

Summary Research Note on *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community: A Comprehensive Sociolinguistic Survey of Scottish Gaelic*

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1. **Research Aims:** This research note presents and summarises the key findings of our comprehensive sociolinguistic survey on the social use of Scottish Gaelic and on Gaelic-speaking identity in the remaining vernacular communities of the Western Isles, Staffin in the Isle of Skye and the Isle of Tiree in Argyll and Bute.
2. **Key Results:** Within these island communities, the social use and transmission of Gaelic is at the point of collapse. The results of the various research modules reveal an ongoing demographic crisis, characterised firstly by a diminishing social density of Gaelic speakers; and secondly by a very low level of societal and familial transmission of Gaelic. The weak cross-generational practice of vernacular Gaelic is the result of these combined social factors. The level of societal crisis for the Gaelic communities is indicated in the primary findings of the survey:
 - Low levels of Gaelic ability among the young island residents in the research area
 - Marginal levels of use of the language across different social contexts
 - Marginal presence of Gaelic in young people's experience of primary and secondary schooling
 - General indifference among the young regarding the place of Gaelic in their lives
 - Severely reduced familial and communal transmission of Gaelic due to the predominance of English in these communities
 - Gaelic-speaking social networks are a marginal aspect of life in the islands, except in the case of the older age cohorts.
3. **Gaelic demolinguistics and Census data:** Census data for the period 1981–2011 show a continued decline in the number of Gaelic speakers resident in the islands of the research area, a 13% proportional average loss per decade since 1981. Of the resident population aged 3+, only 52% of people at the 2011 Census reported an ability to speak Gaelic compared to 80% at the 1981 Census. The main findings of the demolinguistic analysis of the census show (Chapter 2):
 - A net loss of 9660 Gaelic speakers over the 1981–2011 period
 - In the decade from 1981 to 1991, the islands lost the 80%+ social density of Gaelic speakers; Gaelic ability in the 3–17 age cohort contracted particularly severely in that decade:
 - There was a fall of 41% in Gaelic speaker numbers among this young age cohort
 - This post-1981 contraction was a pivotal turning-point in the communal decline of Gaelic social networks
 - Less than 2,000 young people (3–17-year olds) in the vernacular communities report an ability in Gaelic in the 2011 Census
 - There is approximately a 30%-point gap between speaker ability data and Gaelic household use data indicated in the census, i.e. the use of Gaelic in households is much weaker than the level of Gaelic ability in these communities
 - The analysis of the individual speaker data with family household use data indicates a critical intersection of these two variables:
 - when Gaelic ability in a community declines to 45% of the residents and family use of Gaelic contracts to 15% of relevant households
 - This nexus of 15% family use / 45% community ability denotes the **moribund** phase or a critical threshold of non-viability in which Gaelic is largely restricted to marginal aspects of community life, institutional practice and to the elderly age cohorts
 - Within the next ten years, most of the communities will be at or will have entered the **moribund** phase on current trajectories

- A comparison of the individual Gaelic ability data with the household use of Gaelic (19% of the total family households) suggests the current size of the Gaelic vernacular speaker group extends to around 11,000 people.

Figure 1 illustrates the projected future levels of Gaelic ability based on previous intercensal rates of decline. It shows a progressive and substantial reduction in Gaelic speaking ability in the Western Isles with the projected Gaelic-speaker population approaching the 45% threshold of non-viability by 2021.

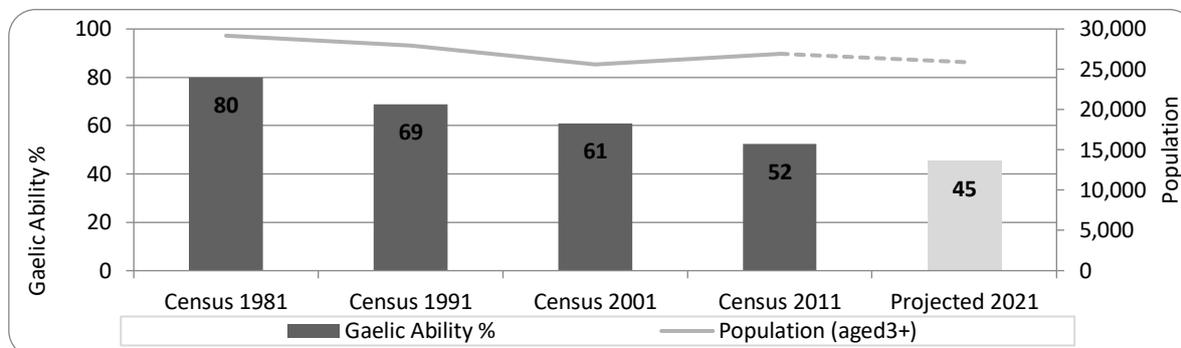


Figure 1: Trend in actual (solid data line) and projected (broken line) population (3+ yrs) and actual and projected (2021) percentage Gaelic ability, Western Isles

4. Some Key Findings from the Research Modules

- The findings of the **preschooler survey** (Chapter 3) show that a small number of preschool children (24 of 359 children, i.e. 6.7% of the total) had a *Native-like* or *Good* understanding of Gaelic on enrolment. 88% of the preschoolers use only English with their fellow preschoolers on enrolment, with a small reduction in this percentage to 76% of the children as time passes. Despite some increase in the use of Gaelic over time, English remains the language of peer-group socialisation for a large majority of the preschoolers, indicating that the Gaelic-medium inputs from the preschool staff have a marginal impact on peer-group language socialisation. The main implication arising from the preschooler survey is that the parental generation no longer speaks Gaelic to a sufficiently productive extent in order to support the social practice of Gaelic in the islands. In other words, the island communities have lost their social capacity for self-regeneration as Gaelic-speaking communities.
- The **teenager survey** (Chapter 4) on Gaelic ability, use and attitudes, shows that Gaelic impinges only marginally on the lives of these teenagers. Low levels of Gaelic use are reported in the home and in the community:
 - The pooled data analysis shows low levels of Gaelic use in the home; 18% of teenagers report both parents as fluent in Gaelic, and 5.1% report that they *Always* or *Mainly* speak Gaelic to their parents (see **Table 3 in the Research Digest**).
 - Whilst around 20% of the teenagers, report fluency in Gaelic (either as native speakers, 14.3%, or learners, 6%), 1.3% of teenagers report that they *Always* or *Mainly* speak Gaelic to their friends.
- Regarding identity, only 32.6% of the teenagers self-ascribe as Gaels, compared with 79% of respondents in the community survey (Chapter 5). In contrast to their own social practice of Gaelic, 41.2% of the pupils indicate that they intend to raise their own children in Gaelic.
- The **Community Sociolinguistic Survey** (Chapter 5) and the **Speaker Typology Survey** (Chapter 6) were conducted in Scalpay, Grimsay and Eriskay. The findings demonstrate the loss of Gaelic dominance especially since the 1980s, but with significant evidence of initial contraction in the 1970s also. These surveys corroborate the findings in the census-based demolinguistic analysis. In the Community Sociolinguistic Survey of those aged 65+, 72% of respondents in the three islands report themselves as fluent Gaelic speakers; 31.6% of respondents report that their spouses/partners speak only or mainly Gaelic to them; however, 15.5% of all respondents' children were raised in households only or mainly through Gaelic. The majority (63.6%) of respondents aged under 45 were reported as not being fluent in Gaelic. The Speaker Typology Survey shows that high densities of Gaelic native speakers pertain to the 65+ age groups in the three islands.

5. Conclusions

The combined evidence of the surveys shows that the communal practice of Gaelic does not extend beyond fragile and marginal social networks. The findings indicate that the social continuity of Gaelic in the Western Isles has been lost as a result of the societal weakness of the Gaelic-speaking group in its remaining vernacular habitat.

The marginal levels of societal and familial transmission of Gaelic, combined with low levels of youth socialisation through Gaelic, are clear indicators of the peripheralisation of the Gaelic-speaking networks in the islands. These remaining Gaelic networks will not survive anywhere to any appreciable extent, under current circumstances, beyond this decade. Given that the Gaels are now experiencing the final social phase of ethnolinguistic erasure, the limited relevance of Gaelic bodies and their current policy initiatives are now a significant hindrance to the Gaelic group in efforts to engage positively with challenging circumstances.

6. Initial Steps to Address the Gaelic Crisis

Chapter 9 of the *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* sets out in detail a model for the revival of the Gaelic community, and a summary of the model is explained in the accompanying *Research Digest* of the book. The proposed new model for community-led Gaelic revitalisation in the islands, termed the **Participatory Minority Language Cooperative**, is based on a comprehensive language-in-society approach. It is a language planning and policy model which is rooted in a community development framework.

Figure 2 gives an outline indication of the required components for the establishment of Urras na Gàidhlig, as the chief component of the Participatory Minority Language Cooperative.



Figure 2: Participatory Minority Language Cooperative: Component Levels 1-6

Moving beyond the current situation will be a challenge for all stakeholders. In order to respond to the crisis in a positive and rational manner some initial steps would be prudent:

- a) An admission by the community and public bodies that the situation is critical
- b) An acceptance among public bodies that the current policy interventions for the Gaelic vernacular speaker group are not fit for purpose
- c) An acknowledgment that an alternative approach is required if the complete loss of vernacular Gaelic is to be averted
- d) A collective willingness to bolster the societal vitality of the Gaelic-speaking group
- e) A reasonably swift re-orientation of language policy and planning efforts away from formal symbolic institutional provision.

The proposed cooperative model seeks to re-balance power, financial provision and strategic resources in favour of embedded community groups, and Gaelic familial and social networks possessing the capabilities and the desire to initiate a process of change aimed at language-in-society revitalisation.

The *status quo* and the social continuity of Gaelic as a community language are clearly now incompatible.