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Ó Giollagáin, Conchúr; Caimbeul, Iain; Ó Curnáin, Brian; Camshron, Gòrdan; Moireach, Pàdruig

Published in:
Scottish Affairs

Publication date:
2022

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Citation for published version (APA):

Ó Giollagáin, C., Caimbeul, I., Ó Curnáin, B., Camshron, G., & Moireach, P. (2022). Including the Threatened First-language Gaelic Vernacular Community in Gaelic Promotion and Protection: A Rebuttal to McLeod et al. *Scottish Affairs*, 31(1), 122. <https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2022.0402>

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INCLUDING THE THREATENED FIRST-LANGUAGE GAELIC VERNACULAR COMMUNITY IN GAELIC PROMOTION AND PROTECTION: A REBUTTAL TO MCLEOD ET AL.

*Conchúr Ó Giollagáin, Iain Caimbeul, Brian Ó Curnáin,
Gòrdan Camshron and Pàdruig Moireach*

Abstract

This article serves as a rebuttal to McLeod et al's criticism of Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul's 'Moving Beyond Asocial Minority Language Policy' article in this journal, while also offering an analysis of McLeod et al's disapproving viewpoint of the conclusions and recommendations in Ó Giollagáin et al's *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (2020). This rebuttal argues for the inclusion of the threatened first-language Gaelic vernacular community in Gaelic policy, as well as the integration of the protection of Gaelic communities in official Gaelic promotion – minority language promotion with language community protection. McLeod et al's contribution to the debate on the Gaelic vernacular crisis is essentially a collective effort to reinforce the relegation of the Gaelic crisis within official language promotion in Scotland and to promote a reinvestigated *status quo*.

Conchúr Ó Giollagáin is the Gaelic Research Professor in the University of the Highlands and Islands, where he directs the UHI Language Sciences Institute, and academic director of the Soillse inter-institutional sociolinguistic partnership.

Iain Caimbeul is a research fellow of the UHI Language Sciences Institute.

Brian Ó Curnáin is Associate Professor in the School of Celtic Studies, the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

Gòrdan Camshron is currently working on a PhD through the University of the Highlands and Islands. He was a fieldworker on Soillse's 'Gaelic Crisis ...' study.

Pàdruig Moireach is currently employed by Sabhal Mòr Ostaig as a part-time Gaelic tutor on online courses. He was a fieldworker and researcher for Soillse's 'Gaelic Crisis ...' study.

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Keywords: The Gaelic Crisis; language policy; language shift; sociolinguistics; vernacular Gaelic

Introduction

We welcome the clarification by McLeod et al. (2021)¹ of their perspectives. Their contribution is essentially a collective effort to reinforce the relegation of the Gaelic crisis within official language promotion in Scotland, in support of a reinvigorated *status quo*. The dominating Gaelic-promotion paradigm in Scotland has been a top-down, academic perspective whereas our perspective provides a complementary approach combining a bottom-up, communal perspective with the top-down approach, emphasising an equitable and productive distribution of resources and official engagement.

At the heart of their response to the 'Moving Beyond Asocial Minority Language Policy' article in *Scottish Affairs* 30.2 (Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul, 2021) is a misunderstanding of the substance of the article, entailing a failure to engage productively with the vernacular sociolinguistic evidence and recommendations in *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020). In brief, Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul (2021) contended that current Gaelic policy can be characterised as sector-led language promotion without relevant language protection measures for the remaining highly-threatened L1 Gaelic vernacular communities in the islands. In the neglect of the societal situation of the Gaelic-speaking communities in the islands, we contend that official Gaelic policy becomes another socio-cultural factor driving the language shift to English in these communities. Rather than addressing the points raised in that article, the main objective of McLeod et al. is to convey their disapproving viewpoint of some of the conclusions and recommendations in Ó Giollagáin et al.'s *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (2020).

Briefly, *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* is the academic output of multi-modular and triangulated research providing data on the current social condition of Gaelic competence, practice and social identity in the demography of the vernacular communities in the islands. It also assesses core societal factors driving the final stages of language shift to English in these communities. It offers a reassessment of Gaelic policy discourses and applications, concluding with a series of recommendations to address the Gaelic crisis in the vernacular context.

McLeod et al. ignore both the analysis of the deficiencies of existing language promotion measures and the social implications of the absence of targeted vernacular-community language protection initiatives, as discussed in

Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul (2021). In their failure to engage with the integrity of the argument as it is presented, they resort to inaccuracies, false conjecture and reassertions of ideological perceptions of what they consider constitute priorities for Gaelic identity and society. In this, they create straw man arguments that aim to provide a rationale to academia and official Gaelic bodies to dismiss evidence, insights and recommendations that highlight the need for an alternative approach to current policies.

The main weaknesses in the response of McLeod et al. are:

- A disregard for the need for equitable L1 focus; proving the point made in Ó Giollagáin et al.'s *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (2020: 389–397) that much of current Gaelic sociolinguistic discourse addresses postmodernist academic concerns and, by neglecting L1 reality and aspirations, actually undermines long-term L2 possibilities.
- In problematising Ó Giollagáin et al.'s (2020) recommendations, McLeod et al.'s discussion amounts to a reiteration of the Gaelic language discourses underpinning the current dispensation. Much of their argument is preoccupied with an unconstructive 'whataboutery' regarding challenges identified and proposals made in Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020), with a concurrent effort to muddy the waters through definitional sophistry.
- There is a lack of logic in their assertions that Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020) should not explain the statistical implications of decline for fear of causing a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. Ironically, they acquiesce in the terminal decline of Gaelic communities through their evasions and their admission regarding the advanced state of loss of vernacular Gaelic while failing to offer constructive proposals. It is contradictory to reproach Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020) as potentially demoralising when the evasiveness of the *status quo* has been and continues to be more demoralising.
- Their response has little of consequence to impart about the critical social reality of the currently non-viable remaining Gaelic L1 vernacular communities in the Western Isles, Skye and Tiree, as shown in Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020).
- McLeod et al. fail to examine the implications of the likely collapse of the Gaelic vernacular group, under existing circumstances, for the future prospects of a lived Gaelic culture in Scotland.
- By problematising concepts of native speaker, community and ethnolinguistic identity, they seek to monopolise the discourse.

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They replace these concepts with an abstracted, individualised and desocialised ‘Gaelic-speaker’ asserted identity ascription. Their attempts at academic gate-keeping, in fact, are one aspect of the ongoing disempowerment of the remaining community-ascribed Gaelic identity. Part of their gate-keeping is their ignoring of Ó Giollagáin et al.’s (2020) highly relevant data on social identity.

In a nutshell, Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020) assert that the asocial Gaelic-planning emperor has little or no clothes, but McLeod et al. counter this by discussing how one defines ‘clothes’. In this article, rather than circular argumentation over definitions, we concentrate on substantive social metrics and policy issues.

McLeod et al. fail to present an accurate overview or engage with the substantive findings of Ó Giollagáin et al.’s *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (2020) and they are mainly concerned with five issues:

1. Media framing of Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020);
2. Analytical context, conceptual definitions and some key conclusions drawn from Ó Giollagáin et al.’s data;
3. Competing academic approaches to Gaelic sociolinguistics;
4. Analysis of the Gaelic policy framework;
5. Ó Giollagáin et al.’s recommendations in *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community*.

The ‘Controversial’ Framing of *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community*

McLeod et al. assert two related unsubstantiated claims about Ó Giollagáin et al.’s *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (2020). These are: (a) that its media framing risks ‘the demoralisation of Gaelic speakers and the weakening of social or political support for the language’; and b) that the book is both ‘controversial’ and ‘confirmatory’. Their claim is clearly contradictory. The research digest and statistical notes, produced by Ó Giollagáin et al. as part of an overall media and public engagement strategy, enhanced the dynamism of the public debate which has emanated from the reality check of the study’s findings. This suggests that the public have welcomed the honest portrayal of the current sociolinguistic situation and have been heartened by the proposals for an alternative approach to protecting Gaelic communities.² *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* is generally perceived as an overdue

reassessment of current circumstances and a reasonable call for a re-examination of policy perspectives. There is little or no evidence that the Gaelic community or media have found the analysis ‘controversial’, apart from some in academia and official bodies, who are invested in protecting the Gaelic policy *status quo*.

Analytical Context and Key Conclusions Drawn from *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community Data*

The McLeod et al. response expends much discursive energy questioning the analytical terms of reference and conceptual definitions used in Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020). Perplexingly for language scholars, they assert that they do not know what we mean by the use of the term the ‘vernacular’ community. In the first paragraph of the study (2020: 1) we state:

This study is a baseline sociolinguistic survey focusing chiefly on the extent of the use and transmission of Scottish Gaelic as a communal language and on Gaelic-speaking identity in the Western Isles, in Staffin in the Isle of Skye and in the Isle of Tiree in Argyll and Bute.

In one of the rare specific references to the 2020 study’s actual data, McLeod et al. contend erroneously that we do not provide a justification for the importance we have attached to a 45% threshold in reported Gaelic-speaker ability data from the Census. (On which, see, Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020: 13, 17, 64–68)). In brief, we state that areas falling below this threshold pass into a Moribund Nexus (i.e. a significant loss of the remaining vestiges of communal language vitality) in the final stage of their assimilation to English. McLeod et al.’s reading of this part of the analysis ignores the four main analytical and statistical rationales for our threshold:

- The triangulation of individual and household Gaelic data (Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020: 42–43; 66));
- The analysis of the ‘actuality gap’ between reported Gaelic ability and household practice (Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020: 23; 64–68));
- The K-cluster analysis of the distribution of the Gaelic ability data across the 25 Study Districts (Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020: 55–57));
- The implications of the various profiles and permutations of the sociolinguistic make-up of the household analysis in comparison to various interpretations of the individual Gaelic ability data (Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020: 29–30)).

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This illustrates the selective interpretation of *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* by McLeod et al.

The parsimonious depiction by McLeod et al. of the Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020) findings as 'confirmatory' is contradictory to their assertion of *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* being 'controversial'. They claim after the fact that they had already been aware of Ó Giollagáin et al.'s findings indicating the seriousness of the vernacular sociolinguistic contraction. The difference between demonstrating a fact and claiming to know a fact is what differentiates academic analysis from discursive assertion. If they had been previously cognisant of the crisis, it is surprising that these opinion formers were quiescent about the ongoing reality of collapse among the remaining Gaelic-speaking communities, while they were portraying a renaissance in Gaelic affairs. Such a partial portrayal, based on growth in top-down measures, amounts to a misleading framing of reality which predominantly directly supports public Gaelic bodies and a small group of beneficiaries or clients. The importance of community for both L1 and L2 language vitality has been widely recognised, especially since Fishman. McLeod et al. accuse Ó Giollagáin et al. of not paying due attention to studies which they reference,³ but all academic publications of relevance to the societal sustainability of the Gaelic vernacular group are discussed in *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community*. On the other hand, the new insights and findings of Ó Giollagáin et al. are ignored completely or inadequately addressed in their response. For example:

- Quantifying the 'actuality gap', c. 30% points between ability in Gaelic and social practice of the language, including a calculation of the maximal extent of the L1 Gaelic vernacular community of c.11,000⁴;
- Identifying, through survey evidence (Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020: 290–302)), the critical turning point in the 1970s when the communal capacity to maintain high proportions of active Gaelic speakers was lost;
- Correlation between the socio-geography of teenage Gaelic ability data and of parental-fluency salience;
- Current socio-geographic data on the salience of familial/communal transfer of Gaelic;
- 60-year time span of Gaelic language shift;
- The bimodal spectrum of language ability in the vernacular social geography;
- The weak relevance of current Gaelic policy to the vernacular crisis (Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020: 375)).

Similarly, McLeod et al. have virtually nothing to say about the contents of more than half of *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (Chapters 3–7). In ignoring these chapters, they erroneously assert that the ‘book confines its analysis of Gaelic language use to home and family contexts, and does not attempt to study the wider community role of the language’, whereas the chapters actually include data on Gaelic practice in various broader societal settings. Sustaining a minority language is first and foremost predicated on protecting both the familial and societal praxis in which competence is acquired, and also in which the socio-cultural capital is expressed through that competence. McLeod et al. show no appreciation of this core minority sociolinguistic lived reality.

Competing Academic Approaches to Gaelic Sociolinguistics

In line with a current individualist and postmodernist philosophical perspective on Gaelic culture, McLeod et al. place much emphasis on the issues of Gaelic identity and processes of identity ascription among Gaelic speakers and learners. McLeod et al. erroneously ascribe an anti-L2 perspective to *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community*, for which there is no evidence provided. (For views which refute this claim, see e.g. Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020: 12, 362–3, 404–5)). Assigning opinions to us which we have not expressed in any publication and which we do not hold is an unsound basis for academic exchange. *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* does, however, include a reasoned critique of the new-speaker-oriented sociolinguistic discourse (Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020: 387–391)), of which many of the McLeod et al. authors are practitioners. Our critique of new-speakerism is centred on its over-emphasis of societally disconnected, institutionally led minority-language aspirations to the detriment of a strategic prioritisation of the societal realities of the minoritised speakers. Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul (2021) demonstrate how the bureaucratised and client-based language-plan approach is not strategically targeted on the societal conditions of the L1 community. *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* argues for the prioritisation of the L1 community in a time of crisis, given that, up to now, the L1 community has been neglected in comparison to L2 and higher level aspirations. Such prioritisation will, in fact, be of complementary benefit to L2 learners/speakers. The inclusive, sociologically aware, underlying philosophy of *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* is clear in our emphasis on a collaborative, mutually-beneficial dynamic between Gaelic native speakers and L2 learners or

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L2 speakers who ‘require each other to survive or prosper’ (Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020: 362–3)).

De-emphasising or minimalising the societal concerns of a dwindling vernacular group in order to posit a post-vernacular, second-language future for Gaelic (see McLeod (2020: 335) for an example of this) may represent zero-sum thinking at a time of crisis – a potential fear among the newspeakierist discourse leaders that a remedial official focus on the vernacular societal collapse implies fewer resources for learner-focused projects. This downplaying of the L1 Gaelic social context illustrates how far certain discursivist strands in Gaelic sociolinguistics have decoupled both the language and its promotion from its vernacular speaker group. The disembodied aspect of their minority-language discursivism has created a problematic epistemological framework in which they devise and implement language support and protection. The official espousal of this discursivism, along with the neglect of L1 community concerns, largely explains why current Gaelic promotion efforts have such ineffectual outcomes in the regions we studied (Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020: 392); Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul (2021: 191)). Again, the discussion in McLeod et al. only proves the point of *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community*.

Analysis of the Gaelic Policy Framework

It is illustrative that *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community*'s evidence-based recommendations to strategically differentiate Language *Promotion* measures in the non-vernacular context from Language *Protection* measures in the vernacular context should generate such discursive heat. McLeod et al.'s restating of their attempted dissolution of the key categorial sociolinguistic differentiation of modes of language acquisition and affiliation (i.e., perfectly legitimate categories of L1 and L2 contexts) is a significant obstacle to feasible language planning. Their assertion that: ‘it makes more sense to think in terms of a single, albeit substantially differentiated Gaelic community ...’ is a *non sequitur*. Such contradictory assertions are both sociologically naïve and strategically ill-advised as they preclude specific strategic interventions to support the declining L1 community of Gaelic speakers. The title of McLeod et al. (2021) – ‘Against exclusionary Gaelic language policy: A response to Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul’ – is misleading and misrepresents the legitimate prioritisation of L1 concerns. Their defence of the *status quo* adheres to their own idea of sociolinguistic discursive pre-eminence. The resolute nature of their rejection of reasonable suggestions for a considered re-evaluation of

Gaelic-policy priorities indicates how clientelist strategies of power brokers have permeated the current official dispensation for Gaelic affairs. When we consider the combined effects of such unproductive argumentation, in policy control structures, and evasive responses in official bodies to evidence-based societal challenges, it is not surprising that many Gaelic speakers (L1 and L2) feel dissociated from and demoralised by the world of Gaelic officialdom and related discourses. Once again, McLeod et al. prove the point made by *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* in demonstrating the extent to which Gaelic affairs in Scotland are distorted by much of the discourse of some of those in institutional ascendancy.

McLeod et al. assert four times in their essay that the current policy dispensation for Gaelic affairs in Scotland provides ample scope to address the issues which have been raised in *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community*. Their repeated assertions, for which they provide no substantive evidence, would suggest that the principal motivation of McLeod et al. is more ideological and political rather than a focus on the applied sociolinguistics required for reversing language shift. They claim that the formalised language-plan approach and institutional language promotion mechanisms 'are based on empirically testable theories of language revitalisation'. However, it is empirically nonsensical to ignore the key societal metric of the actual survival of the minority groups and simultaneously claim that language revitalisation theories are subject to any credible verification. The Gaelic vernacular groups in both Ireland and Scotland have been on the receiving end of this form of bureaucratised language promotion and are now approaching the final phase of their societal erasure. Suggesting more of the same, even if intensified, and expecting better outcomes for the threatened minority-language communities is not realistic and is unlikely to gain effective traction among or be of benefit to community actors, who one would hope should be key beneficiaries of Gaelic language planning.

Radical Proposals and McLeod et al.'s Response

There is a lack of logic in the unbalanced McLeod et al. response to the radical proposals in *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community*. McLeod et al. accept the diagnosis of crisis but problematise the proposals without suggesting anything constructive themselves. It is a *sine qua non* of crisis management that it demands radical responses in time and space. Yet, McLeod et al. overlook these two central aspects of reality, including realistic language planning in a time and place of crisis, which should be devised in sincere and open dialogue with participants drawn from the island communities, their

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public bodies, and their political representatives. The Allan and Crouse (2020: 14) official report on the post-publication *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* consultations in the islands indicated that: 'Urras na Gàidhlig - Most participants believed this idea should be explored further in terms of structure, membership and resource'.

Conclusion

Little of McLeod et al. (2021) entails a review of Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul (2021). Most of their response is an overall negative and retrograde response from the six authors to high-profile publications, in particular *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community*, on which they have publicly expressed little or no positive comment. Unfortunately, this is detrimental to constructive public debate. It is disappointing that the authors, several of whom hold chairs in Gaelic or Celtic Studies, have so little of consequence to offer in their response which would seek to mitigate the societal erasure of the last communal vestiges of Gaelic civilisation in Scotland. At a time of crisis in the Gaelic vernacular community, McLeod et al.'s response will be of historical interest as an indication of the priorities of some within the academic *status quo*, priorities which *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* has sought to alter.

It is also unfortunate that they would question the commitment of other authors to what they refer to as 'cultural liberalism'. On the contrary, it is hardly a hallmark of culture or liberalism to misrepresent *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* and to rebuke the editors of *Scottish Affairs* for publishing articles divergent from the viewpoint of McLeod et al. Gaelic and language academics often prioritise the status of academic discourses and, therefore, neglect the primarily societal aspect of these challenges faced by a disfavoured group. This problem is evident in McLeod et al.'s response.

Achieving a credible and productive accommodation between L1 speakers of Gaelic, networks of L2 speakers and learners and their various public bodies and support organisations, first requires an acknowledgement of social reality and a magnanimous acceptance among different participants to work together to address common challenges and to achieve mutually reinforcing goals of reversing language shift. We have written this article in defence of *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* and of Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul (2021) with reluctance, because discursive squabbling among Gaelic and language academics is counterproductive. In order to address the enormous challenges faced by all those committed to improving the societal situation of Gaelic speakers and their culture, it will be necessary to set aside disagreements and for stakeholders to cooperate for all our benefit.

Notes

1. The publications cited in our rebuttal here are all listed in McLeod et al.'s references. See also: <https://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/research-enterprise/res-themes/humanities-and-arts/language-sciences-institute/publications/the-gaelic-crisis-in-the-vernacular-community/appendices/>
2. See Pàdruig Moireasdan on the level of public debate which *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* has 'stimulated' in his contribution to the UHI Seminar 'One Year On from The Gaelic Crisis': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bzvkh6Ltfc> [Accessed 8 October 2021]. See also: <https://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/research-enterprise/res-themes/humanities-and-arts/language-sciences-institute/publications/research-digest/>
3. The advice of McLeod et al. (2021) is not followed by McLeod (2020) to sufficiently explore the findings of the report on the Siabost district in Lewis (Mac an Tàilleir, Rothach and Armstrong 2010). McLeod's (2020: 274–5) discussion of vernacular sociolinguistic studies could not be considered an effusive or detailed endorsement of the co-author's work in Siabost. Similarly, McLeod (2020) affords one sentence to the 480-pages of *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community*. One sentence is insufficient to address the Gaelic vernacular crisis.
4. In contrast, McLeod et al. indicate a literalist interpretation of Gaelic vernacular demology in the Census: 'Given that the Gaelic-speaking population of the IGRP study area is 17,468 ...'.