

Not Enough Words: language acquisition and identity work in tertiary-level Gaelic-medium education.

Timothy Currie Armstrong

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Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is a fully accredited higher-education institution that teaches degrees up to the PhD level entirely through the medium of Scottish Gaelic, a threatened minority language with less than 60 thousand speakers. I direct our first-year intensive, immersion program for our fluent undergraduates, mostly students who have acquired the language in Gaelic-medium primary and secondary education, and also, in some cases, in the home. Gaelic-medium education in Scotland is underdeveloped and fragmented, and this mirrors the weak, fragmented state of the Gaelic speech communities themselves. There are, at present, no communities remaining in Scotland where Gaelic functions as the default community language for all age groups. As a result, Gaelic language/identity acquisition in the school and in the community is failing, and most nominally fluent undergraduates come to Sabhal Mòr Ostaig with much stronger language skills in English than in Gaelic, as well as inchoate identity connections to the language, and rarely speak Gaelic with peers outside of formal educational contexts. This presents us with a unique set of challenges, both practical and ideological, as we work to help these students acquire the language skills that they will need to pursue university-level education through the medium of Gaelic, at the same time as we encourage them to develop the sorts of identity connections to the language that will motivate them to use Gaelic socially outwith formal, educational contexts. In this talk I will draw on my own research and the research of colleagues, as well as my experience in developing a curriculum that meets the special needs of this cohort of young bilinguals, to propose a new direction for the development of Gaelic-medium education in Scotland, and also to consider more generally the role of identity work in successful minority-language education for language revival.

Tim Armstrong is a senior lecturer at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic college on the Isle of Skye in Scotland. He leads the Gaelic and Communication course at the college, an intensive, immersion Gaelic course for fluent speakers and advanced learners in the first year of the college's degree programs. He has published research on language ideology, language revival, language acquisition, and social movements, as well as fiction in the Gaelic language. His novel, *Air Cuan Dubh Drilseach*, won the Saltire Society's best first Scottish book of the year award in 2013, and his latest book, *Às na Freumhan: Eachdraidh air Iomairt na Sgoileadh Gàidhlig ann an Dùn Èideann, 1998-2011*, is a social history of the long-fought campaign to establish a Gaelic-medium primary school in Edinburgh.

For almost eighteen years, I have had the privilege of working and studying at a truly unique place: Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic college on the Isle of Skye. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is unique in that it not only teaches in Scottish Gaelic, a threatened, minority language spoken by less than two percent of the Scottish population, but also that it also aspires to create a completely Gaelic-language learning environment for its students both inside and outside of the classroom, establishing Gaelic as the language of instruction and a social language everywhere on our residential campus, as well as establishing Gaelic as the working language of all our staff at the college. These are ambitious goals, they present significant challenges, and we do not always succeed, but we often get close, and in my talk today, I would like to specifically discuss some of the pedagogical issues we grapple with as an explicitly activist tertiary educational institution that was established to promote the revitalization of a threatened, minority language by teaching a university curriculum through the medium of that language.

But first, as context, I should say a few words about the current state of Gaelic in Scotland. Once spoken almost everywhere in Scotland, Gaelic is now a minority language in all but a few places in the Western Isles, and even in these core communities, Gaelic is no longer spoken as a default, community language by all ages. In 2011, I was part of a team that published research on Shawbost, or Siabost, a majority Gaelic-speaking village on the west coast of the Isle of Lewis. We chose Shawbost because it was recognized as being a particularly strong Gaelic-speaking community, perhaps one of the strongest on Lewis, itself a majority Gaelic-speaking island at the time, and we found that even in this relatively strong Gaelic-speaking community, with 66% of residents reported as proficient Gaelic-speakers, language shift to English was almost complete. Proficient Gaelic-speakers were only a majority amongst residents over fifty, and intergenerational transmission of the language in the home had all but broken down, with only one in five parents speaking mainly or only Gaelic to their children. (Munro *et al.* 2011) At the time, we had no reason to believe that the situation in Shawbost was unique, and indeed, more recent research by Conchúr Ó Giollagáin and his team at the University of the Highlands and Islands has largely confirmed these results in more communities throughout the islands. (Ó Giollagáin *et al.* 2020)

Almost all Gaelic speakers now live embedded to a greater or lesser extent in Gaelic-speaking networks throughout the country, rather than in areas where Gaelic functions as the default community language. (Armstrong 2020) My colleague at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Iain Mac an Tàilleir, conducted fine-grain analysis on the 2011 census results and concluded that only 364 Gaelic speakers still lived in two small communities where he expected Gaelic might still function as the default community language, that is just 0.63% of the total Gaelic-speaking population of Scotland. (Mac an Tàilleir 2014) Almost half of all Gaelic speakers live outside of the Highlands and Islands, particularly in Glasgow and Edinburgh in the urban central belt in Scotland. Gaelic was given some legal recognition as a national language of Scotland with the Gaelic Language Act in 2005, but this legislation was fairly weak, establishing no clear language rights for Gaelic speakers, and campaigners were particularly disappointed that a clear right to Gaelic-medium education was not included in the final act, a demand that was at the centre of their campaign leading up to the legislation. (c.f. Dunbar 2011a; McLeod 2006)

So while Gaelic is officially a language of Scotland commanding “equal respect” with English, in practice, Gaels remain a low-status, subaltern community of speakers in their own country, and this is reflected in the history of the establishment of Gaelic education in

Scotland. Provision of Gaelic-medium education in Scotland is fragmented, lags far behind demand, and where there is provision, it is almost 100% the result of activist pressure from the grass-roots rather than top-down education policy. Councils typically range between indifferent to openly hostile to the provision of Gaelic education, and even in the Gaelic heartland of the Western Isles, Gaelic-medium education is not universal, with only 40% of primary students in the Western Isles enrolled in Gaelic-medium units. (Morgan 2020: 13)

And this brings us to an unusual feature of the development of Gaelic education in Scotland, and many would argue, a particular weakness: that Gaelic-medium education was first established in units in English-medium schools rather than in stand-alone Gaelic schools (c.f. Rogers and McLeod 2006), and while a small number of Gaelic schools have been opened in the last two decades, at the primary level, Gaelic units still outnumber Gaelic schools 55 to 6. (Morgan 2020: 3) Gaelic provision at the secondary level is even more fragmented, with only one dedicated Gaelic high-school in Scotland, and Gaelic departments in otherwise English-medium high-schools typically teaching only a handful of subjects through the medium of Gaelic. (O' Hanlon *et al.* 2020) Attrition along this fragmented Gaelic-learning pathway is steep. In the last school year, while 653 students entered Gaelic-medium education in their first year in primary school, only 180 students were still enrolled in Gaelic-medium education in their fourth year of secondary school. (Morgan 2020: 26)

Gaelic-medium education was established in units rather than in stand-alone schools, and Gaelic-medium education was also established entirely within the state education system, rather than in independents schools, as is often the case in other countries. In Scotland, Gaelic-medium education largely means teaching to the mainstream, state curriculum, but through the medium of Gaelic. There is very little specifically Gaelic cultural content to most Gaelic-medium education, and nothing like a specifically Gaelic pedagogy, and also, Gaelic-medium education largely still relies on immersion alone for language acquisition, with as yet very little teaching to form as part of the curriculum. Taken together, students often leave Gaelic-medium education as strongly preferential English speakers with weak identity links to the language, and do not use the language much or at all in their adult lives. Stuart Dunmore at the University of Edinburgh recently published research on the first generation of Gaelic-medium educated students, now young adults, and found that only a minority of these adults still used Gaelic daily or spoke it with their children. He also found that these young adults largely did not identify with the language as Gaels, the traditional core Gaelic identity. This is his assessment:

[...] the majority of Gaelic medium-educated adults' identification as Gaels was either weak, or rejected out of hand. [...] if immersion pupils do not develop social identifications and supportive ideologies toward the languages through which they are educated, it should not necessarily be surprising if they do not then speak the language outside of the classroom, or after completing formal education.

(Dunmore 2017: 737)

I direct the Gaelic and Communication course at the College, an intensive, immersion course in the first year of our degree programs that is aimed at those students who come to us directly out of Gaelic-medium education, so these young adults are the very students with whom I work. The days are long past when any young adult would come to us with Gaelic skills that either equalled or exceed their skills in English, so all of our students spend their

first year in an intensive Gaelic-learning program with up to 20 hours a week of classroom contact time, either in my course for the most competent Gaelic speakers, or in another course, an Cùrsa Comais, aimed at more intermediate learners. This prepares all of our students to understand, speak, read and write Gaelic at a level that will allow them to study their university subjects through the medium of the language, courses they begin in earnest in their second year.

Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is a unique institution, almost an anomaly, and it is only by happenstance that it exists at all. The College was founded coming on fifty years ago, in 1973, by the financier and improving Highland laird, Sir Iain Noble. Sir Iain was visionary, and more than a little bit eccentric, and unlike most other modern Highland landlords, he took a passionate interest in the Gaelic language. He founded the College with support of local Gaelic activists, such as the famous Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean, but completely on his own initiative. (cf. Dunbar 2011b; Hutchinson 2005) Folk in the Scottish political establishment undoubtedly thought he was crazy, and further, he was starting Gaelic-medium education backwards, at the university level before Gaelic-medium provision was established at the primary level. And while perhaps it was wildly over-ambitious at the time, the last fifty years have shown that it was also inspired decision, and I will come back to this idea of doing it backwards, of starting with a college, at the end of my talk.

The College was founded in an old, ruined stone farmstead, above a bay called Ostaig, on the Sleat peninsula, on the Isle of Skye. The name of the college, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, literally means the Big Barn at Ostaig, an odd name for a college, but we are attached to it and no one is interested in changing it now. In the intervening years, the College has expanded into two adjoining campuses with student housing, a library and archive, a television and radio studio, offices for Gaelic-related initiatives, and space that we rent out to local businesses, as well as a Gaelic-medium childcare facility. Prior to Covid19, there were typically about one hundred and forty people working at the College full- or part-time, about sixty full-time students in residence, more than 300 part-time, distance-learning students, and more than 800 students attending one of the week-long short courses we run in the summer.

All of our degree-level courses are taught and assessed in Gaelic, and as I said earlier, we aspire to create an entirely Gaelic-speaking environment for our students, as well as to create an entirely Gaelic-speaking workplace for our employees; but as I also explained, we face huge challenges in respect to both of these goals, and we don't fully succeed in either. If you come to the College, you will hear both students and staff using English together to a greater or lesser extent, at different times and in different situations.

It terms of staff, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig has grown rapidly at the same time as the Gaelic community around it has declined in Skye, and we now find it difficult to hire sufficient Gaelic-speaking staff for all roles, particularly in house-keeping and in catering. All of our staff are offered free Gaelic-learning during their work-day, but bringing staff to full fluency in Gaelic has proven practically and ideologically very, very challenging. In 2013, we looked at the question of what it costs us to bring a staff member from zero to fluent in Gaelic, and taking into account lost labour, on-costs and cover, even with all the efficiencies of scale that we enjoy as a business that is itself a provider of Gaelic education, we arrived at the eye-watering figure of over £16,800 per person. The truth is that we have never actually funded staff Gaelic learning to this level, and further, some of our staff have little or no interest in learning Gaelic in the first place, and a few individuals over the years have been actually hostile to the language, hated Gaelic and would never use it.

Our students arrive at the college with their own difficulties when it comes to using Gaelic socially amongst themselves. Those students at an intermediate level, of course, simply struggle with their competency in the language, but even those students who come to my program, who are nominally ‘fluent’, often struggle with their Gaelic, have a limited command of traditional structures, vocabulary, and idiom, and are keenly aware that their Gaelic is not as strong as their English. As one student once described to me her own feelings about the language, it felt to her like there was not enough words in Gaelic.

Fiona O’Hanlon at the University of Edinburgh surveyed Gaelic-medium students at the end of primary and beginning of secondary, and found that while 93% rated their own English speaking ability as ‘very good’ only 36% rated their own Gaelic speaking ability at the same level. (O’Hanlon 2012: 340–1) My students are young, they want to fit in and make new friends at university, and their poor Gaelic seems in the way. They lack confidence in their own abilities, and as Stuart Dunmore’s research demonstrated (above), they lack the strong identity connections to the language that might motivate them to take the social risks involved in speaking Gaelic with their peers. I suspect, even at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, that many students, at least initially, are ashamed to be Gaelic speakers. Gaelic units in English-medium schools don’t help. Many of my students have experienced bullying at school for being Gaelic speakers, and would never use Gaelic with friends outside of class.

It is often heart-breaking, and exasperating, to hear so much English still used at the College, but as I counsel my students, this also presents them with a learning opportunity. Gaelic is not the default language any longer in any community anywhere in Scotland now, so if young speakers want to actually use Gaelic in their adult lives, they will have to adopt an *activist stance* to the language at the micro-level, finding creative ways to encourage friends, family and co-workers to speak the language with them. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig can function, in this respect, as a living language-laboratory for our students where they can practice these micro-level language activist skills, and learn the social strategies they will need to use Gaelic after university. (cf. Armstrong 2018) I often tell my students that learning these social skills is actually harder than learning the genitive case or other difficult linguistic features of the language, but also more important, if their aim is to actually speak Gaelic in their daily lives in the future.

We teach a very ‘metalinguistic’ course in the first year. Also, we spend at least as much time talking *about* Gaelic as a social practice as we spend learning Gaelic specifically as a code, and this contrasts starkly with Gaelic-medium education at the secondary, and particularly at the primary level, where the focus is still very much on content, on teaching the standard Scottish curriculum through the medium of Gaelic, but with very little discussion of the language itself, of either its form or its practice.

Much of this work we do together in class could be considered ‘ideological clarification’, to use Joshua Fishman’s term (Fishman 2001b), where we examine Gaelic identity and the language revival as a social movement. Gaelic identity in Scotland in the 21st century is particularly contested and fraught, with some in the Gaelic-speaking community defining the core Gaelic identity, the Gael, in linguistic and cultural terms, and others defining the Gael based on birthplace, place of residence, and/or ancestry. (cf. Bechhofer and McCrone 2014) As a lecturer on an activist course, at an activist college, I explicitly advance the former linguistic and cultural understanding of Gaelic identity. In a 21st century, multi-ethnic, multi-racial country like Scotland, defining the core Gaelic identity in terms of ancestry, and therefore, in terms of race, is particularly problematic to say the least, and our

ultimate aim is that all of our students will see themselves as full members of the greater Gaelic community, and in turn, as confident young Gaelic activists who use the language socially in their daily lives because they take pride in their identity as Gaels, regardless of where they come from, the colour of their skin, their religion, or anything else.

The entire curriculum is designed to help students develop the linguistic skills and the confidence to switch to Gaelic as their preferential social language with other Gaelic speakers. Much of this work comes down to simple language acquisition. A significant portion of the contact time each week is spent studying all aspects of the language as a code, from pronunciation, to grammar, to vocabulary and idiom. We ask our students to come to Gaelic with fresh eyes and ears, and approach this aspect of the course as if they were learning Gaelic all over again as a foreign language. The trick, from my end, is to teach to a standard without devaluing the Gaelic the students already have, and knocking their confidence as a result, and I do this by talking a lot about register. I try to never use the words ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in discussing the structure of the language, but rather contrast traditional versus modern, formal versus informal, or literary Gaelic versus street Gaelic, the Gaelic they would use at work versus the Gaelic they might use down at the pub.

So we work a lot on acquiring standard, literary Gaelic as a code, and also, on identity work, discussing the Gaelic revival as a social movement, and I have tried to bring these two elements together by basing much of the course on reading and discussing modern Scottish Gaelic novels. Surprisingly perhaps, as one of the oldest written languages in Europe, Scottish Gaelic actually came to the novel as a literary form relatively late. The first real novels in Gaelic were published in the first half of the 20th century, and then, only a few, but from the 1970s on, the novel really took off in Gaelic, and we now have several library shelves worth of books to choose from, all written in modern, literary-standard Gaelic, a written reflection of the idiomatic, traditional Gaelic spoken in core Gaelic communities in the second half of the 20th century. (cf. Watson 2011) We read and discuss seven Gaelic novels over the course of the academic year, and we use these novels in a number of ways:

First, to exemplify, contextualize, and reinforce the grammar and idioms we learning; and second as a resource for building students’ active vocabulary. I have designed the vocabulary-acquisition part of the course around the language found in the novels. The students are given lists of less-common words they will encounter in each novel, encouraged to try to work out what these words mean in context, and I have also created flashcards for these words on a vocabulary-learning app that students can use as they progress through the texts. And finally, we use the novels as an opportunity for the students to develop their higher-register spoken Gaelic in seminar-style classroom discussions of their reading. These novels are rich in depictions of different attitudes to Gaelic language use and identity in late-modern Scotland, and we use these depictions as prompts or catalysts for the students’ own reflections on their relationship to the language, and the role of Gaelic in their lives.

Shockingly, it is clear that many of my students have never done this before, have never been given the opportunity in school to reflect on why they are learning Gaelic. Their parents put them into Gaelic-medium education as infants, but their school curriculum offered them little or no context for their new language. As Stuart Dunmore pointed out (above), it is little wonder then that they don’t use the language much outside of school and as adults. Gaelic-medium education is almost forty¹ years old in Scotland, and we now have a

¹ At the university level, full-time courses began at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in 1983, and at the primary level, the first Gaelic units opened in Glasgow and Inverness in 1985. (Dunbar 2011b: 197, 201)

lot of good data about what is working well and what is *not* working as well as hoped, and I would propose that it is time for a step-change in how we approach Gaelic immersion learning in Scotland. I believe this reassessment and redevelopment effort would focus on two broad areas:

First, acknowledging that immersion, as powerful as it is, by itself cannot give students the productive language skills that they will need to use the language outside of school in many contexts, and that we need to integrate more focus of form (cf. Ellis 2016) and explicit language instruction into Gaelic-medium education at all levels; and second, understanding that successful language learning is as much about identity as it is about learning a new code (cf. Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000), that we need to integrate positive identity work into the curriculum at all levels, aimed at opening up the core Gaelic identity, the Gael, to all children in Gaelic-medium education, regardless of background, and at the same time, helping them develop the micro-level language-activist strategies that they will need if they want to use the language outside of school, and as adults after formal schooling has ended.

This is what we are trying to do at the College, and I would argue, before any of the other language development projects based at the College, that this is the most important contribution we make to the revival of the Gaelic language, that every year we graduate a cohort of young, confident, proactive Gaelic speakers that will go on to use and promote Gaelic in their adult lives, working in Gaelic, socializing in Gaelic, and raising families in Gaelic.

Joshua Fishman was famously sceptical about the role of tertiary education in language revival (Fishman 2001b: 473–4), and counselled that development efforts should focus at the community level and on transmission in the family as the *sin qua non* of language vitality, but I would argue, in certain situations of language endangerment, that founding a tertiary-level minority-language-medium educational institution may make a lot of sense, even before immersion education is established at the primary and secondary level, and even before intergenerational transmission in the community is secured. Fishman himself wrote that, as important as children are to the vitality of a language, revival often has to start with adults:

[...] if the school is not to become merely a [threatened language as a second language] institution, it must be preceded by (or at least accompanied by) adult language learning of the threatened language as a second language, by instruction in parenting [in the threatened language] and then by substantial child acquisition of it as a first language [...] *even before pupils-to-be show up at school.*

(Fishman 2001a: 14-5, emphasis in the original)

The rate of intergenerational transmission of a language to children in the home may be an important measure of the vitality of a language, but it is *adults* that drive the revival of a language as a social movement. (cf. Jones 1993: 9–11) Educating cohorts of confident, motivated minority-language-speaking young adults who can become teachers, broadcasters, policy-makers, activists and parents in that language may be a logical first step in any effort to revitalize a language in the 21st century. And it is also important, I think, not to underestimate the status that university education in a language confers on that language's community of speakers. The university has become such an important and ubiquitous

institution around the world, that it is hard to imagine that any community could secure long-term vitality for their language without a university or college that teaches in that language.

Obviously, there are problems with this strategy, not the least of which is that many or perhaps most of the world's minority-language speaking communities would not have the resources to establish a college or a university, at least in a form that satisfies the rules of accreditation in majority-language speaking states, but this is more of a problem with how these institutions are defined, accredited and regulated, not with the basic idea that indigenous or minority-language communities might aspire to establish an institution of higher-learning through the medium of their own language.

Indeed, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is currently one college in the federated University of the Highlands and Islands system, but long-term, we aspire to establish our own Gaelic-language university at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, and one of our principal challenges will be to convince the government and the educational establishment that the current rules for accreditation, rules that conceive of the university as a massive institution serving a large and wealthy English-language speech community, are fundamentally unjust, and do, in fact, typify the structural biases that have marginalized Gaelic in Scotland over the centuries. The first universities in Europe were not huge institutions; they have become that, but that is not how they started (de Ridder-Symoens & Rüegg 2003: 187–193), and there is no reason that minority-language universities should have to start large as well.

A college that not only teaches *about* a minority language, but that also functions *in* that language, can serve as a revitalizing site of language use, as an organizing node in networks of minority-language speakers, and also, as a powerful site for ideological clarification in the context of a broader language-revival social movement. Establishing new sites of minority-language use is always a challenge, and no less so on a college campus like Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. In our work at the College, we have found that it is a common error to vastly underestimate the scale of this challenge. We yearn for language use that feels natural, that seems to just happen, but those days are long gone for Gaelic. If we aim to have Gaelic spoken in a particular space, then we have to self-consciously promote Gaelic use in that space. Keeping Gaelic going at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig requires continual ideological work; it never just happen 'naturally'.

This disappoints some folk. For detractors, Gaelic as a networked, activist language feels artificial, fake, or staged in some way, but I strongly reject this critique. I spend almost all of my waking hours speaking Gaelic. It is my working language, I use it with my network of Gaelic-speaking friends on Skye, and I speak it at home. Gaelic isn't a hobby or a performance for me; it's a real, living language. And each year, I have the opportunity to work with a new group of talented young adults who are strengthening their Gaelic skills and acquiring strong identity connections to the language, and who then go on to use Gaelic in *their* daily lives, working in Gaelic and raising families in Gaelic all over Scotland and beyond. Gaelic isn't a dead language for them either.

We are all very lucky. None of us would have these opportunities without the College. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig *is* our speech community, and for all its flaws, it serves as a powerful driver of the revival of Scottish Gaelic as a vital, spoken language in the 21st century.

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