ‘Invernessian accent’, you know, . . . chan eil iad a’ gabhail ri sin, you know.*

(F2: If you have a strong Lewis accent or something like that, they [native speakers] won’t think anything of it and that’s all right, but if you’re from Inverness with an ‘Invernessian accent’, *you know* . . . they won’t accept that, *you know*) (McLeod, O’ Rourke and Dunmore 2014, 40).

These responses accord with the view reported by Emily McEwan-Fujita from a native speaker working in the Gaelic development organisation

Comunn na Gàidhlig (c. 2000), who said, seemingly through clenched teeth, ‘I don’t really have a problem with Gaelic learners. But something that really gets on my wick, I don’t like hearing Gaelic in a very alien accent, OK?’ (McEwan-Fujita 2003: 145; see Will 2012: 41).

On the other hand, some activists celebrate the new diversity of contemporary Gaelic. One example of this point of view comes from the prominent novelist and poet Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul, a native speaker from South Uist), who has also written lyrically of the value of the traditional dialects (as quoted above):

*Bha daoine riamh a’ bruidhinn gach cainnt is dualchainnt ann an dòighean eadar-dhealaichte, agus ’s dòcha le sin nach bu chòir mòran dragha bhith againn an e blas Bhaghasdail neo blas a’ Bhronx a th’ aig neach sam bith a tha bruidhinn Gàidhlig: tha iad uile freagarrach is ceart. Oir is fhèarr Gàidhlig bheò na Gàidhlig bhalbh.*

(People have always spoken every language and dialect in different ways, and thus perhaps we shouldn’t be too concerned whether a person who speaks Gaelic has a Boisdale accent or a Bronx accent; they are all appropriate and correct. Because living Gaelic is better than silent Gaelic (Caimbeul 2015) [trans. WCM]).

Against this background, the issue of new speakers and emerging new Gaelic dialects has received some prominence recently through media reporting on the possible emergence of a distinct Glasgow form of Gaelic driven by the rapid expansion of Gaelic education in the city. Important research has been carried out on this topic by Claire Nance, who has looked at the language production both of secondary school pupils in the city and also the new speakers in the study described above (Nance 2013, 2015: Nance et al., under review). Unfortunately the media coverage has been predictably superficial and has not directly addressed Nance’s work, much of which involves close technical analysis, but what is perhaps surprising is that most of the public response to the possible emergence of a new ‘Glasgow Gaelic’ has been positive in tone, presenting this development as natural and healthy language change (Kane 2014; BBC 2015). For example, a group of Gaelic teachers in Glasgow appeared to characterise their pupils’ Gaelic as a legitimate new variety:

F1160 The kids from Glasgow have their own accent, don't they?  
They've got their own sort of special Gaelic.

...

F947 Uh-huh. Yeah there is a twang when you hear them. . . .  
Particularly on the radio you can tell where they're from.

...

F746 Oh right and is that kind of a mix of all the different teachers'  
accents or is that more like the Glaswegian?

F947 The Glaswegian, I think.

F1160 It's the Glaswegian accent.

M1161 Yeah.

...

F1160 But it's not like they are saying the words wrong, like they  
would do if they'd learnt it older. Do you know what I mean?  
They're pronouncing it, putting their Ds properly and their,  
it's, it's like just their own accent, isn't it, almost (Scottish  
Corpus of Texts and Speech 2006).

The last speaker's use of the qualifier 'almost' may be significant here, however.

A particularly striking reaction came from a mother of children in Gaelic education in Glasgow who was interviewed as part of another recent project looking at parents from Ireland with children in Gaelic-medium education in central Scotland:

. . . . the Glaswegian Gaelic growing, that is a good thing, that is a healthy thing, I would hope. And that's the Gaelic I hope I'm speaking by next year or the year after. You know, 'Chan eil scoobie agam'. I love it. This kind of funny [. . .] you know, it's modern, that's a language alive. Isn't it? When it's doing that. So . . . I would hope that is what is going to happen here. I hope my children are growing up speaking a language that is changing and adapting to the world around it (McLeod and O'Rourke, forthcoming).

A note of caution about this possible new Glaswegian Gaelic is necessary, however, for there are questions about the extent to which it is actually used. If we consider the total community of active Gaelic users in Glasgow, speakers of 'Weegie Gaelic' are probably not very audible, for three distinct

reasons. First, it is widely recognised that many young people who acquire Gaelic in school tend to make very limited use of the language outside school or after leaving school (e.g. Dunmore 2015). Nance's research would lead us to hypothesise that this is particularly true of those pupils whose Gaelic is most strongly influenced by the phonology and prosody of Glasgow English as opposed to those who have aimed at a more traditional pronunciation (Nance 2013, 2015). Second, many of the new speakers who are active in Glasgow's growing Gaelic 'scene' are not actually from Glasgow and do not exhibit the linguistic features such as non-rhoticity that Nance identified in adult learners who grew up in Glasgow (Nance et al., under review). In our research on new speakers, for example, only eight of the eighteen Glasgow-based participants originally came from the area. Finally, a large proportion of Gaelic speakers in Glasgow have migrated to the city from Gaelic-speaking areas and thus speak Gaelic with the dialect (perhaps somewhat modified) of their home area. To the extent that a new 'Weegie Gaelic' variety is emerging, then, it cannot simply be understood as 'the variety of Gaelic habitually used by Gaelic speakers in Glasgow'.

## **7 Conclusion**

The *Dlùth is Inneach* report on Gaelic corpus planning, which was based on extensive community consultation, included a number of recommendations, one of which drew attention to the issue of dialects:

People want support for informal, vernacular, traditional language use, as well as for more formal, standard usage, so that younger speakers can familiarise themselves with the many appropriate modes of speaking (including dialects), and do not end up using formal Gaelic in informal contexts. It is thus important for Gaelic corpus development to prioritise the description and preservation of the traditional vernacular dialects, and not just focus on the formal standard language (Bell et al. 2014: C200).

In October 2015, Bòrd na Gàidhlig announced the establishment of a new body, *Buidheann Stiùiridh Corpais* (Corpus Steering Group), to drive forward development in relation to corpus planning, particularly in relation to the preparation of a new reference grammar 'based on the vernacular usage of traditional Gaelic speakers' and the agreement and dissemination of new terminology. To what extent dialect issues will be addressed explicitly within

this work programme remains to be seen. For many, a pragmatic approach, borne of necessity, remains the only viable way forward, as Coinneach Combe, a teacher with extensive experience working in Gaelic development, commented:

Basic fluency in the schools is the priority, teachers don't have enough contact time to deliver the curriculum through a language which most pupils do not speak as their native language and focus on a particular dialect of Gaelic at the same time (Combe 2015).

Another Gaelic development officer who worked with teenagers, Donald Morris, echoed this view:

The dialect promotion enthusiasts often seem to me as slightly removed from the realities of fluency levels in schools and young people in general. I don't mean that to be critical more that ensuring children have a working fluency is more important than what dialect they use (Morris 2015).

Since the 1980s this point of view has clearly been the dominant one in Gaelic education and in Gaelic development more generally. It remains to be seen if a renewed emphasis on dialect differentiation will become apparent in the coming years.

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