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Gaelic on the Isle of Skye: older speakers' identity in a language-shift situation*

CASSANDRA SMITH-CHRISTMAS and DICK SMAKMAN

Abstract

This article examines age and identity in the context of language shift occurring in a community on the Isle of Skye, Scotland. Via a language ability test and a language usage survey, 19 speakers were assessed; it was determined that the older (40+) and the younger speakers (<40) in this community are distinguishable on the basis of language ability, particularly in terms of synthetic forms, conditional forms, and post-nominal possession. The usage survey revealed a decline in older speakers' longitudinal use of Gaelic, and although younger speakers are making an effort to speak Gaelic and are not accommodated by older speakers switching to English, we can still conclude that, to some degree, older speakers are somewhat linguistically isolated in this community. Finally, we propose identity negotiation and the possibility of the age and identity correlation as perpetuating factors in the language shift.

1. Introduction

1.1. Study overview

This study examines the effects of the gradual decline of Gaelic across generations in and around Bernisdale, a village on the Isle of Skye, Scotland. Language shift is occurring in Bernisdale (see Smakman and Smith-Christmas 2008; Smith-Christmas 2007), and this article describes the ramifications of the resultant language use and ability gap between older and younger speakers. In particular, we look at how older speakers are becoming socially defined by their language preference and the changing language skills and attitudes surrounding them.

1.2. *Gaelic on Skye*

One of the six Celtic languages, Scottish Gaelic (henceforth referred to as “Gaelic”) was once spoken throughout Scotland, but in the late Middle Ages sociopolitical factors caused a decline in the number of speakers in the Lowlands, thus restricting the language mainly to the Highlands, the mountainous region in the north, which also includes the Hebrides (McLeod 2001). Gaelic in the Highlands began to decline due to several factors, one of which was the diaspora of Highlanders to primarily English-speaking nations (Krauss 1992). Those who stayed in the Highlands were affected by the emergence of English as the language of economy (Campbell 1950); additionally, education played a role in the decline of Gaelic (MacKinnon 1974).

Although Skye suffered from the same circumstances of decline as other Gaelic-speaking areas, it remained a linguistic stronghold; according to the 1891 census, for example, the entire island was reported as Gaelic-speaking. Following World War II, however, dramatic population decline due to the war and its economic effects negatively impacted the number of Gaelic speakers on the island (Duwe 2004). On the basis of the returns of the 1971 census, MacKinnon reported no monoglot Gaelic speakers for the areas surveyed in Skye and characterized the period of 1961 to 1971 as one of weak intergenerational language transmission (MacKinnon 1978).

Gaelic has since made progress in terms of maintenance. There are currently six Gaelic Medium unit schools on Skye, as well as the Gaelic Medium College, *Sabhal Mòr Ostaig*. In addition to local levels, Gaelic has been maintained at the national level; one of the most important gains was the Gaelic Language Act of 2005 and the establishment of the *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* (“The Gaelic Board”). In terms of media, BBC Alba (the Gaelic TV station) was established in September 2008, and in 1997 the Gaelic radio was made a national service (Cormack 2000).

1.3. *Language shift*

Language shift is the process whereby a speech community shifts to speaking another language. This process has taken place on Skye and has led to older speakers having fewer opportunities to use Gaelic. Despite maintenance gains, Gaelic speakers only comprise 1% of the Scottish population, which is a 4% decline from the beginning of the twentieth century (Oliver 2002). According to the most recent census from 2001 (General Register Office 2005), Gaelic speakers numbered

58,652 in 2001, with 53% of speakers aged 45 or older. The Hebrides still remain the Gaelic stronghold, with 22% of the total population speaking Gaelic; 37.9% of the population of Skye returned as able to speak Gaelic.

1.4. *Bernisdale, Isle of Skye*

Our study took place in and around the Skye village of Bernisdale. The chief island of the Inner Hebrides, the Isle of Skye itself covers 1,656 square kilometers and houses a population of 9,400. In 1995, the Isle of Skye was linked to mainland Scotland by a bridge. Bernisdale, which lies seven miles from Portree, the largest urban center on the island (pop. 2,500), has approximately 200 inhabitants living on 77 crofts (small farms). Crofting, along with tourism, are the island's two chief occupations.

1.5. *Previous research*

Language shift studies on the linguistic (morphological, syntactical, phonological, lexical) and the sociolinguistic components of language loss and attrition have included studies of immigrant communities such as Turkish speakers in Australia and France (Yagmur and Akinci 2003; Yagmur 2008), Dutch speakers in New Zealand and Australia (Hulsen 2000; Clyne 1967), and Chinese speakers in England (Li 1994). Studies of indigenous communities undergoing language loss include Schmidt's (1991) study of Dyrbal speakers in Australia and Taiap speakers in Papua New Guinea (Kulick 1993). In terms of Gaelic language shift, the most extensive studies have been undertaken by Dorian (1981) and MacKinnon (1974, 1977).

These studies show that rapid language loss can occur over just two generations, and, in some cases, near-language loss within one generation (e.g., Kulick 1993), and although the circumstances vary with each study, certain trends seem to emerge, such as the lack of education in the home language as a contributing factor to language shift.

1.6. *Research questions*

This study describes the social effects of language shift across generations and inquires into how this shift has manifested itself as a sociocultural phenomenon in the lives of older Gaelic speakers. The following stepwise research questions have been defined to lay bare this manifestation.

- a. Are older speakers of Gaelic linguistically distinguishable from younger speakers?
- b. In what way, if so, are the usage domains of Gaelic different for older and younger speakers?
- c. In what way, if so, do older speakers accommodate their use of Gaelic to the younger generation?
- d. Are older speakers socially isolated because of the language shift?

2. Methodology

2.1. Overview

Language ability was tested in inhabitants of the town of Bernisdale, Skye, as well as their evaluation of Gaelic usage. First, they did an Ability Test, which was used to select speakers. After this selection, 19 suitable Gaelic speakers were left, and these did a Usage Survey. Finally, smaller subsets of participants were subjected to informal interviews and participant observation. The participants and the investigations are discussed below.

2.2. Participants

Although not all participants resided directly in Bernisdale, we have grouped them as a speech community for two reasons. First, the participants comprise one extended family by marriage; and, second, the participants interacted with each other within the same social settings — the Co-op grocery store, for instance, served this speech community. Smith-Christmas stayed with the named family for a month in 2007 (the family of participant OP1; see below) and has maintained regular ongoing contact with them. Twenty-two of the twenty-three members reside on Skye. Participant OP4, OP1's sister, who lived in Ullapool, which is another community in the Highlands, was also included not only because of the time she had spent in the Skye community, but also because she maintained regular contact with the community. The participants ranged in age from 4 to 66. Fourteen females and nine males participated in the test.

The Ability Test (described below), which evaluated Gaelic language ability, was administered to the participants. Four (younger) participants had scores which showed that they had no real command of Gaelic but based their responses on anecdotal evidence that they had picked up during their lives and education. Their average ability percentages (100%

Table 1. *The participants group*

Age	Sex	Gaelic Medium	Code
4	Male	yes	YP8
10	Female	yes	YP7
15	Female	yes	YP6
15	Male	yes	YP5
28	Female	no	YP4
29	Male	no	YP3
31	Female	no	YP2
35	Male	no	YP1
40	Female	no	OP11
42	Female	no	OP10
44	Male	no	OP9
49	Female	no	OP8
51	Female	no	OP7
56	Female	no	OP1
58	Male	no	OP6
60	Female	no	OP5
61	Female	no	OP4
64	Female	no	OP3
66	Male	no	OP2

if no mistakes were made in the Ability Test) across the language functions tested were between 0% and 20%, and these averages were mainly due to coincidental knowledge of how a plural was formed or the past tense. In most cases, they scored 0% for a certain language function. We decided, therefore, to consider these four participants too deviant to be included in the results, because we wanted to test speakers with a reasonable command of Gaelic. Their survey results were also ignored. After deleting these four records, the “lowest” participant scored an average of 44% (across the language functions).

The remaining 19 participants are given in Table 1. The table also indicates whether the participants had been enrolled, or were at that time enrolled, in Gaelic Medium Education. The age increase was gradual, with the possible exception of the step from the two 15-year-olds to the 28-year-old. The mean age was 39.9, with a standard deviation of 19.31.

2.3. *Ability Test*

The linguistic functions of language loss can be categorized into morphological, syntactical, phonological, and lexical. We tested for morphological, syntactical, and lexical erosion. Testing phonological abilities was

beyond the scope of our (written) research. The Ability Test assignments were based on Dorian's 1974 and 1976 batteries of East Sutherland Gaelic (Dorian 1981), which Smith-Christmas received via e-mail. In her study, Dorian found passive formation, plural morphology, and tense morphology to have eroded, and thus, the Ability Test was modeled on these three elements, asking speakers to translate (simple) sentences from English to Gaelic: 11 passive sentences, 58 plural nouns, and 33 tense sentences. The pilot tests were given to three fluent Gaelic speakers, and suggestions were made.

Generally, the tests were completed in either the participants' own homes or in OP1's house, while Smith-Christmas was present, though some participants completed them without Smith-Christmas' presence. Participants did not use a dictionary or any other aids in completing the test. In cases in which the participants could speak Gaelic but not write it (one younger participant, the rest older), participants dictated their responses and another participant recorded them. This dichotomy between written/spoken Gaelic did not seem particularly relevant because the sentences were so simple by nature and fairly entrenched in daily Gaelic. In cases where the spelling could have made a difference to the response, the response was verbally verified. One problem encountered was that of "questionnaire fatigue," as termed by Dorian (1981: 159). Several of the younger participants failed to fill out the test in full; judging from the qualitative findings and reactions by participants, it was clear that in most cases this was because they simply did not know the responses. Therefore, blank responses were counted as "incorrect" (not as "missing"). The test by OP1, who taught Gaelic Medium, was used as the control test.

The Ability Test tried to reveal the participants' success rate in applying various language functions of Gaelic. We looked at the ability regarding nine functions (explained in detail in Smakman and Smith-Christmas 2008). They were the following:

1. Plural: avoiding overgeneralization of plural rules
2. Passive (ability): ability to produce the passive
3. Passive (correct): producing correct passives
4. Verb tenses: future
5. Verb tenses: past
6. Verb tenses: conditional
7. Synthetic forms: correct use of these forms and the ability to not use them unnecessarily
8. Possession (lenition): use of lenition to show possession
9. Possession (post-nominal): post-nominal possessive marking

2.4. *Usage Survey*

The Usage Survey was modeled after Dorian's questionnaire (1981) and served as a quantitative device for assessing the frequency with which each participant used Gaelic and the domains in which he or she did. The participants were asked, first of all, whether, as a child, they talk(ed) Gaelic to their parents, grandparents, older siblings, younger siblings, Gaelic-speaking classmates, and household pets. Second, they were asked whether, as an adult, they speak Gaelic to their parents, spouse, older/younger siblings, their children, friends, coworkers, and household pets. The youngest participants ($n = 4$; aged 4–15) could not answer this question, of course. Finally, participants were asked about whether they did certain activities in Gaelic, namely reading the newspaper, listening to music, watching television, listening to the radio, praying, cursing, dreaming, discussing local and national affairs, and using Gaelic as a secret language.

The Usage Surveys were scored on a 4-point continuous scale. The responses were quantified as follows: "Always" received 3 points, "Often" received 2 points, "Sometimes" received 1 point, and "Never" received 0 points. The response "Not Applicable" was not factored into the scoring.

2.5. *Participant observation and informal interviews*

To supplement the attitudinal evidence from the Usage Survey, attitudes were assessed by personal interviews, which took place in various situations. These interviews ranged from extensive to relatively short. The interview process started out fairly formally, with Smith-Christmas taking notes, but when speakers tended to be slightly uncomfortable with the formal nature of the interview, a more informal approach was taken — that is, interviews were conducted while peeling prawns, driving around the island, attending social events, doing grocery shopping, taking the ferry to Barra, etc. This participant observation approach (see Saville-Troike 2003) yielded relevant anecdotal evidence.

Additionally, five of the older participants (OP1, OP3, OP4, OP6, OP7; all older than 50) completed interview surveys to ascertain whether they adjusted their speech to accommodate to younger speakers and to gauge their perceptions of younger speakers' speech adjustments when conversing with older speakers. These older participants also expressed their attitudes to accommodation. These interviews were administered via e-mail in July and August 2008.

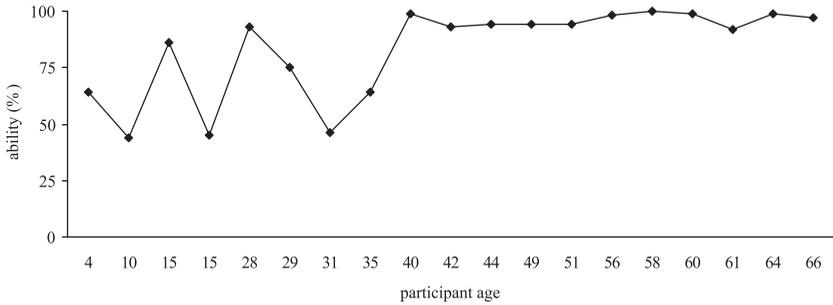


Figure 1. *Results of the Ability Test: overall Gaelic ability percentages for the various participants*

3. Results (I): Ability Test

3.1. General ability

Figure 1 shows the overall ability of each of the participants. The ability percentage refers to the average success rate in the Ability Test. A percentage of 100 means that the participant made no mistakes in any of the tasks. The ability percentage for each language function was weighted equally, and therefore each function had the same relative impact on the ability average. The horizontal dimension is chronologically ordered on the basis of the ages of the participants.

A clear pattern emerged. The figure shows that the participants aged 40 and older consistently had an excellent command of Gaelic (between 92% and 100%), while the success rate of the under-40s ranged from 44% to 93% and was relatively unpredictable on the basis of age. On the basis of this result, we decided to form two groups of participants for further calculations, namely the ones who were 40 years or older (and had a perfect or near-perfect command) and those who were less than 40 years of age (and whose command ranged from relatively poor [less than 50%] to near-perfect). This division appeared justified given the large gap in performance between the two groups. Henceforth, the participants over the age of 40 will be called the “Older Participants” or “OPs” ($n = 11$) and the younger ones are called the “Younger Participants” or “YPs” ($n = 8$).¹

3.2. Ability for different language functions

Figure 2 shows the degree of command regarding the various functions, split up across the new participant groups. The average for each of the functions is shown. The data are organized from left to right on the basis

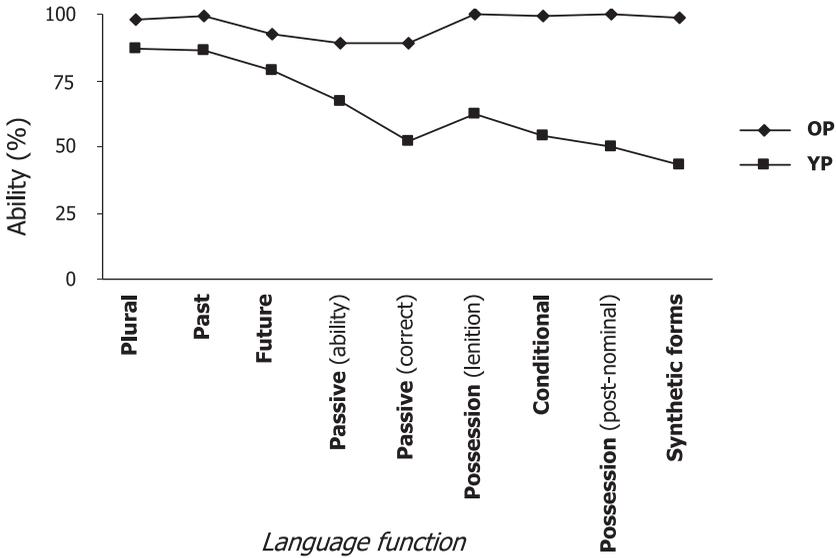


Figure 2. Results of the Ability Test: language proficiency of younger (“YP”) and older (“OP”) Gaelic speakers, split up over nine language functions

of the scope of the differences in command for each function between the two groups of participants.

A few things became instantly clear. For all of these functions, the Older Participants had a perfect or very good command, while an obvious lack of ability for a certain function occurred only within the Younger Participants. Synthetic usage ability in particular distinguishes the groups. The ability to form a plural, past, or future constituted a relatively small problem for the Younger Participants. The Older Participants had some difficulty with the passives but only when compared with the other functions. Table 2 shows whether differences between the two groups were significant.

Table 2 shows that for eight language functions, the Older Participants did significantly better ($P < 0.01$ vs. $P < 0.05$) than the Younger Participants. The future tense is the exception in that both groups did similarly well (both had a good command). Figure 3 shows the distribution of the ability scores for each function for the two participant groups and sheds light on the data in Figure 2 and Table 2. The box plots show, from bottom to top, the lowest score, the lower quartile, the median, the upper quartile, and the highest score (two or more of these may visually coincide). The boxes thus show the range of 50% of the results for a certain function. Circles and asterisks mark outliers.

Table 2. Results of the Ability Test: (non)significant differences between the Gaelic ability of Younger Participants and Older Participants regarding nine language functions

Function	<i>P</i>	<i>t</i>	df
Passive (correct)	<0.01	4.78	17
Synthetic forms		4.24	17
Conditional		3.81	17
Possession (post-nominal)		3.89	17
Passive (ability)		3.25	17
Plural		1.69	15
Possession (lenition)	<0.05	3.22	17
Past		2.43	17
Future	≥0.05	2.03	17

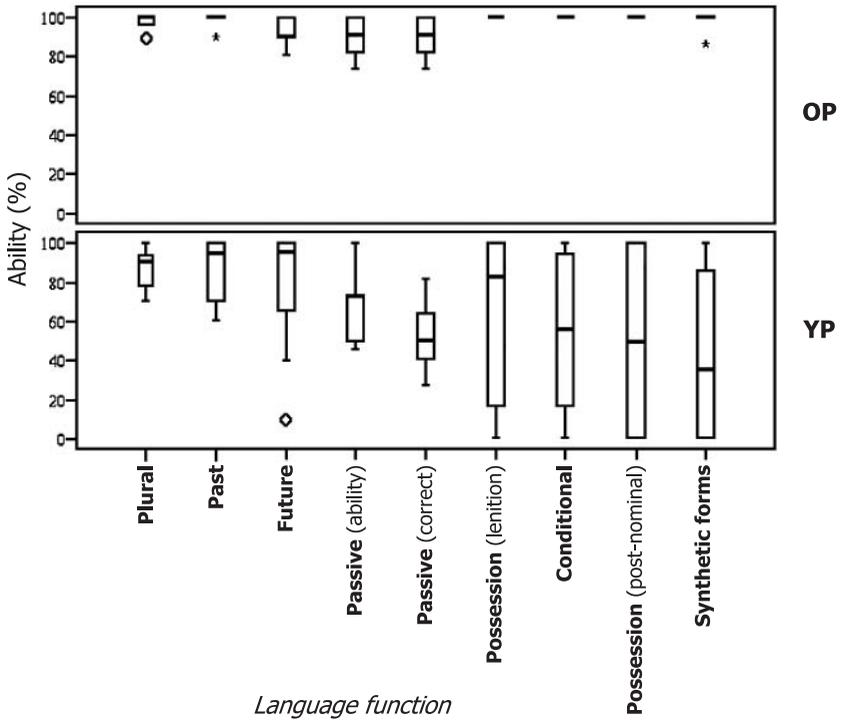


Figure 3. Results of the Ability Test: distribution of the values for the various skills, separately for Younger Participants and Older Participants

The results explain the unexpected position of possession (lenition) and plural in Table 2. Possession (lenition) revealed a strikingly high standard deviation within the Younger Participants; several of them scored like Older Participants while others more or less lacked a reasonable command. Both groups did well in plural formation but the Younger Participants were consistently less able nevertheless.

The box plots also show that for the Younger Participants only, the average ability percentages for the functions (Figure 2) are in several cases based on a wide range of ability levels. The distinction between Older Participants and Younger Participants is thus confirmed.

4. Results (II): Usage Survey

4.1. Gaelic usage

We have explored the degree and nature of command in Gaelic, but the results so far have not revealed whether Gaelic is actually often used, nor in what social settings. It can be expected that ability and frequency of usage correlate, but usage may be restricted to certain domains. We wanted to know whether older speakers use Gaelic in different social settings than younger speakers and whether Gaelic perhaps was not only restricted to certain (mainly older) speakers but also to a limited group of conversational partners.

To reveal the actual contact in Gaelic between older speakers and the rest of the community, we administered the Usage Survey. In line with Dorian, we looked at three discourse domains, namely (i) addressing people in Gaelic as a child, (ii) addressing people in Gaelic as an adult, and (iii) the tendency to use Gaelic for certain activities. All participants filled in the same survey questions and were told to ignore items that did not apply to them.

Table 3 gives the average results for the three main themes in the survey. As can be seen, Older Participants use Gaelic less now than they

Table 3. *Results of the Usage Survey: Older Participants' ("OP") and Younger Participants' ("YP") tendency to use Gaelic*

Usage	OP ($n = 11$)	YP ($n = 8$)
Gaelic as a child	2.49	1.36
Gaelic as an adult	1.95	1.56 ²
Gaelic activities	1.42	0.85

Note: 0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = often, 3 = always.

did when they were children. Their daily activities are only sometimes conducted in Gaelic. Younger Participants report of some usage of Gaelic, too, but this usage appears to be restricted to a limited number of activities. A closer analysis of the findings will be given in the subsequent sections (i.e., Sections 4.2, 4.3, 4.4).

4.2. *Gaelic as a child*

We first asked the participants to whom they spoke (or speak, in the case of non-adult participants) Gaelic as a child. The participants were presented with six groups of people and indicated the likelihood with which they were/are likely to speak Gaelic to these people as a child.

The Older Participants scored higher in all categories. They all spoke Gaelic to their grandparents (it scored an average of 3 [= “always”]) but not always to their parents (score = 2.91), and they also did not always speak Gaelic to their older and younger siblings (2.67 and 2.33, respectively). The Younger Participants scored less than 2 (= “often”) in all cases and their scores show a stronger tendency to speak Gaelic when interlocutors were older: “younger siblings” (1.14); “older siblings” (1.25); “parents”/“grandparents” (1.92/1.83).

Significant differences exist between the following responses: (speak Gaelic to) “parents” ($t = 2.61$, $df = 17$, $P < 0.05$), “grandparents” ($t = 2.74$, $df = 17$, $P < 0.05$), “older siblings” ($t = 2.40$, $df = 11$, $P < 0.05$), and “younger siblings” ($t = 2.40$, $df = 10$, $P < 0.05$). The two remaining categories (“household pets” and “classmates”) yielded no significant differences between the groups.

4.3. *Gaelic as an adult*

We then asked the participants the same question as the previous but added “as an adult” instead of “as a child.” The participants were presented with six groups of people and indicated the probability with which they were/are likely to speak Gaelic to them as an adult. The participants aged 15 years and younger were excluded from the calculation. This unfortunately means that the Younger Participant averages below are comprised of only four participants and not eight.

The participants gave varied responses, and although the Older Participants on average scored higher, they did not consistently score higher than the Younger Participants. The Older Participants talked Gaelic to “parents” (score = 3) and were likely to talk to other close family mem-

bers (between 1.60 and 2.00 for “older siblings”/“younger siblings,” “spouse,” and “children”). Interestingly, they did not always speak Gaelic to “friends” (score = 2), which means that Older Participants among themselves “often” speak Gaelic but not “always” (if we assume that friends often have a similar age). The “co-workers” category scored even less (1.30), which means that Older Participants only partially perceived Gaelic as suitable for professional purposes or that their co-workers were English monoglots.

The Older Participants ($n = 11$) only scored significantly higher than the Younger Participants ($n = 4$) regarding the “parents” response ($t = 6.57$, $df = 8$, $P < 0.01$).

4.4. *Gaelic activities*

Finally, we asked the participants about the likelihood of them doing certain activities in Gaelic. Ten examples of activities were given, ranging from “radio” and “secret language” to “pray” and “national affairs.” The averages (Table 3) indicate that current usage of Gaelic is limited for both groups. Older Participants like listening to the radio (score = 2.27), but all other activities score less than 2. Younger Participants use Gaelic as a secret language sometimes (score = 1.73), but in all other activities they scored less than 1.25. The results related to current usage of Gaelic seem to be largely determined by circumstances, for instance because Older Participants are more likely to pray and perhaps read newspapers (some of the Younger Participants were children). Plus, the availability of media in Gaelic (“radio,” “newspaper,” “TV”) limits and determines exposure, irrespective of willingness to use the language. All in all, these results seem hard to interpret.

In two cases, the Older Participants scored significantly higher than the Younger Participants, namely regarding “local affairs” ($t = 2.35$, $df = 15$, $P < 0.05$) and “national affairs” ($t = 3.35$, $df = 13$, $P < 0.05$). No significant differences were found regarding the following responses: “newspaper,” “music,” “TV,” “radio,” “pray,” “curse,” “dream,” and “secret language.”

4.5. *Participant observation*

In addition to the Usage Survey findings, usage data were collected more informally through observation. The results show that for Older Participants, Gaelic was largely the language of the home and the community (e.g., church, social networks during their childhoods). The Older Partic-

ipants tacitly admitted to playing a role in the shift of Gaelic. General attitudes of Gaelic as “non-prestigious” and “rural” inhibited transmission, according to the interviewees. OP6 and his wife, for example, did not raise their children as Gaelic speakers (the daughter took the test, but hers was disregarded because of the extremely low score). At the other end of the spectrum, however, there were families devoted to always speaking Gaelic. OP1’s husband, for example, would become very angry if his children replied to him in English. The group of Older Participants is thus quite varied when it comes to the approach to sustaining Gaelic.

In the second generation (i.e., the Older Participants’ offspring), we see English begin to emerge as the peer-group language. English starts to invade the home environment. YP1, for example, was charged with “bringing home the English.” He would speak to his siblings in English, which eventually led to all three siblings speaking in English together, both during their childhoods and adult lives. The siblings also mentioned that they would not want to be caught speaking Gaelic together because it was “uncool” (as mentioned by YP2).

English continues to be the peer language for the youngest participants, so they indicated. One defining characteristic of this generation is their access to education in Gaelic (Gaelic Medium Education, GME). This access, however, does not undermine the position of English as their language of preference. Use of a particular language in the classroom does not guarantee its use outside the classroom (see Spolsky 1991), which is corroborated by OP1’s observations after teaching GME for 12 years. She noted a lack of Gaelic spoken outside the classroom, even though students might be fully fluent in the language. This lack of usage in the long run is likely to lead to attrition.

4.6. *Informal interviews*

Informal interviews (with five Older Participants via e-mail) were done to reveal the discourse practices between the Older Participants and the Younger Participants. In particular, we tried to ascertain whether the Older Participants changed their speech in order to accommodate the Younger Participants. In general, interviews indicated little evidence of Older Participants making adjustments when conversing with Younger Participants, especially at the beginning of conversations. Older Participants also indicated that they would not address someone in English simply because that person was younger. In general, the Older Participants indicated a desire to keep the conversation in Gaelic. They admitted to switching to English when the conversation became “too frustrating,” as

one participant noted. It is interesting to note that the one participant who seemed indifferent to language preference is one of the two Older Participants who chose to raise his children as English monoglots.

Younger Participants using English when initially spoken to in Gaelic by an Older Participant is not unusual in the family realm either, judging from certain remarks. OP1 commented that many conversations between her and her son, YP1, took place with her speaking in Gaelic and him answering in English. YP4 noted that sometimes it was difficult to keep speaking to her son (YP8) in Gaelic when he insisted on answering her in English. As was indicated in Section 4.1, the Younger Participants did seem to make an effort to speak Gaelic.

5. Summary of the findings

5.1. Introduction

The detailed results have given many insights into the intricacies and structures of language shift in a close-knit community on the Isle of Skye. A clearer picture will arise through a summary of the most essential findings, which will be done next. We will come back to the four research questions as formulated above in Section 1.6 and show the ways in which our data have helped to answer each question. In addition, our data will be reconsidered in the light of the relevant literature.

5.2. Are older speakers of Gaelic linguistically distinguishable from younger speakers?

The age of 40 constitutes a convincing breaking point within our group of participants, which enabled us to create two groups of speakers whose Gaelic was fundamentally different. The considerable variation in the ability of younger speakers (younger than 40 years old) suggests that while the older speakers' command of Gaelic was not dependent on efforts by educators or parents, or personal motivation, the younger speakers' Gaelic was determined by just these factors. In other words, the older speakers (40 years or older) received native input to such a degree that they became native themselves, while the younger speakers were dependent on initiatives and efforts, and were perhaps not naturally immersed in Gaelic in all components of their lives.

The named division is reminiscent of Dorian's (1981: 116) division of "Fluent speakers" versus "Semi-speakers"; additionally, Dorian subdivided her categories into "Older Fluent Speakers" and "Younger Fluent

Speakers,” illustrating that when her study was conducted, age was considered a distinctive, or determining, characteristic in language ability as well. Dorian found that older speakers and younger speakers could be substantiated as groups in terms of language ability.

It is unclear from our research to what degree both groups of speakers are bilingual. It may well be true that older speakers are simultaneous bilinguals (cf. the definition by Lightbown and Spada [1999: 3]) because they have been in contact with both languages in a variety of settings throughout their lives, including their critical period. Because of the growing and dominant role of English in Skye society, it seems unlikely that a possible preference for Gaelic will have caused their English to deteriorate. It remains uncertain, however, whether their Gaelic and English proficiencies are equally divided across domains. For the semi-speakers, the situation is different. Their preferred native tongue is generally English. Depending on the efforts of parents, teachers, and the society around them, they have been exposed to Gaelic in their youth, resulting in varying degrees of proficiency, often restricted to certain domains.

Though age 40 seems low as a division line, it coincides with Lamb’s (2008) observation of Gaelic speakers in North Uist; Lamb surmises that speakers born in the late 1960s were the last generation to use Gaelic as their playground language. Because the true decline of Gaelic may thus be relatively recent, its revitalization may not seem as hopeless as some might think. Many of the older speakers are still in the social and professional prime of their lives; they are an active and influential group in society. What is required, however, is a supportive attitude toward Gaelic, and this attitude would need to be shared by most speakers, irrespective of their age.

The command of basic forms like the plural, past, and the future is good for both groups. More advanced functions — like synthetic forms, passives, and showing possession through lenition when necessary — are not acquired as well by younger speakers. Synthetic functions in particular mark shift; this function is where the younger speakers’ first and second languages differ most.

We see that the younger speakers’ ability average is not attributable to a specific language function, which accentuates the general unpredictability of the ability of the under-40s and the language hiatuses that older speakers will encounter in the Gaelic of younger speakers when conversing with them. The Gaelic by younger speakers shows signs of interference from English. Older speakers can be distinguished on the basis of their absolute fluency and ability to use a Gaelic that is not being translated via English structures/concepts, while younger speakers tend to produce an Anglicized Gaelic, if they are able to produce Gaelic at all.

Taken as a whole, the distinction between older and younger speakers is a reality in this community.

5.3. *In what way, if so, are the usage domains of Gaelic different for older and younger speakers?*

The older generation is distinguishable on the basis not only of degree and nature of language ability but to a certain extent also on the basis of attitudes and of discourse choices. In her (1981) study, Dorian found that speakers would use Gaelic both for discussing what Fishman (1967) termed “L(ow) functions” (i.e., local education, domestic domains, and so on) as well as “H(igh) functions” (i.e., government, media, education). We have found a reluctance and inability on the part of younger speakers to use Gaelic to discuss H domains (and even L domains), whereas older speakers used the language for both H and L domains.

During much of older speakers’ childhoods, Gaelic was strongly discouraged in schools. Stockdale, Munro, and MacGregor (2003) noted in their comprehensive survey of GME schools that while some decades ago Gaelic was discouraged, it nevertheless remained the language of the playground (i.e., the first generation’s peer language). In line with other language shift studies (e.g., Yagmur [1993] examining Turkish speakers in France), the majority language (English) emerged as the peer-group language for the second generation, and despite revitalization efforts such as GME, English remains the peer-group language of the youngest speakers in this study (third-generation speakers).

We can glean from the significant results in the Usage Survey that Gaelic played a larger role in the family domain during older speakers’ childhoods than it did for younger speakers (or currently does, as some of the participants are still children). The “Grandparents” category yielded the highest usage for older speakers. This correlates with what MacKinnon (1977: 150) found on his survey of Gaelic speakers on Harris as well as in his survey of Skye, in which speech with elder relatives was a near-exclusive Gaelic domain.

5.4. *In what way, if so, do older speakers accommodate their use of Gaelic to the younger generation?*

The informal interviews revealed a determined preference for Gaelic by older speakers, one that the Usage Survey did not reveal as convincingly, in that they start their conversations in Gaelic and only change to English when necessary. The data thus suggest that the changed position of

Gaelic is decisive of discourse between and among generations. Younger speakers, older speakers feel, are not in the habit of speaking Gaelic in ordinary everyday interaction. Instances of these “vertical” (Schmidt 1985) language practices are found in other shift cases, such as Schmidt’s study of Dyribal, in which Traditional Dyribal was only spoken by speakers over 35 and Young Dyribal was only spoken by younger speakers when addressing older speakers (i.e., neither Traditional Dyribal nor Young Dyribal was used within the younger speakers’ peer group). We would argue that a near-parallel situation exists on Skye: “traditional Gaelic” is only spoken by inhabitants older than 40; when intergenerational communication does occur, younger speakers will most likely use a more Anglicized Gaelic when addressing their elders.

5.5. *Are older speakers socially isolated because of the language shift?*

A picture arises of a generation of native speakers of Gaelic, aged 40 and over, which suffers from a certain degree of linguistic separation. They have few native conversation partners apart from each other and may assert identity through the language. While maintaining a deep-rooted love of Skye culture and the language they identify with it, they nevertheless seem to be adding to tendencies toward shift — a paradox which bears similarity to the shift situation in a small Papuan New Guinean village, as noted by Kulick (1993), where speakers had extremely favorable attitudes toward Taiap, their local vernacular, yet rapid shift was occurring in this linguistic microcosm.

6. Discussion: age, identity, and language shift

The juxtaposition of older and younger Gaelic speakers and the emergent differences between the two groups allow us to analyze the relationship between identity and language within this microcosm of society. As, according to Tabouret-Keller (1997), speech acts are directly correlated with identity, we can postulate that speakers’ choice whether to use English or Gaelic is an “act of identity” (as termed by LePage and Tabouret-Keller in the title of their [1985] monograph). Presupposing this, we can make several inferences relating to language and identity.

First, the perception of “identity” as a fluid, dynamic force is corroborated — that is, following one of Omoniyi and White’s suggestions, namely the theory of a “Hierarchy of Identities” (2006: 11). As both older and younger Gaelic speakers are constantly negotiating their choice of language, they are also negotiating their identities. Furthermore, their

identities are negotiated on a moment-by-moment basis. Given a certain set of circumstances, the language the Gaelic bilingual, older or younger, will choose is not entirely predictable, which supports the Hierarchy of Identities theory, which characterizes this language choice as a process highly complex in nature.

The analysis of age, identity, and language within this Gaelic-speaking community begs the following question: When negotiating identity, exactly what identities are these speakers negotiating? In other studies, we have seen clear negotiations motivated by perceptions of “them” versus “us” (most notably Labov’s [1963] study of Martha’s Vineyard). However, what we are dealing with in the present case is a small, cohesive community (mostly one family), in which most of the members share the same cultural, macro-social, and micro-social traits. In this case there only appears to be an “us.” We can conclude that age rather than “them” versus “us” is the determining factor in language choice and identity negotiation. Li (1994: 145) also discusses the same phenomenon in his study of Tyneside Chinese speakers, noting that Gumperz’s (1982) dichotomy of a “we” code versus a “they” code in terms of ethnic linguistic identity is not applicable to the Tyneside Chinese community. Instead, as Li points out, Chinese is the “we” code for the older speakers and English is the “we” code for younger speakers. Our findings suggest that the same is true for the Gaelic language shift situation on Skye, with Gaelic being the “we” code for older speakers and English being the “we” code for younger speakers.

We can gain a further understanding of how identity acts play into language shift across generations. Certain factors caused language shift in this community, and, in terms of this study, resulted in decreased proficiency and usage within the younger speakers. We can therefore postulate that, to younger speakers, Gaelic has come to be identified with older speakers in general, and as a way of asserting their identity, these younger speakers might use English where their parents would have used Gaelic. From the older speakers’ perspective, Gaelic may have become an identity representative, fitting into the norms of their community and norms of the past and to assert their identity as such, older community members will choose to use Gaelic and maintain their fluency. We thus see the interplay of age and identity as a possible perpetuating factor of language shift within a close-knit community.

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Notes

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1. A further division might have been to subdivide the Younger Participants into adult Younger Participants (28–35 years of age) and child Younger Participants (4–15 years of age), but we did not do this because on the basis of actual skills this division cannot be made. This subdivision would also lead to two small subgroups (of four participants each) in which the members would have little in common.
 2. For four of the YPs, “Gaelic as an adult” was not applicable, as they were still children. Hence, 1.56 is the average over 4 participants.

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