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Sociolinguistics of Scottish Gaelic

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Abstract

This chapter discusses Scottish Gaelic, a Celtic language with a growing number of speakers according to official statistics. First, it considers the historical context of Gaelic, and the demographic make-up of current speakers. In particular, it covers the results of recent national censuses in Scotland in 2001, 2011, and 2022 including speaker location and age profile. The chapter then considers key legislation and policy support for Gaelic surrounding the revitalisation movement from the 1970s onwards known as the 'Gaelic renaissance'. The chapter also discusses acquisition trajectories for Gaelic speakers including provision and location of education in Gaelic. Finally, the chapter considers the linguistic characteristics of Gaelic as spoken today by different social groups. It concludes with a discussion on the future of Gaelic noting changes in community structure and speaker identity rather than total language loss.

Introduction

Scottish Gaelic is now a Celtic language with a growing number of speakers according to official statistics. Provision for Gaelic Medium Education is expanding and a significant piece of legislation, the Scottish Languages Act (2025) now recognises the language as an official language of Scotland. In many respects, the decades-long revitalisation efforts of dedicated activists now seem to be achieving success. However, at the same time use of Gaelic is reducing in traditional domains and speaker numbers are declining in the former heartland communities of north and west Scotland, as well as in the diaspora community in Nova Scotia, Canada.

In this chapter, I explore the historical context leading to the current minoritised but official status of Gaelic, as well as the sociodemographic characteristics of the language. In particular, I focus on statistics and distribution of speakers using data from the last two national censuses in Scotland. I then discuss structural support for Gaelic and explain how these policies and legislation have created a strong media presence and have built on existing heritage. In the final sections, I explore data around availability of education for children, and the social profile of adults who use Gaelic before exploring the sociolinguistic and structural aspects to their language use. In this chapter I refer to the Scottish Gaelic language simply as 'Gaelic' (in English: [galɪk]), as is common practice in the community.

The chapter is structured around six questions for Gaelic sociolinguistics which aim to contextualise the language in terms of history, speakers, and language variation and use:

1. When is Gaelic? – historical context;
2. Where is Gaelic? – how are Gaelic speakers distributed across physical and digital space;
3. How is Gaelic supported? – legal and structural frameworks surrounding Gaelic;
4. How is Gaelic acquired? – education and family transmission;
5. What is the nature of Gaelic today? – language structure and use;
6. What is the future of Gaelic? – conclusions.

When is Gaelic?

In this section I give some historical background to the social and linguistic context of Gaelic in Scotland. I especially focus on the development of an ideological and political divide between 'Highland' and 'Lowland' which emerged in Early Modern Scotland along linguistic and social lines, as much as geographical, and has had long-standing consequences for perceptions of Gaelic in national identity and planning.

Medieval context

The history of language in early medieval Scotland is complex and multilingual. Gaelic was originally the Irish language spoken by people who moved back and forth between early medieval Ireland and Scotland from around the fifth century CE (Campbell, 2001; Dumville, 2002). Eventually, their language spread across much of Scotland from the established medieval kingdom of Dál Riata in Argyll (MacKinnon, 1974), although the process of diffusion was varied across different regions (Clancy, 2011). At this time, much of the rest of Scotland would have spoken Pictish and Brythonic Celtic, but Gaelic speakers became the political, religious, and cultural dominant culture by the eleventh century CE (Woolf, 2007). It is thought that by 1000 CE, much of what is now Scotland would have spoken Gaelic with areas of Old Norse, Old English, Cumbric, and Pictish (MacKinnon, 1974, p. 15). From this multilingual setting, the first unified kingdom of Scotland was established by Gaelic speakers, with its capital in the central north-east of Scotland (Woolf, 2007).

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, therefore, Gaelic was the language of high-level politics, the aristocracy, and culture. Due to the cultural and political flourishing geographically distant from Ireland, Gaelic began to develop separately from Middle Irish. Linguistically, it is argued that Gaelic can be considered a distinct language from evidence in the twelfth century *Book of Deer* (Ó Maolalaigh, 2008, p. 187). In terms of social recognition, this came later. It is suggested that Gaelic was recognised as a separate language through translation of religious texts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Horsburgh, 2002, p. 239).

From this zenith of political prominence during the twelfth century, the spread of Gaelic across Scotland has declined. In 1071 the Scottish king Malcolm married a woman who did not speak Gaelic, Margaret, and this seems to have marked a transition away from Gaelic in the Court. This period was also marked by a move of the Court itself from central north-east Scotland to Lothian, where Norman French and Latin became the languages of government and aristocracy, followed by Scots (McLeod, 2020, p. 8). At the same time, religious orientation moved away from Celtic Christianity towards an English and continental version of Roman Catholicism, and Scotland transitioned politically towards a feudal model of society under influence from continental Europe. The stages and details of this shift in the eleventh and twelfth centuries are detailed in Withers (1984 p. 19). McLeod (2020 p. 8) notes that this language shift in medieval Scotland happened as an internal political process rather than as a consequence of invasion and colonisation as was the case in Ireland and Wales.

Constructing 'Highland' and 'Lowland'

Initially, Gaelic was named after the Latin name for people living in Scotland, the Scotti, i.e. it was the 'Scottish' language. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Gaelic was no longer referred to as the 'Scottish' language but become known as 'Erse' (Irish) and finally referred to as 'Gaelic' from the eighteenth century. This transition away from being named as the 'Scottish' language highlighted as an important cultural transition between considering Gaelic as a national language, and a beginning of othering Gaelic as separate from Scottish national identity (Withers, 1984, p. 22). From the late fourteenth century onwards, a distinct linguistic, political, and cultural division was beginning to be made between 'Highland' and 'Lowland' Scotland (MacInnes, 1989, p. 90). This ideological border is typically aligned with a geographical border between the lower-lying eastern and southern areas of Scotland, and the mountainous north and west. Although the geographical features might appear to be a natural division, the Highland/Lowland axis which emerged in the fourteenth century was not previously made and emerged for cultural and political reasons during medieval times (Barrow, 2003, p. 332; McLeod, 2020, p. 9).

In Highland Scotland, Gaelic was used by all sectors of society during medieval times, around a clan-based societal structure. In Early Modern Scotland, the Reformation led to the Lowland Scots-speaking Court further being religiously divided from (mainly) Catholic Gaelic-speaking Highland areas (McLeod, 2020, p. 11). In 1603, King James became both King of Scotland and England under the Union of the Crowns, and the 1707 Acts of Union unified Scotland and England under a single parliament in London. These political events further shifted political orientation to the south, and away from Highland areas. King James legislated that heirs of Highland chiefs needed to be educated in the Lowlands and were required to speak English, thus directly including language discrimination and shift into policy (Withers, 1984, p. 30). As a result of this policy, further political developments and economic opportunity, the Gaelic-speaking aristocracy of the Highlands gradually shifted to English. During this turbulent time in British history, many Highlanders became affiliated with the Jacobite movement, which aimed to restore a different branch of the monarchy. Conflicts culminated in the Battle of Culloden in 1746, where the Jacobite army was defeated. After 1746, wearing traditional highland dress was forbidden, and area of the Highlands were occupied by military forces to ensure that no further uprisings were possible (Withers, 1984, p. 104).

So far, it has become clear that gradually political perspective tilted away from Gaelic and away from areas now associated with Gaelic, namely the Highlands. Through politics, religion, and culture the perspective of the Scottish political system and powerful aristocracy began to shift towards seeing the Highlands as different and, certainly after the Jacobite conflicts, hostile. Post-Culloden, cultural discrimination continued through what McIntyre (2009, p. 144) refers to as a '400-year pogrom of cultural genocide'. In this process, Highland and Gaelic culture, was simplistically (and incorrectly) portrayed as an oral story-telling culture and therefore construed as inferior and impoverished (MacKinnon, 1974, p. 43). Scholars have referred to the cultural and political othering and economic exploitation of the Highlands as 'internal colonialism' (Connell, 2004; Hechter, 1999; Mackinnon, 2017). In this framework, it is argued that the Highlands, and by extension, Gaelic speakers and Gaelic culture, have been subject to systematic discrimination and cultural disadvantage from national centres. In the case of Scotland, these could mean both Lowland Scotland authorities as well as the

UK Government in Westminster. Hechter's model describes 'core' and 'peripheral' regions in one nation state. In this model, the Highlands were politically constructed as 'peripheral' through social and cultural means, rather than necessarily geographic distance.

At the same time as the cultural downgrading of Gaelic-speaking regions, eighteenth and nineteenth century visions of peasant Romanticism across Europe also influenced Scotland with Gaelic speaking Highlanders being portrayed as 'noble savages' (McEwan-Fujita, 2011; Stroh, 2017). Much of the activity centred around the poetry of 'Ossian', a Highland bard, published by James Macpherson in the 1760s. Macpherson claimed to have discovered third century Scottish-Irish poetry from the Highlands, written by Ossian. It was later demonstrated that the poems were adaptations of Gaelic oral poems that had recently been transcribed, but nevertheless readers across the world were fascinated by the idea of a romanticised Gaelic hero (Withers, 1984, p. 112). Although the writings of 'Ossian' were falsified, the Romantic idea of Gaelic-speakers and the Highlands became popular across Europe and were reinterpreted and repeated in other cultural and literary works, for example in Walter Scott's writings (Brown, 1979).

It might seem contradictory that on the one hand, that Highlanders were constructed as culturally impoverished, but at the same time Romantic and fashionable in eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain. Nevertheless, these discourses circulated simultaneously highlighting the varied and at times complex relationship between Gaelic language, Gaelic culture and identity, and other regions of the UK. An example of this practice can be found in the full-scale model Highland village at the Empire Exhibition of 1938 in Glasgow. This exhibition aimed to showcase the British Empire in industry, achievement and power. One of the highlights of the 1938 exhibition was 'An Clachan', a model Highland village including post office, blacksmith's forge, a ruined church, and a land owner's castle. 'Real-life' Highlanders had to live in the village as exhibits in the large-scale museum of imperial power the Exhibition represented (Lorimer, 1999; McArthur, 1986).

At times, Celtic people have even been constructed as racially separate from Germanic-speaking people within the UK and Ireland. McLeod (2020 p. 10) gives an example from the historian John of Fordun as early as 1380 where Gaelic-speaking Highlanders are described as racially separate from Lowlanders. Stroh (2017) further explains that modern conceptions of racial difference in the eighteenth century were used to explain prevailing poverty and underdevelopment in Highland areas. Longstanding social, cultural, economic and potentially racialised discrimination against Gaelic-speakers set the scene for what has become known as the 'Highland Clearances' in the mid eighteenth until late nineteenth century. After Culloden, substantial areas of land in the Highlands were divided into large estates. Communities living on these estates were moved from economically valuable land to less productive land in other places. Sometimes, this was within the same estate, at other times people were relocated to cities, to Canada, Australia, or New Zealand. Some areas were cleared voluntarily but there are also reports of forcible removals. For detailed information on the Clearances and variation across regions, see Hunter (2010); Richards (2012). The Clearances, subsequent potato famine, and also migration for economic reasons has led to a long history of Gaelic-speakers moving to major lowland cities, especially Glasgow (Kidd, 2007; Oates, 2025; Withers, 1998). In addition, there is a long-established Gaelic-speaking community in Nova Scotia, Canada (Dunmore, 2021a, 2025; Nilsen, 2010). I discuss these developments and the sociodemographics of Gaelic in the next section.

When is Gaelic: Summary

This section has considered the sociolinguistic history of Gaelic from early medieval to modern Scotland. The section indicates a long-standing association of Gaelic with north- and west-Scotland, which emerged along social and political divisions in early modern times. As a result of social construction of Highlanders as distinct from Lowland Scotland, Gaelic-speakers, and by extension the Gaelic language, have had reduced economic opportunity and in some cases have been subject to forcible displacement. Under these circumstances, it is understandable that Gaelic is undergoing gradual language shift to English in traditional communities. In the next

section, I now explore the location and social demographics of Gaelic speakers in more detail.

Where is Gaelic?

In this section, I focus mainly on the context of Scotland, as this is where Gaelic developed as a separate language, and where we have substantial data on speaker demographics from surveys and national censuses. I also consider the context of Gaelic in Canada as an established diasporic community (Section 'Canada'). Clearly, there are Gaelic speakers in other parts of the world, facilitated by increasing access to online learning and digital networks (see Section 'Digital communities'). It is unknown how many people outside of Scotland and Canada use Gaelic on a regular basis, but the structure and spread of digital communities is also considered in this section.

Sociodemographic characteristics of Gaelic in Scotland

The main tool for examining the sociodemographic spread of Gaelic in Scotland has been national censuses which are typically carried out at 10-year intervals in Scotland. Note that in 2021 the census was delayed for a year until 2022 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and in 1941 there was no census due to World War II. There are several difficulties surrounding the use of census data for judging language vitality and shift. First, data are based on self-reports of language ability, which might be more or less reliable and are subject to ideological pressures. In the early twentieth century, for example, attitudes to speaking Gaelic were very different to those of today. Second, the questions are phrased in a binary way (i.e. ability to speak yes/no) rather frequency of use. Third, there is no way to distinguish how people acquired Gaelic and their proficiency. Despite these caveats, I now discuss some of the most recent census results in detail. The number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland according to national censuses are plotted in Figure 1. The number and proportion of speakers in Scotland are shown in Table 1. For comprehensive analysis of census data pre 2001, see MacKinnon (2010). Here, I especially focus on developments since MacKinnon's analysis and linking results from 2011 to the 2011 and 2022 censuses.

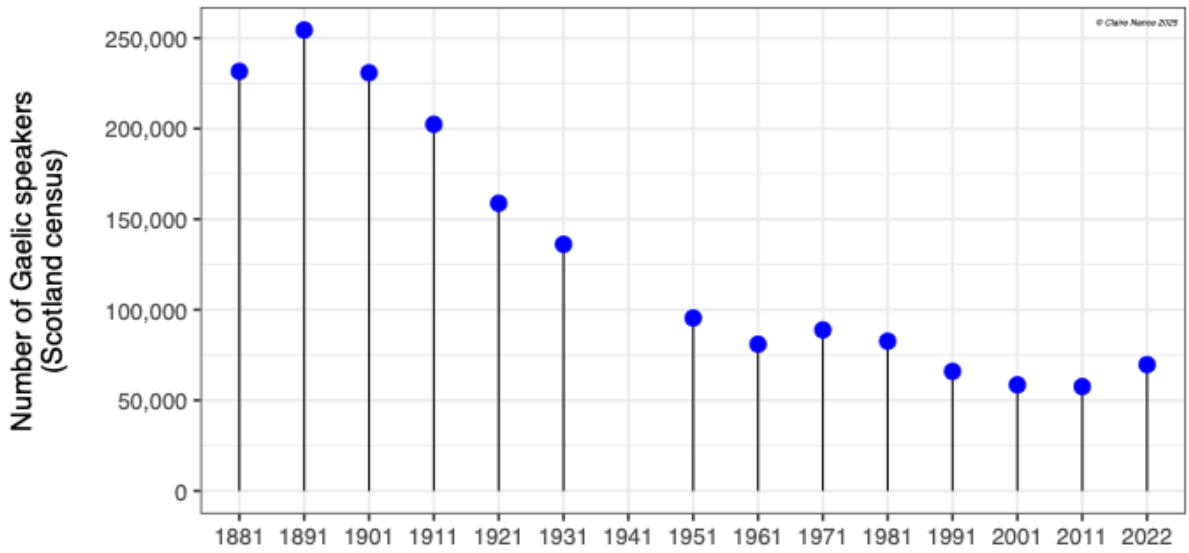


Figure 1: Number of Gaelic speakers according to Scotland's censuses 1881–2022. Data are from McLeod (2020), MacKinnon & Withers (1983), and National Records of Scotland (2022).

Date	Total Gaelic speakers	Percentage of the Scottish population	Percentage change in number of speakers
1881	231,594	6.2	
1891	254,415	6.3	9.0
1901	230,806	5.2	-10.2
1911	202,398	4.3	-14.0
1921	158,779	3.5	-27.5
1931	136,135	3.0	-16.6
1941			
1951	95,447	1.9	-21.3
1961	80,978	1.6	-17.9
1971	88,892	1.7	8.9
1981	82,620	1.6	-7.6
1991	65,978	1.3	-25.2
2001	58,552	1.2	-12.7
2011	57,602	1.1	-1.6
2022	69,701	1.3	17.4

Table 1: Numbers of Gaelic speakers from Scotland's censuses. Data in this table are adapted from McLeod (2020) and MacKinnon & Withers (1983). The percentage change for 1951 is half the percentage change between 1931–1951 so this 20-year period does not appear disproportionately high.

There are different ways to assess the use of Gaelic across Scotland. Using census data, it is possible to calculate the proportion of Gaelic speakers or the proportion of Gaelic skills in a particular area. Another important aspect to the data is numerically strong areas in absolute terms i.e. where the higher numbers of speakers are distributed. In order to visually understand this, I have plotted the percentages of people who speak Gaelic and people with Gaelic skills across the three most recent censuses in Figure 2 and Figure 3.[i] Figure 4 and Figure 5 show the absolute numbers of people who speak Gaelic in different areas. The data are plotted according to parish in order to give a fine-grained perspective. Initially the maps indicate some stability between 2001 and 2022 in terms of the percentage of speakers and skill-holders in different locations. It is clear that the densest concentrations of speakers are in the north and west of Scotland, especially the traditional stronghold of the Outer Hebrides. However, between 2011 and 2022 there are several parts of Lewis where the concentration of speakers is now below 50%. At the same time, areas of north-east Scotland have increased their proportion of Gaelic speakers. Looking at Gaelic skills, almost all parishes in Scotland have a Gaelic skill rate above 1%. This has clearly increased since 2011, especially in the south and east.

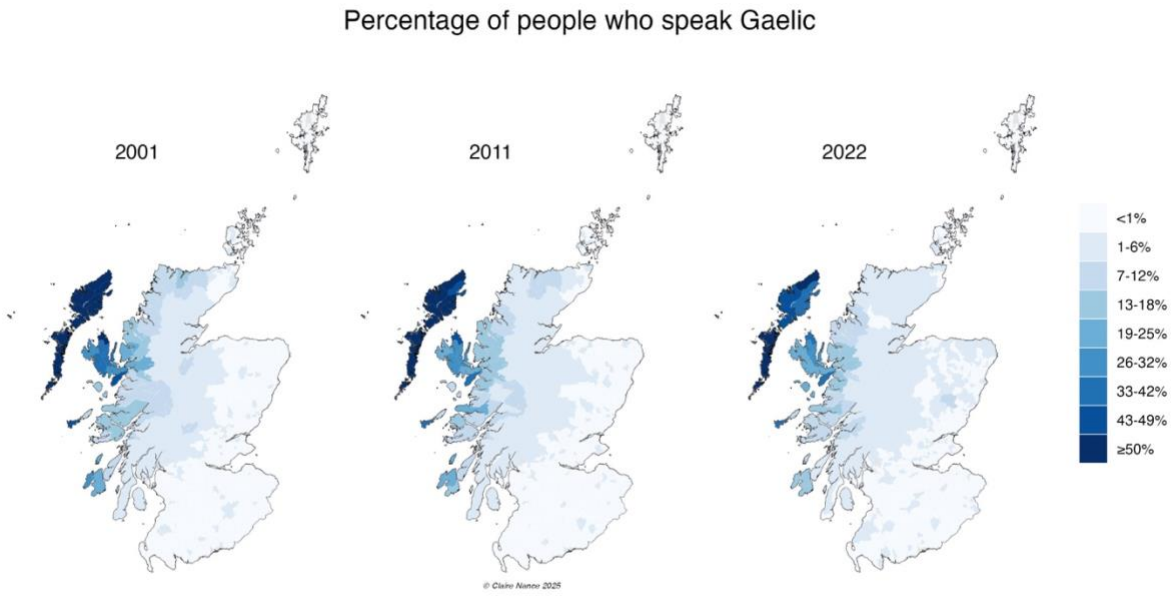


Figure 2: Percentage of Gaelic speakers across Scotland 2001–2022 by civil parish.

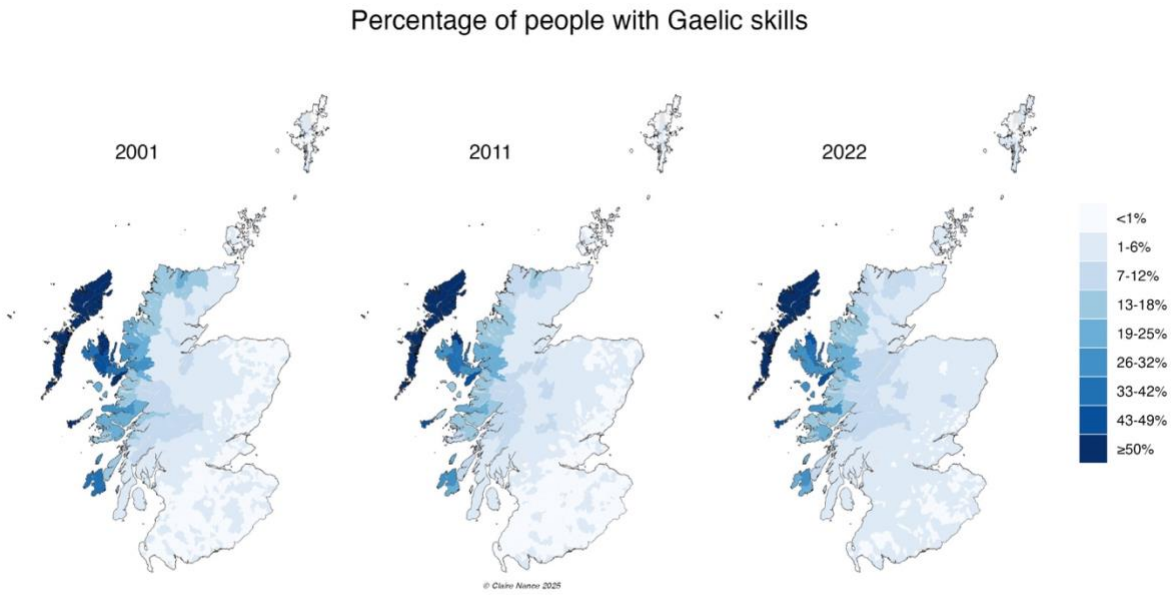


Figure 3: Percentage of people with Gaelic skills across Scotland 2001–2022 by civil parish.

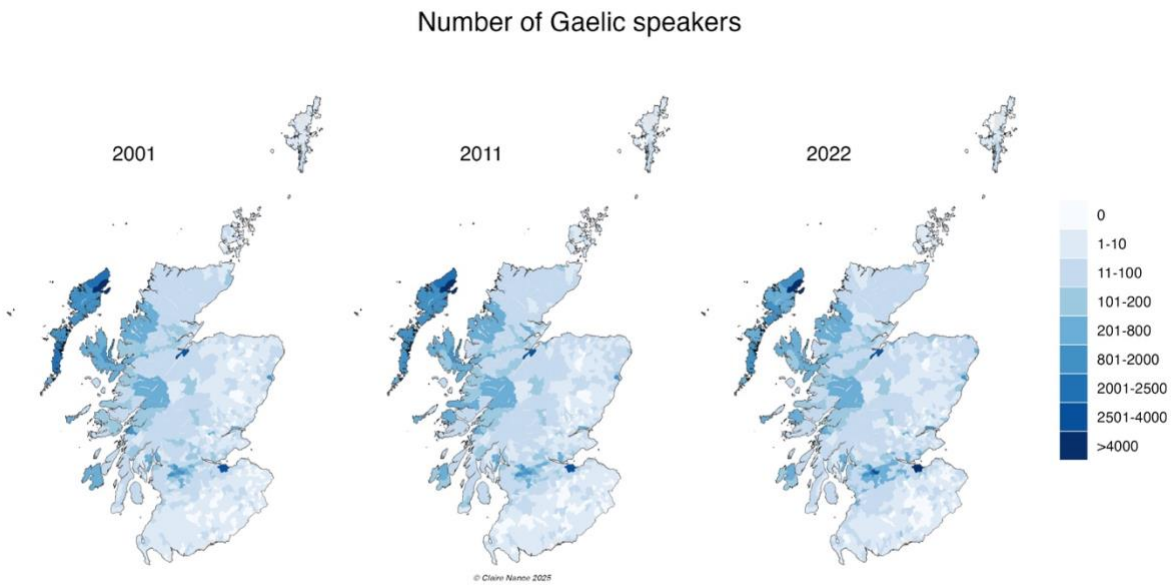


Figure 4: Numbers of Gaelic speakers across Scotland 2001–2022 by civil parish.

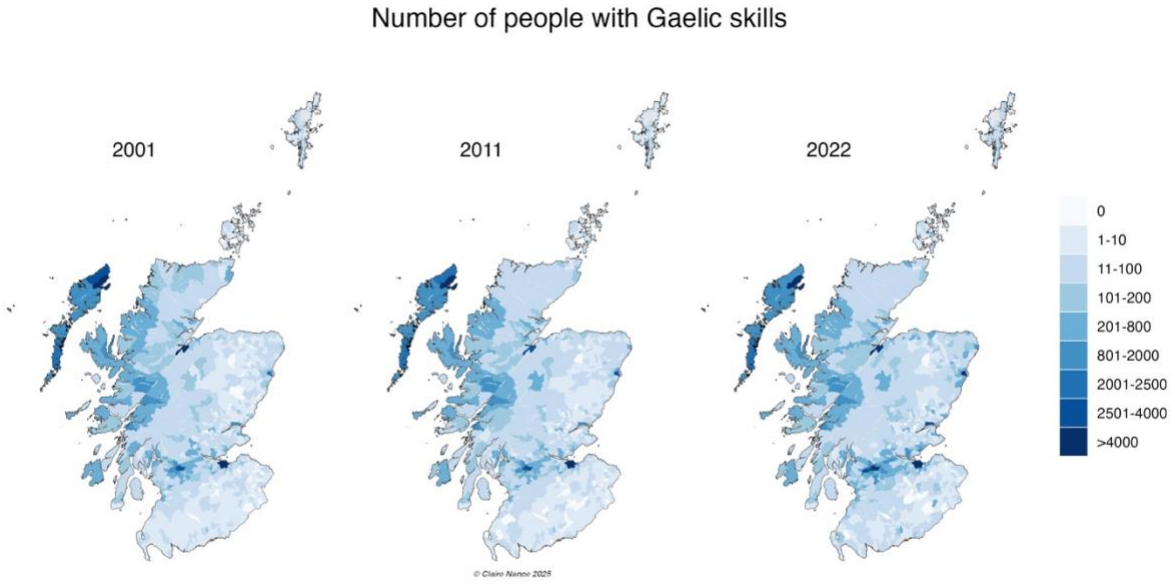


Figure 5: Numbers of people with Gaelic skills across Scotland 2001–2022 by civil parish.

In terms of absolute numbers, the highest values are clustered around urban areas: Stornoway, Inverness, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Aberdeen. This is especially apparent in the data from 2022, where Edinburgh is now home to over 4628 Gaelic speakers. To

understand the wider picture and extent of change, the percentage change between 2011 and 2022 is plotted in Figure 6.[ii] These data are shown in Table 2. The information indicates a reduction in speakers in traditional heartland areas of the Western Isles and Argyll and Bute, but large increases in the south and east of Scotland. Indeed, the biggest growth for speakers and for Gaelic skills is in Aberdeenshire. In the Western Isles, number of speakers reduced by 19% and there was an 8% reduction in Argyll and Bute. The only reduction in Gaelic skills is in the Western Isles (-11%). While these figures are potentially a success story for urban, eastern, and southern areas it is concerning in terms of language transmission and community vitality that there are reductions in the traditional heartland areas for Gaelic.

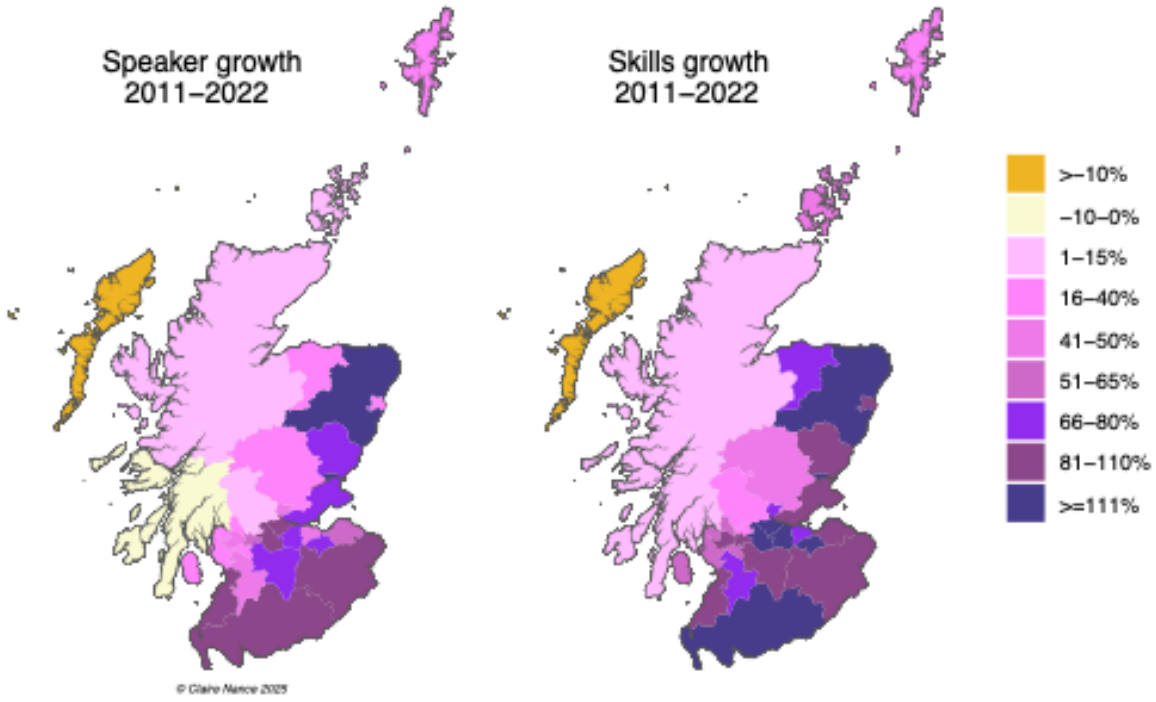


Figure 6: Percentage growth in Gaelic speakers and Gaelic skills 2011–2022 by Local Authority.

Local Authority	Speakers 2011	Skills 2011	Speakers 2022	Skills 2022	Percentage speaker growth (%)	Percentage skills growth (%)
Aberdeen City	1628	3174	2219	5969	36	88
Aberdeenshire	1397	2721	2985	7087	114	160
Angus	417	825	703	1549	69	88
Argyll and Bute	3451	5050	3159	5175	-8	2
City of Edinburgh	3157	5935	4628	10381	47	75
Clackmannanshire	278	507	403	852	45	68
Dumfries and Galloway	468	968	879	2060	88	113
Dundee City	470	1073	990	2517	111	135
East Ayrshire	576	961	836	1608	45	67
East Dunbartonshire	910	1340	1039	1877	14	40
East Lothian	397	728	634	1396	60	92
East Renfrewshire	549	874	740	1357	35	55
Falkirk	636	1163	1210	2450	90	111
Fife	1272	2462	2111	4839	66	97
Glasgow City	5891	9469	8962	17380	52	84
Highland	12039	16596	12040	18555	0	12
Inverclyde	424	667	531	1064	25	60
Midlothian	307	546	554	1268	80	132
Moray	623	1081	823	1851	32	71
Na h-Eileanan Siar	14066	16489	11426	14633	-19	-11
North Ayrshire	683	1129	874	1804	28	60
North Lanarkshire	1326	2127	2469	4810	86	126
Orkney Islands	126	217	143	305	13	41
Perth and Kinross	1275	2169	1571	3146	23	45
Renfrewshire	957	1586	1433	2940	50	85
Scottish Borders	375	771	679	1545	81	100
Shetland Islands	97	187	113	255	16	36
South Ayrshire	387	733	712	1542	84	110
South Lanarkshire	1232	2106	2109	4202	71	100

Local Authority	Speakers 2011	Skills 2011	Speakers 2022	Skills 2022	Percentage speaker growth (%)	Percentage skills growth (%)
Stirling	789	1360	903	1875	14	38
West Dunbartonshire	510	863	684	1387	34	61
West Lothian	662	1179	1148	2496	73	112

Table 2: Gaelic speakers and skills - change from 2011–2022 by Local Authority.

To focus in more detail on the island communities where proportions of Gaelic speakers are highest, the data for these islands is in Table 3. Here, I focus on the Western Isles, Tiree, and Skye. Each of these islands experienced a reduction in the number of speakers between 2011 and 2022, and most experienced a reduction in people with Gaelic skills except Skye and Tiree. Reductions were greatest on Lewis and Harris. Lewis is the location of the biggest number of Gaelic speakers so a reduction in nearly 2000 speakers here is significant. On the other hand, the data in Table 2 indicate a different picture in Scotland's largest cities. In Aberdeen, speakers grew by 36%, in Edinburgh 47%, and in Glasgow 52%.

Island	Speakers 2011	Skills 2011	Speakers 2022	Skills 2022	Percentage speaker growth (%)	Percentage skills growth (%)
Skye	2905	3678	2717	3686	-7	0
Tiree	240	284	230	298	-4	5
Lewis	9327	11111	7435	9700	-25	-15
Harris	1207	1342	945	1180	-28	-14
North Uist	887	991	729	885	-22	-12
South Uist	1885	2174	1665	2041	-13	-7
Barra	760	871	644	832	-18	-5

Table 3: Gaelic speakers and skills - change from 2011–2022 in major island communities.

After painting an overall picture, I now consider the age of Gaelic speakers and current demographic profile in more detail. The age profile of Gaelic speakers varies considerably from location to location. Data from the 2022 Census are currently

available to include Gaelic skills by age. These are plotted according to the locations in Table 3 by proportion of people with Gaelic skills in each age group. Rural island locations are in Figure 7 and large lowland cities in Figure 8. These figures indicate that in rural locations the demographics of Gaelic often follows a u-shaped pattern with higher levels of Gaelic skills in the oldest and youngest age groups. In larger lowland cities, the younger age groups generally have a higher proportion of Gaelic skills than the older age groups, though overall proportions of the population with Gaelic skills are much lower than in island locations. It seems likely that these growth figures are at least partly due to the expansion of Gaelic education opportunities for children, especially in Glasgow. In Sleat, Isle of Skye, for example, 80% of children aged 3–15 have skills in Gaelic and the school in Sleat is a Gaelic school with an English unit. I discuss the development and planning for Gaelic in education further in the section on Education and planning, below. For discussion surrounding acquisition see Section 'Who are Gaelic speakers?', and for new speakers, see Chapter 18.

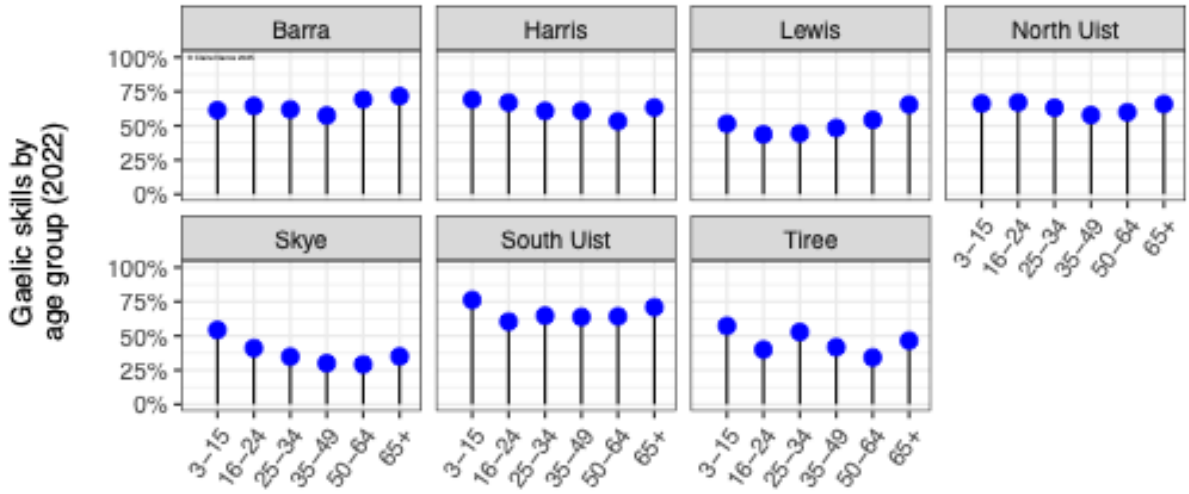


Figure 7: Percentage of people in different age groups with Gaelic skills by island.

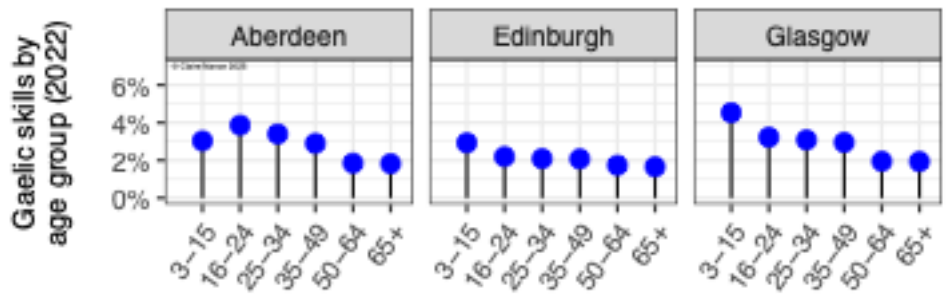


Figure 8: Percentage of people in different age groups with Gaelic skills in Aberdeen, Glasgow, and Edinburgh.

These data give no indication of language ability. It is likely that a larger number of people ticked the option to say they speak Gaelic than are fluent speakers. Munro et al., (2016) aimed to test language proficiency of people who might tick that they speak Gaelic on the census. They found that large proportions of respondents have the ability to have a basic conversation rather than discuss advanced topics, and this was especially the case in lowland areas where Gaelic speakers are less densely concentrated. Some further insight can be gained from the respondents' declared main language on the census. In the Western Isles, 1,761 people said Gaelic was their main language in 2022 (7% of people). Of the 1,761 people with Gaelic as their main language, 1011 (57%) of them were aged 65+ indicating a large skew towards older generations for this metric. Finally, the large survey on attitudes discussed above also asked about Gaelic language ability (Dean et al., 2022). Their study showed increases in lower levels between 2012 and 2021. For example, the proportion of Scottish people able to speak a few simple sentences increased from 1% to 4% between the surveys. The proportion of fluent speakers remained relatively stable at 0.5% of respondents (Dean et al., 2022, p. 8).

A major survey of language use and ability in island communities is reported by Ó Giollagáin et al., (2020). Sets of surveys considered Gaelic skills and use in pre-school children, adolescents, and households. In order to obtain an in-depth picture of Gaelic ability in the numerically most Gaelic-speaking areas, household surveys of self-reported ability were conducted in three small island communities in the Western Isles: Eriskay, Grimsay, and Scalpay. These data indicated around 60% of respondents considered themselves fluent in Gaelic, 20% had 'a few words' and less than 10% knew no Gaelic at all (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020, p. 248). However, speaking abilities were concentrated in the older age groups: 85% of 75+ year-olds were fluent in Gaelic, and no 18–24 year-olds were reported to be fluent in Gaelic. The data also indicate a demographic bias in these small island settings. In this survey, there was only one respondent in the 18–24 group and the survey contained data about 81% of island inhabitants (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020, p. 245). Taken together, these sources suggest

that the number of fluent Gaelic speakers is well below the number of reported speakers on the census. However, the reported rises in numbers from 2011 to 2022 are confirmed across the most recent survey (Dean et al., 2022), although proficiency is variable for the increased numbers of speakers.

Looking at the Census and available data on ability, it is undeniable that Gaelic is gradually undergoing shift towards English in traditional communities. There are considerable social and economic historical factors which fed into this process as explained in the historical context section. MacKinnon (1977) identified four possible factors into why language shift is taking place: 1) factors relating to the Highland Clearances and forced or induced population movement; 2) economic reasons requiring use of English in business; 3) new people coming into formerly Gaelic-speaking areas and social change; 4) 'social morale' – Gaelic speakers lose confidence in the value of language due to changes in power relations. Of all factors, 4) is potentially the most difficult for a language revitalisation movement to turn around as ideologies might be long-standing and cross generations. I now explore the role of attitudes and identity in more detail in the next sub-section.

Attitudes and Identity

In this section, I focus on attitudes towards Gaelic at the national level, the role of Gaelic in culture and heritage, and also in how individuals perceive their identity as Gaelic-speakers or 'Gaels'. For attitudes towards Gaelic Medium Education specifically, see Section 'Children'.

A large-scale recent study has investigated public attitudes towards Gaelic across Scotland over time (Dean et al., 2022). This work collected the attitudes of a balanced sample of the Scottish population in 2021 and compared to similar data collected in 2012, as such we can gain a picture of general attitudes among those who do and do not speak Gaelic. Topics include knowledge and exposure to Gaelic (discussed above in the section on sociodemographic characteristics), attitudes to Gaelic being used in public life, importance of Gaelic to heritage, attitudes to Gaelic in education, views on government spending, and opinions about the future of Gaelic.

Most respondents were comfortable or indifferent to hearing Gaelic being used in Scotland and there has been little change in this figure (89% in 2012 and 88% in 2021) (Dean et al., 2022, p. 26). Respondents with higher qualifications or more exposure to Gaelic were unsurprisingly more likely to be comfortable hearing the language. The survey also asked about attitudes to Gaelic used in public signage with the aim of understanding how the public feel about Gaelic in the soundscape but also the visual landscape of Scotland. Here also attitudes have not change significantly since 2012. Around half of respondents think that signs should be bilingual across Scotland (50% in 2012, 47% in 2021), and a substantial number think signs should be bilingual but only in areas 'where Gaelic is spoken' (36% in 2012, 38% in 2021) (Dean et al., 2022, p. 29).

In 2021, 23% of respondents thought that learning Gaelic makes someone more Scottish and 44% disagreed (Dean et al., 2022, p. 37). This response highlights the complex relationship between Gaelic and Scottish national identity (McEwan-Fujita, 2011). As highlighted in McLeod (2020, p. 8), Scotland has always been a multilingual and multicultural society. McLeod notes:

> 'Any claims about the status of Gaelic as a national language of Scotland, or as the national language – and the choice of indefinite or definite article is significant – should therefore be framed with great care'.

In 2012 and 2022, 26% and 31% of Scottish people thought Gaelic was important to their own cultural heritage, but this figure was much higher, 74%, in people who could speak at least a few sentence of Gaelic in 2021 (Dean et al., 2022, p. 41). The importance of Gaelic for cultural heritage is geographically specific, with much higher proportions of respondents thinking it is important for the culture of the Highlands and Islands (95% and 88% in 2012 and 2021 respectively). Even though Gaelic is perceived as very important to the Highlands and Islands, it is also perceived as important to Scotland as a whole for cultural heritage reasons. In 2012, 78% of respondents thought Gaelic was important to Scotland's heritage and 79% in 2021 (Dean et al., 2022, p. 44).

In terms of funding, survey respondents were informed about the levels of government funding for Gaelic, equivalent to £4.80 per person in 2012 and £5.20 in 2021. When

informed about this amount, 48% of respondents thought that this was about right and there was no change between 2012 and 2021. However, in 2012 17% of respondents thought this was too little, and this figure rose significantly to 22% in 2021 indicating that public opinion is shifting in the direction of people wanting more spent on Gaelic (Dean et al., 2022, p. 57). Finally, respondents were asked about the future for Gaelic and whether they thought more/fewer people would speak it, and whether they would like more/fewer people to speak it. In both years, over half of respondents thought fewer people would speak Gaelic in the future (54% and 55% respectively). However, the proportion of people who would like more people to speak Gaelic grew from 46% in 2012 to 56% in 2021. Taken together, these findings indicate that attitudes to Gaelic were already relatively positive in 2012, but the increases towards wanting to spend more money on Gaelic and wanting more people to speak Gaelic indicate changes in a positive direction.

This balanced national survey gives a relatively positive picture of attitudes to Gaelic in Scotland. However, there is a significant minority who hold extremely negative attitudes towards the language. For example, in the 2012 and 2021 attitudes surveys, 5% of respondents said they felt uncomfortable about hearing Gaelic (Dean et al., 2022, p. 26). The strength of this negative feeling appears to be amplified in media and social media. As described in the section on constructing Highland and Lowland, there is a long history of Gaelic and Highland persecution and even a strand of discourse which racialised Gaelic speakers in order to discriminate. However, anti-Gaelic rhetoric seems to have substantially increased in public media since the revitalisation movement began in earnest in the 1980s (McLeod, 2020, p. 239). For example, Gaelic speakers are portrayed as an over subsidised minority who have more than their fair share of public funds (Dunbar, 2000, p. 7). As described in the large attitude survey above, overall there is not a large negative perception of Gaelic being used in road signs, but this issue appears to have taken up a disproportionate amount of negative coverage for Gaelic and claims about use of funds (McLeod, 2020, p. 324). This discourse was so widespread that a report was commissioned to assess driver cognitive load and potential for accidents. No change in accident rate was detected where signs were bilingual (Kinnear et al., 2012). Other negative discourses circulating relate to the

language itself as ‘unpronounceable’, ‘dying’ or ‘backward-looking’ (McLeod, 2021). As MacKinnon (2012) notes, these negative stereotypes are tolerated by media editors to a greater extent than they would be tolerated for other minority groups.

In terms of individual identity factors and motivations, these have been explored in a series of research projects. The main focus of these investigations has been to understand why individuals might learn Gaelic (MacCaluim, 2007; M. MacLeod, 2018; McLeod et al., 2010), or how individuals orient to the ethnolinguistic label ‘Gael’ (Dunmore, 2019; Macdonald, 1997; Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020; Oliver, 2002). Here, I focus on individuals and identity as Gaels. See Chapter 18 for motivations on becoming a speaker of Gaelic and Section ‘Children’ for attitudes towards education for children in Gaelic. In order to ask young people the extent to which they identify with a Gaelic identity, Oliver (2002) asked adolescents from highland and lowland areas about the ethnolinguistic label ‘Gael’. This label is complex and contested as it draws on history, culture, language, and identity but also discrimination and stigmatisation. There is no clear definition of ‘Gael’ so researchers have instead investigated how people construct the term themselves. Oliver’s results indicate that only Gaelic-speakers would identify with this label, but not all Gaelic speakers were comfortable with using the term, and some were even uncomfortable with being asked about it (Oliver, 2002, p. 99). Views about what a Gael is depended on location: in Skye, young people drew a link between knowledge of Gaelic, being from the Highlands, and also maintaining Gaelic culture. In Glasgow, family heritage, language, and culture are important rather than exactly where someone is born (Oliver, 2002, p. 104).

The Gael identity and role of Gaelic in identity formation is discussed through interviews with the young adults who were the first cohort of students educated through Gaelic in the 1980-1990s (Dunmore, 2019). Dunmore’s interviews indicate that these young adults, who mainly live in the Lowlands, still consider Gaelic an important part of their identity, even though few of them continued speaking the language after leaving school. In particular, Dunmore asks specifically about the label ‘Gael’ (Dunmore, 2019, p. 123). When asked directly, participants typically said yes, they would consider themselves a Gael, but that the label is bound up with heritage, history, and geography of the

Highlands and Islands. Many respondents were ambivalent or uncertain. One identified ‘Gael’ as a derogatory term (Dunmore, 2019, p. 126).

The surveys in Ó Giollagáin et al., (2020) indicated strong affiliation with the term ‘Gael’ in small Western Isles island communities (79% of respondents from Eriskay, Grimsay, and Scalpay). However, only 33% of adolescents in the Western Isles considered themselves Gaels. Identification with the term was much stronger in those who spoke Gaelic (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020, p. 206). Both these surveys aimed to understand how people define a ‘Gael’ and found a strong association with both living in the Western Isles and speaking Gaelic, similar to Dunmore and Oliver’s analysis. There is some indication that identity as a Gael might be changing over time in Canada. Here, language advocates encourage use of the label and young speakers identify more strongly as Gaels than older speakers (Dunmore, 2021a) (see also Section ‘Canada’).

Domains of use and transmission

Here, I focus on a wide picture of where and how Gaelic is used outside of education settings. For Gaelic in education, see Section ‘Who are Gaelic speakers?’. Gaelic has previously been reported as a diglossic situation with large-scale surveys being completed in the 1970s and 1980s to support this view of domains and forms of usage (Dorian, 1981; MacKinnon, 2010). However, the prototypical high/low distinction in diglossic contexts (Ferguson, 1959) was already complexified in the 70s and 80s through strong use of Gaelic in religious contexts, and reduction in use in family settings in Dorian’s analysis of East Sutherland (Dorian, 1981). MacKinnon’s work included detailed contextual surveys in Harris, Barra, Skye and the Western Isles at a time when education entirely in Gaelic was not available (MacKinnon, 1977, 1988; MacKinnon & MacDonald, 1980). Notably, some of the surveys asked respondents about using Gaelic in different family contexts to different generations and asked them to compare to their original family situation growing up. The results show gradual shift towards English. For example, the Skye survey indicates that Gaelic was previously used between siblings 88% of the time but was used 25.5% of the time when respondents filled in the survey MacKinnon (1988a). Overall however, ManKinnon’s work indicated some maintenance

of Gaelic usage in the family though he notes the rapid language shift which was occurring during the process of survey collection (MacKinnon, 2010).

More recently, a large-scale survey was conducted in the context of one numerically strong Gaelic-speaking community on the west coast of Lewis, Shawbost (Munro et al., 2011). In this survey, participants were asked about their usage of Gaelic in different contexts as well as potential for intergenerational transmission. The survey indicated very high community levels of Gaelic skills: 66% of people in Shawbost could speak Gaelic fluently and 73% could understand fluently. However, fluent speaking skills were mainly concentrated in the 50+ year old generation. As discussed above, it is possible that this situation might now be changing (see Figure 7). However, a strong conclusion from Munro's report was that intergenerational transmission of Gaelic is 'broken' (Munro et al., 2011, p. 12). This conclusion comes from results indicating low usage of Gaelic in families and reduced use of Gaelic in community contexts. Similar conclusions are reached in the recent large-scale surveys of island communities (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020). For example, data from pre-school workers indicated that only 8% of children spoke Gaelic when entering pre-school in Tiree, north Skye, and the Western Isles and the authors note that 'the home acquisition of Gaelic is now exceptional' (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020, p. 118). The large-scale surveys presented in this work paint a picture of shift towards English in most settings, even in traditional island communities. For example, even among children who entered pre-school already speaking Gaelic, they used mainly English to their peers and reduced peer use of Gaelic over time, conforming to the prevailing sociolinguistic conditions of the pre-school (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020, p. 117). In a survey conducted with adolescents in the Western Isles, only four young people (1.3% of respondents) always or mainly speak Gaelic with their friends (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020, p. 181).

Outside of family and peer group usage, Gaelic has traditionally retained a strong presence in religious life. Those trying to reform the Highlands in the eighteenth century saw worship in Gaelic as a necessary step to evangelising the people and keeping them away from Catholicism. The main challenge to this policy was a shortage of ministers able to speak Gaelic and able to cover large geographical spaces. Despite numerous

schemes and bursaries aimed at recruitment, the Church in Scotland has always suffered from a lack of ministers with appropriate linguistic background. In 1843 the Church of Scotland split in two over theological disputes and the Free Church of Scotland was created. 470 ministers out of 1200 joined the new church; 101 out of 201 Gaelic-speaking ministers (Withers, 1984, p. 136). The schism meant that both churches now had to recruit Gaelic-speaking ministers from a divided pool.

Despite these difficulties in Gaelic ministry, the Church continued to be a bastion of Gaelic long after language shift in areas of the southern Highlands, and the Gaelic translation of the Bible provided a basis for literacy in Gaelic for many people educated only in English (Meek, 1990). Similarly, worship in Gaelic was central to maintaining social networks for Gaelic speakers migrating to Glasgow from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries (Oates, 2025, p. 130). MacKinnon's survey data reflected this strong tradition of Gaelic use in religious life in island communities, although he does note that some home worship contexts are shifting to English (MacKinnon, 1977). In Shawbost, there is still strong use of Gaelic in a religious context when speaking with the Minister. Twenty-three percent of respondents who were Gaelic speakers used mainly Gaelic in this context. This is far above most other contexts such as at the shop, post office, health centre, with teachers, but below the historical society and gardening club (Munro et al., 2011, p. 10). In contemporary Glasgow, Gaelic in church services is now limited to one joint congregation due to changing relationship between age and religion in the social networks of Gaelic speakers in the city, as well as post-pandemic recovery (Oates, 2025, p. 149).

Another perspective on domains of usage for a language such as Gaelic or Basque can be gained from observational work in public spaces (Altuna & Urla, 2013). The aim of this strand of research is to understand the soundscape of traditional island locations and understand the role Gaelic plays in naturalistic interaction as an indicator of language shift or vitality (Birnie, 2018). Birnie's research analysed 2000 conversations in public spaces in Stornoway, the largest urban settlement in the Western Isles. The results were strongly stratified by age: 60+ year old adults conversed in Gaelic 25% of the time (males) and 17% of the time (females), whereas under 30-year olds used

Gaelic 2.4% of the time (males) and 2.7% of the time (females) (Birnie, 2018, p. 122). These findings give an even more detailed picture in comparison to the broad data obtained from the Census or surveys such as Munro et al., (2011). While the Census suggests relatively high Gaelic skills in the younger age groups, Birnie's observational work suggests that usage, at least in public spaces outside of education, is substantially lower.

Canada

A diasporic community of Gaelic speakers live in Canada, mainly in the province of Nova Scotia. The province is named 'New Scotland' as the lands between Newfoundland and New England belonging to the indigenous Mi'kmaw people, and was allocated for colonisation by Scots by King James the VI and I in 1621 (Dunmore, 2021b). After initial small-scale colonisation, larger numbers of Highlanders moved to Nova Scotia in the 1770s. Most of these immigrants chose to move to Canada in order to escape religious persecution as Catholics or seek improved economic conditions. However, some made the journey due to forced displacement during the Highland Clearances (see Section 'Constructing Highland and Lowland') (Nilsen, 2010). This tendency for immigration due to the Clearances continued into the nineteenth century and Gaelic speakers arriving in Canada were often destitute in comparison to the earlier waves of immigration (Kennedy, 2002). Migration from Gaelic-speaking regions to Canada peaked between 1770 and 1850 when an estimated 50,000 Highlanders made the journey (Dunmore, 2021b, p. 72). After this time, Nova Scotia suffered the same potato famine which was affecting Ireland and Scotland, and few people chose to emigrate to another affected region (Nilsen, 2010, p. 94). It is estimated that there were 80,000 Gaelic speakers in Canada in 1880, and Scots were the largest ethnic group in Nova Scotia in the 1871 Census (Dunmore, 2021b, p. 72; Kennedy, 2002, p. 25).

Communities from Scotland often settled in homogenous Gaelic-speaking communities in Canada, bringing language and Gaelic culture with them. In particular, Gaelic was retained in religious life (Nilsen, 2010, p. 95). Despite this strong sense of culture and identity, Gaelic was not well-supported in the education system and was not given official status similar to French. Indeed, a motion in 1890 in the Canadian

parliament to adopt Gaelic as another official language was 'largely treated as a joke' (Dunmore, 2025, p. 10). Language shift to English has been very rapid since the 1880s. In the 2021 Nova Scotia Census, 635 people said they had knowledge of Gaelic and 65 recorded Gaelic as their mother tongue (Statistics Canada/Statistique Canada, 2021). Gaelic education in Nova Scotia is now better supported due to the opening of a Gaelic school on Cape Breton Island in 2021 (Dunmore, 2025, p. 15), and Gaelic learning opportunities as part of the Celtic Studies programme at St . Francis Xavier University. Gaelic learners and first language speakers in Canada retain a strong sense of 'rootedness' and heritage, and there are government-supported revitalisation programmes to promote meaningful activities and interaction in Gaelic (Dunmore, 2021b, 2025).

Digital communities

This section so far has focussed on Gaelic in Scotland and Canada as it is difficult to estimate the number of Gaelic speakers world-wide where national censuses do not ask about Gaelic. However, major learning providers such as Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (University of Highlands and Islands) have been providing distance learning options for some time and in 2020 were delivering remote-learning courses to 260 students (McLeod, 2020, p. 218). The move towards online use of Gaelic, learning and speaking opportunities seems to have accelerated in the past 10 years. This is partly due to the Covid-19 pandemic and greater adoption of video calling but also improved internet speed and access across the Highlands and Islands. Online conversation groups are available from providers such Ceòlas (South Uist) as well as informal groups which have been formed through social media. In relation to Irish, these new, emerging, and expanding digital spaces have been referred to as 'breathing spaces' i.e. a virtual space where minority language usage can be prioritised and supported (Ackermann-Boström & Glass, 2024; Belmar & Glass, 2019).

Many of these developments in the digital space are undoubtedly positive, for example increasing access to Gaelic education for learners who are geographically distant from Scotland. In addition, digital opportunities can supplement and reinforce existing physical social networks. However, it is important to note the importance of maintaining

physical spaces and in-person interaction (Glaser, 2007, p. 264). For example, the ethnography conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic in the Glasgow arts and culture scene suggests that although efforts were made to take interaction around arts events online through live-streaming and comments, many attendees at digital events engaged passively and did not contribute comments, or mainly commented in English (Oates, 2025, p. 197). In order for online breathing spaces to be effective in maintaining Gaelic networks or contributing to language revitalisation, these efforts need to be backed up with face-to-face interaction or truly in-depth, focussed and protected Gaelic spaces (Cormack, 2010, p. 134).

Where is Gaelic: Summary

This section has considered the distribution of Gaelic skills across Scotland according to the national censuses and change over time. Perhaps surprisingly, the 2022 census indicated an increase in Gaelic speakers and in Gaelic skills since 2011. In many cases, growth has occurred in areas without access to Gaelic education, for example Aberdeenshire and Clackmannanshire, and urban centres such as Edinburgh. These increases are of course welcomed and should be perceived as a positive for Gaelic and attitudes towards the language. However, analysis indicates that there is likely a range of language proficiencies in those people who self-declared as Gaelic speakers (Munro et al., 2016). Domains of language use have undeniably changed over time in traditional Gaelic speaking areas with reduced use in the home and family transmission such that education is now the main mode of acquiring Gaelic for children. Along with a growth in uptake and availability of Gaelic education (see also Section 'Children'), this has led to a u-shaped distribution of speaker age profiles in many island communities: there are high numbers of older Gaelic speakers but also a growing number of younger speakers (Figure 7). Despite this progress, Gaelic remains a small minority language in Scotland. In the most numerically strong Gaelic-speaking areas, Gaelic is used in fewer domains than previously (MacKinnon, 1988; Munro et al., 2011; Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020).

The changing attitudes to Gaelic and identification with the language have largely been investigated through a sense of affiliation to the ethnolinguistic label 'Gael'. Research indicates that this label is associated with traditional culture and heritage, as well as a

Gaelic-speaking background. Some participants felt uncomfortable with the label but still felt that Gaelic remained a strong part of their personal identity. One area where identity as 'Gaels' might be increasing is in Canada. There is a diasporic population of Gaelic speakers in Nova Scotia, Canada, and now access to Gaelic Medium Education. Although this community is close-knit and retains strong cultural identity with Gaelic, language shift is progressing rapidly in Canada and only 635 people reported knowledge of Gaelic on the 2021 Census.

In the next section I discuss how these different Gaelic communities are supported through legislation and language planning. This section aims to explore the structural provision for differing needs with relation to Gaelic and how this has evolved from historical context (Section 'When is Gaelic?'), and historical and contemporary community distribution (this section).

How is Gaelic in Scotland supported?

So far in this chapter, the discussion has indicated that historically Gaelic has not been well supported from the state. Indeed, Gaelic has been minoritised, constructed as not worthy of official recognition and use, and Gaelic speakers have suffered discrimination (Sections 'Constructing Highland and Lowland, and 'Canada'). Although there are still some negative attitudes and ideologies towards Gaelic (Section 'Attitudes and identity'), there is now considerably more institutional support than has been the case in the past. This really gathered pace from the 1970 and 1980s in what has been referred to as a 'Gaelic Renaissance' (Macdonald, 1997; D. J. MacLeod, 1989). In this section, I discuss key legislation which support Gaelic in Scotland, as well as institutional support, language planning, and cultural organisations.

Key legislation for Gaelic in Scotland

Two key pieces of legislation have been at the core of the Gaelic language revitalisation movement. Early efforts in the 1970s and 1980s culminated in the Gaelic Language Act (Scotland) 2005 (Scottish Parliament, 2005), which has been updated recently in the Scottish Languages Act (SLA) (2025). The 2005 Act was developed as part of a

‘legislative turn’ in relation to minority language planning in the 1990s (McLeod, 2020, p. 245; Williams, 2013). The Gaelic Language Act was based on the Welsh Language Act (1993), but is not as powerful or wide-ranging in scope (McLeod, 2006). It describes Gaelic as a language ‘commanding equal respect’ to English, but does not include a legally binding framework for what this would entail (Dunbar, 2005, p. 473). As part of the Act, Bòrd na Gàidhlig, the Gaelic Language Board, was reinforced to include roles in developing national language plans for Gaelic (see Section ‘Gaelic language plans’) and identifying public bodies who should develop language plans. However, language plans were not made legally binding in the Act and the Bòrd’s powers to enforce compliance with plans in other public bodies are weak (McLeod, 2006, p. 24).

The Gaelic Language Act was updated and reinforced in the Scottish Languages Act Scotland 2025. This legislation is more wide-ranging than the Gaelic Language Act as it includes provision for Scots as well. British Sign Language is considered in the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015. Here, I focus on Gaelic in the Scottish Languages Act. As this Act was passed very recently, there is little detailed analysis yet available. However, some initial analysis is provided in McLeod (2025). The Scottish Languages Act gives ‘official’ status to Gaelic and also Scots, though there is no information about the practical implications of this and it seems to be a symbolic measure. Previously, under the Gaelic Language Act, Bòrd na Gàidhlig could compel organisations to develop Gaelic language plans (see next section). Now, that power will lie with the Scottish Government as well as powers for enforcement. Perhaps the biggest area of deviation from the previous legislation is the possibility of introducing ‘areas of linguistic significance’. These are geographic spaces where there are 20% of people with Gaelic skills, which have a historical connection to Gaelic, where Gaelic teaching takes place, or where Gaelic cultural activities take place. This broad definition could potentially cover most of Scotland so it will be interesting to see how widely the label is adopted. In order to become an area of linguistic significance, a local authority must apply proactively. When the status is granted, it is currently unclear what this would mean in terms of extra resources or funding.

Gaelic Language Plans and Bòrd na Gàidhlig

Since 2005, Bòrd na Gàidhlig has developed four five-year national language plans, and requested around 60 public bodies such as councils, universities, and amenities to do the same. Language plans set out priorities, targets, and action plans for Gaelic. Usually, the targets in national plans have been about targets for speaker numbers, priorities for visibility and use of Gaelic, and education opportunities. Each plan contains a broad vision. In 2012 and 2023, the vision focussed on increasing the number of people speaking, learning, and using Gaelic (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2012, 2023). The vision in 2018 was to increase Gaelic usage in recognition that some people might identify as speakers but not use the language regularly (see Section 'Where is Gaelic?') (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2018). The first national plan set targets for 2021, 2031, and 2041 (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2007, p. 15). The target for speakers was 65,000, which was met in the 2022 Census (Table 1). However, targets for education seem to have been more challenging to meet. The 2007 plan involves a target of 4,000 children in Gaelic Medium Primary 1, but this is closer to the current number of pupils in primary Gaelic Medium in total (see also Section 'Children').

Education planning and support

In order to meet the ambitious targets for acquisition and education set out in documents such as national language plans, there has also been some planning and legislation to support education in Gaelic. In this section, I introduce the historical context leading up to current educational provision, and also current legislation.

When schools were first built in an organised way in Gaelic-speaking areas in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the education provided was largely in English. The aim of such schools, mostly run by Christian charities, was to educate the local people in English. Private landowners and religious organisations attempted to educate Highland boys in English ways, and as well as providing basic literacy, they also sent them to Lowland Scotland to learn skilled trades. Charity schooling through English was seen as a way of making the Highlands and Islands a 'civilised' part of the British Empire (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 74). These measures were extremely effective in anglicising the southern Highlands but seems to have had little effect on the community language of

more northerly areas (Withers, 1984, p. 252). Although the focus of this education was on English, the Society in Scotland for Propogating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK), who was the major provider, did provide some mainly religious instruction in Gaelic with the aim of pupils being able to read the Bible in Gaelic (MacKinnon, 1974, p. 40). The 1872 Education (Scotland) Act introduced state education across Scotland.

This Act is often considered very detrimental for Gaelic language transmission; however, it did not explicitly ban the use of Gaelic in teaching (McLeod, 2020, p. 77). Instead, provision for Gaelic was left to local decision makers and any increased costs of providing Gaelic in addition to an English curriculum would be covered locally. The effect of this was that Gaelic was not provided for in many cases. However, in 1918 another Education (Scotland) Act was passed which required education authorities to make 'adequate provision' for Gaelic in 'Gaelic-speaking areas'. This requirement has also been included in subsequent education acts. While Gaelic was not officially banned through public policy, there are certainly reports of local policies where speaking Gaelic was punished by beating or humiliation (MacKinnon, 1974, p. 55). Older participants from the Western Isles (age 60+) in my 2013 fieldwork reported that they had been taught some Gaelic literature at school in the second half of the twentieth century, though this lesson typically took place for an hour on a Friday afternoon when concentration was low and focussed on reading literature and discussion in English. They reported being discouraged from using Gaelic as a peer language (Nance, 2013). The lasting legacy of the policy of English-dominant education, as well as the emotional difficulty of having to learn English on arrival at school must have provided a constant reminder that Gaelic was not considered suitable for education or public life.

Gaelic activists in the twentieth century campaigned for the introduction of education in Gaelic as a vital step in the revitalisation movement. As an initial step, bilingual education programmes were set up in Inverness-shire from 1956 and in the Western Isles in the 1970s. These initial bilingual education programmes were considered ambitious and creative, but more content was needed in Gaelic for children from non-Gaelic-speaking backgrounds to progress (MacLeòid, 2011). The bilingual projects aimed to deliver 50% of content in Gaelic in order to provide a numerically balanced

experience for pupils, but it became clear that in a context of language shift, greater emphasis is needed on the minority language (O'Hanlon & Paterson, 2015). Eventually, in 1985 the first Gaelic Medium classes were opened in Glasgow and in Inverness. In 1999 a dedicated Gaelic primary school opened in Glasgow. Gaelic Medium provides a form of immersion education where a maximum of content is delivered in Gaelic, with English gradually blended in in later primary school. Unlike 'traditional' immersion education programmes in, for example Canada, children from all linguistic backgrounds are educated in the same classes (Lyster & Genesee, 2019). For more information about current numbers and experiences in Gaelic Medium Education, see Section 'Children'. The most recent Education (Scotland) Act (2016) provides increased provision for Gaelic Medium Education. However, since its inception, Gaelic Medium has been driven by parental demand and local initiative, and this is reflected in the current act. The 2016 Education Act states that parents of pre-school children can request an assessment for the need for Gaelic Medium Education in their area. Local authorities then have to make reasonable effort to accommodate Gaelic Medium where there is parental demand. These provisions are a positive step forwards but fall short of the right to Gaelic Medium Education which many activists hoped that the 2016 Act would provide.

Gaelic Medium Education is now provided at pre-school, primary, and secondary level. In terms of higher education, it is possible to study a degree in Gaelic at Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Aberdeen since the end of the First World War (McLeod, 2020, p. 219). There is now further provision at University of Strathclyde, which includes training for Gaelic Medium teachers. Perhaps the most significant development in terms of provision for Gaelic higher education has been at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, now part of the University of Highlands and Islands. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is a college on the Isle of Skye where distance and in-person courses are delivered through Gaelic. These include short-term learning opportunities as well as undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Degree courses have been offered since 1999 (Hutchinson, 2005), and there are now 90 students on degree programmes (McLeod, 2020, p. 218). In addition, Lews Castle College, Stornoway, also now offers Gaelic degree programmes as part of the University of Highlands and Islands.

Media and Culture

Gaelic has a very strong presence in media and culture. In terms of media, there is a Gaelic BBC radio station and a Gaelic BBC TV channel as well as written materials on the BBC News website. A Gaelic radio station was first formed by the BBC in 1935, and Radio nan Gàidheal, the current radio station, brought together several existing services in 1985 (McLeod, 2020, p. 225). The first Gaelic TV programmes were broadcast in 1993 with funding from the UK government via Comataidh Telebhisein Gàidhlig (Cormack, 2004). BBC Alba, the Gaelic TV channel, was created in 2008. McLeod (2020, p. 316) notes that no other comparably sized minority language in Europe has such an extensive TV service. BBC Alba has prioritised 'core' Gaelic content, as well as content which is of interest to non-Gaelic speakers such as sports. Through this strategy, weekly viewers peaked at 550,000 adults in 2011 i.e. 12.9% of the population at a time when 1.8% of the population could understand Gaelic (McLeod, 2020, p. 318). Since this time, viewers have declined but this is at least partly due to the societal trend for viewing less broadcast television and more social media and YouTube. The channel produced the popular long-running drama series *Bannan* (Young Films, 2014) and produces ambitious new content such as the recent crime drama *An t-Eilean* (Black Camel Pictures, 2025), but securing adequate funding always remains a challenge.

The wider cultural contribution of Gaelic to Scottish cultural and heritage is undeniably large. Support for cultural activities has traditionally been provided by Gaelic societies, i.e. groups of individuals dedicated to language and culture promotion. The largest Gaelic event annually is the Mòd, a singing, music, and poetry competition which rotates around different locations in Scotland and takes place in October since 1892 (McLeod, 2020, p. 61). The Mòd is organised by Highland society An Comunn Gàidhealach and is broadcast on BBC Alba and Radio nan Gàidheal. The importance of Gaelic culture and cultural events for the Scottish economy has been investigated in a series of economic studies. For example, research commissioned by Highlands and Islands Enterprise estimated the potential value of Gaelic to the economy at up to £149 million in 2014 (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2014). Much of this estimated value stemmed from the culture and arts sectors. Similarly, research conducted in Glasgow

demonstrated that an estimated 235 jobs (full time equivalent) in the city rely on Gaelic services and 96 of these are in the creative industries (Chalmers et al., 2022). In addition to media employment, a major component of the creative offering from Gaelic in Glasgow is festivals such as Celtic Connections, an annual international Celtic music festival. The economic impact of these festival connected to Gaelic is estimated to be £7.2 million in Glasgow (Chalmers et al., 2022, p. 3). Glasgow certainly occupies a hugely significant position in Gaelic arts and culture. In a detailed survey and series of interviews, Oates (2025, p. 253) concludes 'it is the cultural flows informed by centuries of tradition which make the relationship between Gaelic and Glasgow special'. In particular, the cultural contribution of migrants to Glasgow from the Highlands and Islands leads Walsh & McLeod (2011, p. 161) to refer to Glasgow as a 'Gaelic "power centre" of sorts'. In summary therefore, some institutional support is provided for Gaelic media and arts, but Gaelic culture also makes a very substantial contribution to the economy especially in Glasgow.

Gaelic support: Summary

This section has considered the structural provision for Gaelic in Scotland including key legislation, language planning, and the structural support around culture and media. Since the historical persecution and downgrading of Gaelic as a language for high level functions, much progress has been made especially since the 1970s and 1980s through the 'Gaelic renaissance'. Two key pieces of legislation have supported Gaelic and driven forwards the revitalisation planning and structure: the Gaelic Language Act (Scotland) 2005, and the Scottish Languages Act (2025). Although these acts have provided a framework for language planning and now recognise Gaelic as an official language, there is still further progress which could be made in terms of a right to Gaelic Medium Education and dedicated financial support for designated Areas of Linguistic Significance. Continued financial support for Gaelic culture and media is always fragile yet these sectors continue to demonstrate very strong return contribution in terms of economic benefits, tourism and reputation. In the next section I turn the focus to Gaelic speakers themselves focussing on background and numbers of people in different acquisition modes. This allows an analysis of how the structural provision described in this section translates into people who use the language.

Who are Gaelic speakers?

In this section, I focus on the background and context of how people acquire Gaelic today. For detailed discussion about the social construction of speakerhood and new speakers, see Chapter 18. The section is divided into acquisition and provision for children (sub-section 'Children'), and for adults (sub-section 'Adult Gaelic users').

Children

As discussed in Section 'Domains of use and transmission', the main mode of acquisition for Gaelic-speaking children is now through the education system. Some of the current legislation and historical development of the Gaelic education system was explained in Section 'Education planning and support'. Here, I focus on availability and uptake of education for children in Gaelic across Scotland. In Canada there is now a Gaelic Medium school on Cape Breton Island, founded in 2021 (see Section 'Canada').

Contemporary Gaelic education is delivered across Scotland. Provision is made through Gaelic medium units in otherwise English-medium schools, or fully Gaelic schools. A further option is a Gaelic school which has an English-medium unit. Gaelic Medium Education (GME) is available in 17 out of 32 local authorities in Scotland. A map of local authorities where GME is provided is shown in Figure 9.[iii] It should be noted that the data are mapped according to local authority, and each individual child might live some distance from where the education is provided. Also, the figure shows areas where there is some GME provision, this does not necessarily mean all demand for places will be met. Most areas providing GME are in the west and north of Scotland, with provision more limited in the south and east. Five local authorities have provision for primary but not secondary GME (Angus, East Renfrewshire, Inverclyde, North Ayrshire, and Renfrewshire). The standalone Gaelic primary schools are located in Glasgow (three schools), Edinburgh, Inverness, Portree (Skye), and Fort William. Glasgow also has a standalone Gaelic secondary school. The Gaelic school with an English Medium class is in Sleat, Skye.

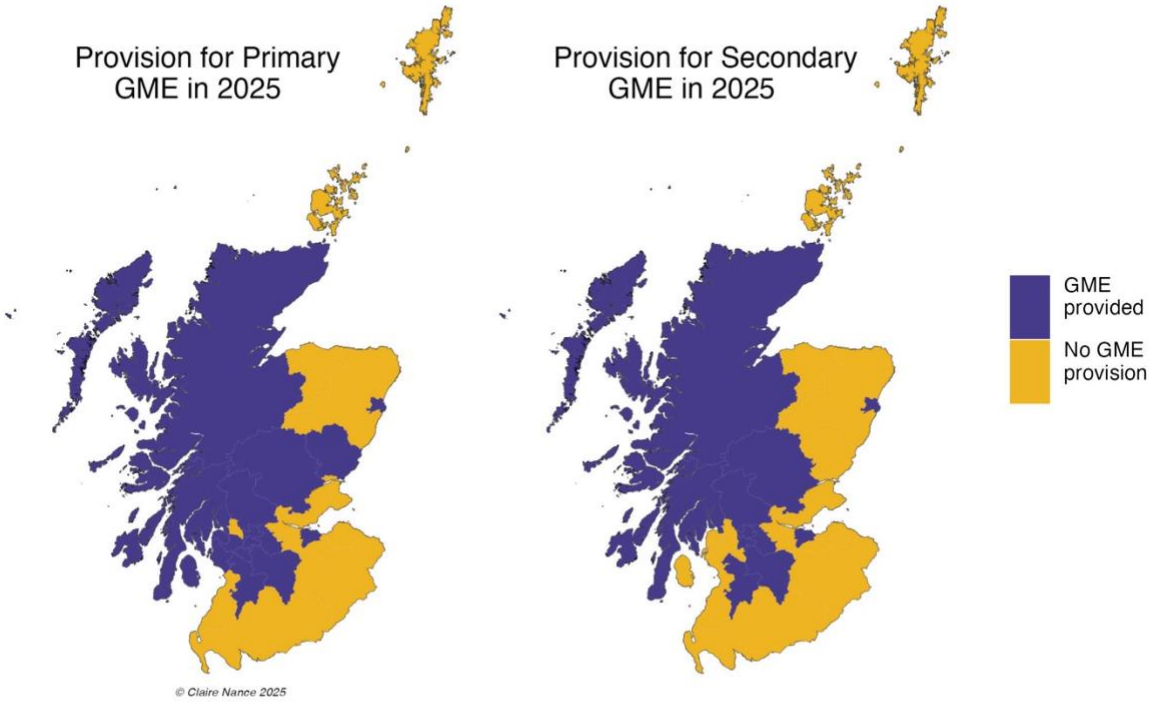


Figure 9: Map showing GME provision by Local Authority in Scotland 2025.

Scotland's pupil census gives some indications about the growth and size of Gaelic education.[iv] Here, I focus on the growth of Gaelic education since MacKinnon (2010) by assessing pupil census numbers from 2011–2024. Data is available for Gaelic Medium Education (GME) at primary and secondary level, as well as Gaelic learner education (teaching Gaelic as a modern language, rather than education through Gaelic). The numbers and percentages of (primary and secondary) pupils in Scotland are shown in Table 4 and Table 5. Note these figures exclude Special Schools as they do not provide GME. The tables show growth in GME and also growth in Gaelic learner education at primary level. At secondary level, there is a continuing increase in pupils in GME, and a mainly upwards trajectory in pupils who receive from Gaelic education (GME, Gaelic taught in Gaelic, or Gaelic for learners). However, numbers overall are quite small. Around 1% of primary pupils now receive GME, and 0.5% of secondary pupils. Around

2% of primary and secondary pupils are receiving Gaelic education in some form. In 2007 the National Plan for Gaelic set a target for enrolling 3,000 pupils in P1 GME in 2021 (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2007, p. 15). However, the total number for pupils at all primary levels was 3,808 in total in this year.

Year	GME primary	Gaelic learners primary	Total primary pupils	Proportion GME (%)	Proportion some Gaelic (%)
2011	2401	3522	366429	0.66	1.62
2012	2383	3631	370218	0.64	1.62
2013	2269	3389	376921	0.60	1.50
2014	2791	4581	384751	0.73	1.92
2015	2931	4260	390687	0.75	1.84
2016	3050	3582	396237	0.77	1.67
2017	3168	3996	399850	0.79	1.79
2018	3415	3695	399815	0.85	1.78
2019	3654	3829	398334	0.92	1.88
2020	3796	3392	393957	0.96	1.82
2021	3808	3844	390313	0.98	1.96
2022	3781	3692	388920	0.97	1.92
2023	3897	4513	384726	1.01	2.19
2024	3851	4636	379354	1.02	2.24

Table 4: Pupils in GME primary or Gaelic learner primary schools 2011–2024.

Year	GME secondary	Gaelic learners secondary	Gaelic is taught in Gaelic	Total secondary pupils	Proportion GME (%)	Proportion some Gaelic (%)
2011	528	3020	670	297109	0.18	1.42
2012	488	2675	866	293562	0.17	1.37
2013	684	3064	546	289164	0.24	1.48
2014	792	2746	439	284762	0.28	1.40
2015	729	2485	272	281939	0.26	1.24
2016	842	2473	268	280983	0.30	1.28
2017	797	2510	247	281993	0.28	1.26
2018	928	2860	205	286152	0.32	1.40
2019	977	2665	298	292063	0.33	1.35

2020	1050	2320	309	300954	0.35	1.22
2021	1258	2631	333	306811	0.41	1.38
2022	1329	2748	322	309133	0.43	1.42
2023	1564	3690	546	313061	0.50	1.85
2024	1676	3489	335	315072	0.53	1.75

Table 5: Pupils in GME secondary, Gaelic learners secondary, or taught only Gaelic in Gaelic 2011–2024.

There are remaining challenges around teacher recruitment in GME, but also a lack of political cooperation from local authorities and perceived funding concerns. A clear example of the difficulties around GME provision and very slow progress despite clear demand can be found in Edinburgh. Here an extensive and very long campaign took place for a GME school, which was eventually successful and the school is now over-subscribed (Armstrong, 2020). Since 2020, GME is the default option for primary education in the Western Isles, and parents need to opt-out of Gaelic to choose English Medium if they choose. This change in policy means that a clear majority of children are educated in Gaelic at least at primary-school level, and likely contributed to the high proportion of Gaelic skills in this age group in the latest Census (Figure 7).

As discussed in the section on education planning and support, education through English has historically been prioritised to the detriment of Gaelic in Scotland. Much of the reasoning behind this has been historical prejudice towards Gaelic and a sense that the language was not suitable for education (Section 'Constructing Highland and Lowland'). However, any potential concerns about educational attainment in GME have now been put to rest. Two studies have assessed the attainment of pupils in GME and found that the standards achieved are comparable if not higher than pupils in English Medium (Johnstone et al., 1999; O'Hanlon et al., 2010). GME is now often perceived as a desirable option as the sustained parental campaigns in Edinburgh, North Ayrshire, Renfrewshire, and East Renfrewshire have demonstrated (Armstrong, 2020). In terms of why parents choose GME, O'Hanlon (2015) identifies four themes: 1) heritage and historical connection with Gaelic whether in the family or more broadly with Scotland's heritage; 2) benefits of bilingualism in terms of acquisition of subsequent languages and confidence; 3) perceived quality of GME including smaller class sizes than English

Medium; and 4) possible enhanced employment opportunities for their children on completing education.

These studies have also assessed the pupil profile of children in GME. Analysis indicates that GME pupils are more likely to be from more affluent families. For example, in 1999 fewer GME pupils received free school meals than English Medium pupils, 9% compared to 16% respectively (Johnstone et al., 1999). Receipt of free school meals is possible when parental income is low, so is often used as a proxy for deprivation in UK school contexts. Similarly, parents with higher education levels were significantly more likely to send their children to GME in 2003 (Stockdale et al., 2003, p. 43), and O'Hanlon et al. (2010, p. 42) note a perception that parents with pupils in GME are more likely to be middle class. Children in GME are not necessarily from families with Gaelic-speaking backgrounds. In many areas, those from Gaelic-speaking backgrounds are in a clear minority. Statistics on linguistic background of pupils are not routinely published however in 2010, Glasgow's Gaelic Language Plan suggested that around 80% of GME pupils in the city were not from Gaelic-speaking backgrounds (Glasgow City Council, 2010, p. 63). In my own work, I found that approximately half of pupils in Western Isles GME schools had some Gaelic language input at home from one or both parents and often also grandparents (Nance, 2020).

In addition to formal GME or Gaelic learner education, some Gaelic provision is also provided in early years settings (Stephen et al., 2010). This can be in an educational pre-school (Sgoil Àraich), Cròileagan (Play groups) or Pàrant agus Pàiste (Parent and Toddler) groups. Most local authorities which provide primary GME also provide early years education. Four local authorities which have recently started providing GME have not yet introduced early years education (Angus, East Renfrewshire, North Ayrshire, Renfrewshire).[v]

Adult Gaelic users

Adults who speak Gaelic are the adults who acquired Gaelic as children and grew up, and also people who acquired Gaelic as adult language learners. Adult new speakers are fully discussed in Chapter 18. Here I provide a brief overview of the acquisition

modes and social characteristics of adults who speak Gaelic. Within the census data for Gaelic speakers in Scotland, there is no information about who acquired Gaelic as a child and who acquired Gaelic in adulthood (see section on sociodemographic characteristics). However, surveys of Gaelic second language users (including third language etc.) estimate that there are approximately 4,000 people learning in Scotland (Sellers et al., 2019). These people are attending evening classes, immersion courses, learning at universities across Scotland (see Section 'Education planning and support'), or independently. The 2022 Census indicates that there are 93,027 people in Scotland over the age of 25 (and less likely to be in full-time educational settings) who have some Gaelic skills. Allowing for several thousand people learning Gaelic as a second language, this still means that there are tens of thousands of adults who acquired Gaelic through home settings or are heritage understanders.

An interesting social change in the profile of Gaelic users today is the change in relationship between social class and Gaelic ability. For example, while in medieval times Gaelic was used across Scotland by both upper class aristocracy, middle class musicians and literate people, and lower class agricultural workers, this was not the case in early modern and modern times as language shift took place (McEwan-Fujita, 2008). Indeed, Gaelic became a language associated with rural contexts, informal usage, and in many cases poverty (McLeod, 2020, p. 216). This trend is now being reversed due to the opportunities created through revitalisation policies and the choices speakers make in the face of continuing language shift in traditional heartland communities. As such, Gaelic-speaking adults are increasingly middle class professionals employed in sectors such as media, politics, and education (Nance & Kirkham, 2022; Smith-Christmas & Ó hIfernáin, 2015). The effects of this big change in social dynamic are to create new spaces and uses for Gaelic (McEwan-Fujita, 2008), as well as new idiom and professional registers (McLeod, 2000). People in this demographic group have been referred to as 'cappuccino Gaels' (MacLeòid, 2004, cited in McLeod, 2020, p. 217).

Gaelic speakers: Summary

This section has explored the impact of Gaelic language policy and planning on speaker numbers in different acquisition streams. The 2022 Census showed an increase in Gaelic speakers since 2011, perhaps unexpectedly. The data on availability and growth in Gaelic Medium Education (Table 4 and Table 5) indicates that some of this growth has come from greater availability and provision of GME (Figure 9). However, this growth in child education opportunities for Gaelic does not make up the large increase in speaker numbers (discussed in Section 'Sociodemographic characteristics').

Although there have been some increases in provision for GME, progress is slow and could be improved by greater government support including financing for teacher training and increased salaries for the increased skill level needed to teach in GME. In addition, some political resistance to greater provision for Gaelic is still present, exemplified in the very low provision for GME in Edinburgh despite high demand (Armstrong, 2020). As Gaelic education expands and attitudes change towards bilingualism, a tendency for a shift in the social profile of Gaelic speakers is also apparent. While Gaelic was once associated with traditional working-class occupations such as crofting and fishing, Gaelic is now becoming a language of highly educated people in professional occupations. The economic value of Gaelic skills is one strong motivator for parents choosing GME in Scotland.

What is the nature of Gaelic today?

In this section, I outline sociolinguistic research conducted on the structural nature of Gaelic and how individuals use Gaelic and English bilingually. In particular, I focus on language use in Hebridean communities where Gaelic is transmitted intergenerationally. For research on new speaker language use, see Chapter 18. Specifically, here I discuss the sociolinguistic conditions for language use, and theoretical frameworks which could be used to model these. I also focus on the language use choices of individuals and how alternation between Gaelic and English is variably deployed between different generations of speakers as 1) a discourse-

pragmatic feature in the language of fluent bilinguals or 2) subject to language ideological pressures within families who choose to transmit Gaelic to children.

Shift, contact and multilingualism

Within the UNESCO framework of language endangerment, Gaelic is considered 'definitely endangered' (Moseley, 2010). Gaelic speakers (with a very small number of exceptions) are at least bilingual in Gaelic and English. In communities where Gaelic has been spoken for a long time, it has been in contact with English for centuries. In this context of endangerment, multilingualism, and societal contact, it is expected that the language itself will evolve and change. Any assessment of the linguistic structure of Gaelic must simultaneously acknowledge and reconcile these sociolinguistic contextual factors as well as allowing for the possibility of language-internal change as in any linguistic setting (Cole, 2013, p. 118). A large body of work has now investigated variation in linguistic structure across different sectors of the Gaelic community, as will be explored in this section.

Previous work has described extensive structural change for languages undergoing endangerment and communities experiencing shift. One of the most famous works conducted in this area is Dorian's description of community variation and change in East Sutherland Gaelic (Dorian, 1981, 2010). In these works, Dorian sets out predictions for linguistic structure in societies such as East Sutherland in the 1970s/1980s where Gaelic was rapidly shifting to English as the community language. In particular, she highlights that the language will undergo 'rapid and widespread change' (Dorian, 1981, p. 151). Within the community, a range of proficiency in the language (Gaelic in this case) is to be expected (Dorian, 1973, 1977). Similar research conducted on language endangerment at this time explained that typologically unusual structures, or structures not shared with the societally dominant language, in this case English, are likely to change (Andersen, 1982; Dressler, 1991).

Since the seminal work in this area, terminology is now changing to conceptualise language endangerment as part of a language shift process, where multilinguals exploit different elements of a repertoire (Grenoble & Osipov, 2023). In contexts of bi- and

multi-lingualism, it is expected that there will be bidirectional influence in the language use of individual speakers (Flege & Bohn, 2021). In addition, Gaelic is now undergoing revitalisation which can have specific effects for linguistic structure due to the social context, heightened awareness, and ideologies of speakers (King, 2001; Nance, 2015a), see also Chapter 18.

In Scotland, Gaelic has always existed in close contact with surrounding languages such as Pictish, Norse, and Old Scots as discussed above. More recently, Gaelic is in close contact with Scots and Scottish English. In Canada, Gaelic is in contact with English, French, and indigenous languages. Theories of language contact would predict that any element of a language might be transferred from another language if contact is prolonged and intense, as in the case of Gaelic. However, after specific vocabulary items, it is common for phonological features to be transferred from one language to another (Thomason, 2001 p. 68-75). As such, in the language of Gaelic users, we can expect aspects of cross-linguistic influence from English and other languages due to individual bilingualism, as discussed above, but it is also likely that the structure of Gaelic has been influenced by longer term language contact (Mayr et al., 2017). A substantial body of work has now tested these predictions about linguistic structure within the context of shift, contact, multilingualism and also the ongoing effects of language revitalisation in Gaelic, as will be discussed below.

Grammatical variation and change?

Since Dorian's work, research has been conducted on grammatical variation and possible change in the Outer Hebrides, both through a variationist sociolinguistic framework and also from the perspective of regional dialectology. For example, Cole (2013, 2015) conducted a study of morphosyntactic variation with 16 participants from North Uist, South Uist and Benbecula aged 30–80. She followed Dorian's method of sentence translation as well as a Labovian sociolinguistic interview (e.g. Labov, 1984). Cole's analysis of mutations and the genitive case did not indicate evidence of large-scale differences between generations and structural change in progress. Instead, her findings indicate language-internal pressures for change such as producing the more common dative case after prepositions. In addition, Cole's work demonstrates that

Gaelic variation is subject to many of the same principles found in other western contexts: in her sample, female speakers were more likely to conform to notions of 'standard' language (Labov, 2001).

Wilson's (2021) work similarly concludes that much of the morphosyntactic variation in Gaelic is conditioned by internal structures and typological pressures, rather than necessarily the role of language shift and contact. His analysis took a geographical approach to morphosyntactic and morphophonological variation and considered data from 41 speakers aged 50+ from 18 locations across the Hebrides. Much of the variation in an interview and elicitation task could be explained by dialectal differences, rather than age-related change in the structure of Gaelic. Wilson's analysis allocates a conservatism score to each speaker based on canonical descriptions of Gaelic grammar. Mull and Islay display more innovative variants and the Uists, Barra and Benbecula more conservative. The conservatism score does correlate with the density of Gaelic speakers in each community to some extent, indicating that traditional grammatical structures are most maintained where there is a greater concentration of speakers.

Cole and Wilson's analyses are important for providing a Hebridean comparison to Dorian's context of East Sutherland and a contemporary benchmark. Their work does not necessarily indicate large-scale changes in the systems for mutation, tense, definite article, or case marking. Instead, there is variation across the community according to dialect and also greater retention of conservative forms in areas with the densest concentration of speakers.

Phonological variation and change?

Recent studies of Gaelic phonology have similarly focussed on applying contemporary sociolinguistic theories and methods to the context of language shift and revitalisation in Gaelic communities. In order to assess the possibility of change, Nance has used the apparent-time construct to compare across generations and infer change (Labov, 1966). For example, Nance (2015b) examines prosodic variation in contemporary Lewis Gaelic. She compares spontaneous phrases from interview speech in older traditional

speakers (age 60+), and also adolescent speakers aged 13–14. In Lewis Gaelic, the traditional dialect maintains a system of lexical pitch accents, where every stressed word corresponds to one of two patterns: monosyllabic words have low or rising pitch, and polysyllabic words have falling, high or rise-fall pitch (Borgstrøm, 1940; Nance & Ó Maolalaigh, 2021; Oftedal, 1956; Ternes, 2006), see also Chapter 8. Nance's (2015b) analysis indicates that while this system is produced in a highly consistent way by Lewis older speakers, it is not produced by younger speakers, who instead use an intonation-based prosodic system.

Nance has also employed a generational and apparent-time approach to the production of laterals in Gaelic (Nance, 2014). There are three phonemic laterals in Gaelic: velarised, plain, and palatalised i.e. /l̪ˠ l l̪ʲ/ (see Chapter 8). Through comparison of older, middle-aged, and younger speakers from Lewis she finds some generational differences: younger speakers are more likely to produce a palatal glide [j] instead of a palatalised lateral /l̪ʲ/. This is similar to the process referred to as yeísmo in Spanish, where delateralisation merges /ʎ/ and /ʝ/ to [ʝ] (Rost Bagudanch, 2017). However, in acoustic analysis of the laterals produced without delateralisation, there is no evidence of a loss of phonemic contrast. The younger speakers as well as the older speakers do maintain the phonemic distinction between all three laterals. The extent and nature of the acoustic distance between lateral phonemes is explored in Nance (2022). In this analysis, the distance between the velarised and palatalised laterals is assessed via Euclidean Distances comparing older, middle-aged, and adolescent speakers but also children aged 7–11. The results indicate no differences between older and middle-aged speakers. The acoustic distance between phonemes is smaller for adolescent speakers, but not significantly so. The distance is significantly smaller for children (see Figure 10, p. 685).

In a final study assessing the possibility of change in Lewis Gaelic, Nance & Kirkham (2022) compared production of rhotics in Gaelic-dominant bilinguals to data from the Survey of the Gaelic Dialects of Scotland (SGDS) (Ó Dochartaigh, 1997). Similar to laterals, there are three phonemic rhotics in Gaelic including velarised, plain, and palatalised /rˠ r rʲ/. Comparison to SGDS is not straightforward as the transcriptions

were made auditorily and do not use the contemporary International Phonetic Alphabet. At times, there are differences in convention between the fieldworkers meaning that the data exhibit transcriber isoglosses rather than dialectal differences, and some conventions changed during this long-term, large-scale, project (Bosch & Scobbie, 2009). Fortunately, the fieldwork on Lewis was mainly conducted by Magnus Oftedal which gives dialect-internal consistency. Nance and Kirkham aggregated their auditory analysis of rhotic phonemes and compared to the SGDS data. Overall, the data from the 21st century speakers were largely consistent with the SGDS transcriptions. There was no evidence of reduction in the number of phonemic categories and the realisations were relatively consistent across the datasets (more trills in the velarised phonemes, more palatalised fricatives for the palatalised phonemes). In further analysis, Nance & Kirkham compared the acoustics and articulation of rhotics across speakers. There was no evidence of age-related differences within the sample and accordingly no evidence of change in apparent-time.

Difficulty of establishing evidence for 'change'

The phonological studies described above indicate the potential for change when older and younger generations are compared, at least in terms of the prosody and laterals for Gaelic. The directionality of these changes is consistent with what could be predicted from the foundational work on language endangerment and contact, namely that contrasts not shared with the societally dominant language (English) are likely to change. However, due to the community structure for Gaelic and the sociolinguistic conditions of language revitalisation, it is difficult to compare generations in the same way that Labov did in 1966. When comparing generations in an apparent-time design, it is crucial to ensure that the speakers are socially consistent enough for such a comparison to be meaningful (Nance, 2022). Typically, comparisons are made at the level of the speech community through a focus on shared linguistic and/or social norms (Coupland, 2010; Gumperz, 1982; Labov, 1972).

In the context of Gaelic, older traditional speakers grew up in Gaelic-dominant environments, which is not the case for many younger speakers. As such, it is not always clear that a meaningful comparison can be made. For example, in the context of

Nance (2014), the younger adolescent users of Gaelic are English-dominant bilinguals growing up in an English-dominant globalised society. A small number of these young people grew up in Gaelic-speaking households, but the context of acquiring Gaelic at home in an otherwise English-dominant society is very different to the acquisition patterns of the older Gaelic-dominant generation in this study. In the context where we were able to compare socially-consistent Gaelic-dominant bilinguals of differing ages, we did not find evidence of change across generations (Nance & Kirkham, 2022). In addition, several authors have noted that acquisition trajectories in minority language settings can be longer than majority language settings (Kennard, 2018; Thomas et al., 2014). It is possible that the palatal gliding described in Nance (2014) is an aspect of extended acquisition and will level out as children mature, rather than an indication of apparent-time change.

The variationist sociolinguistic work outlined above conducted with contemporary Gaelic communities has not conclusively found evidence to support the foundational literature on change in language endangerment (Andersen, 1982; Dorian, 1981; Dressler, 1991). Instead, the picture is more complex with evidence of retention of complex structures (Nance & Kirkham, 2022), possibly extended acquisitional trajectories (Nance, 2014, 2022), dialectal variation being more substantial than generational differences (Wilson, 2021), and language-internal factors which are relevant to all linguistic contexts (Cole, 2015).

Code-switching and Family Language Policy

The language use of contemporary Gaelic speakers has also been investigated from the perspective of code-switching and Family Language Policy within a sociolinguistic framework. As all Gaelic speakers (except the very old and very young) are at least bilingual in Gaelic and English, it is to be expected that utterances will include code-switching and that speakers will draw on their multilingual resources. In an influential model of code-switching, Myers-Scotton (2002) describes how utterances are typically embedded into a frame within a 'matrix' language, for example adding the tag 'you know' at the end of an otherwise Gaelic sentence. Other approaches to code-switching and language mixing argue that in many cases it is difficult to delineate the boundaries

between languages and instead utterances should be considered ‘translanguaging’, a term which recognises extreme language mixing in some contexts (Wei, 2018). In the Gaelic context, many fluent speakers will often code-switch discourse markers such as ‘you know’ in Gaelic utterances, or ‘co-dhiù’ in English utterances (Smith-Christmas, 2016b).

Smith-Christmas (2016b) uses analysis of this level of code-switching to provide evidence for a theoretical model which aims to combine frame and matrix conceptions of code-switching with extreme language mixing (Auer, 1984). Auer’s model suggests a continuum from alternation of two languages to a mixed unilingual code. Examples are drawn from contexts such as urban Wolof, a mixed French-Wolof language contact variety used in Dakar, Senegal. Smith-Christmas uses data from 50+ year Gaelic-English bilinguals to indicate that code-switched items used by fluent Gaelic speakers have been bleached of their original meaning and this indicates progression along the continuum proposed by Auer. In the context of Gaelic, however, it seems highly unlikely that the language context will progress along Auer’s continuum to a ‘fused lect’ similar to Urban Wolof, due to the standardising context of Gaelic use in education and speaker awareness of language separation (McLeod, 2004) (see also Section ‘Attitudes and identity’ and Chapter 18). Instead, Smith-Christmas argues that switching of discourse markers is an established interactional norm for fluent speakers (Smith-Christmas, 2016b, p. 70). Her analysis demonstrates that English equivalents are used in salient positions in otherwise Gaelic sentences. Although each marker is so frequently used that the exact meaning is becoming irrelevant, a change in language indicates a particular emphasis in the conversation. In this case, fluent older speakers use their two languages as resources to draw upon for injecting extra significance and meaning to discourse.

Smith-Christmas (2012) demonstrates that older speakers not only use discourse markers for conversational effect, but also entire stretch of code-switching to mark salient points, or display particular affiliations. One example extract is in Table 6, adapted from Smith-Christmas (2012, p. 99). In this example, Smith-Christmas argues that the whole-utterance switches to English in lines 8 and 10 highlight a negative

judgement and serve to make the point that Isabel does not approve of Nana's actions. Smith-Christmas' work is grounded in careful ethnographic study within multi-generational Gaelic-speaking families. As such, her observations are able to capture the richness of interaction and differences between generations. I now discuss how this rich and data-driven approach has proved extremely fruitful in understanding the language interactions of children being raised in Gaelic-speaking environments.

Line	Speaker	Utterance	Translation
1	Isabel	bha mi ag ràdh ri Fiona	I was saying to Fiona
2		's dòcha gun deach thu	perhaps you went
3		an ra- rathad ceàrr timcheall air *you know*	the wrong way about it
4		biodh aca 's dòcha	let them be perhaps
5		nam biodh tu air a ràdh riutha air an toiseach	if you [Nana] had said to them at the start
6		faodaidh tu a' chlann a thoirt leat	you can take the children with you
7	Nana	Oh aye aye	Oh aye aye
8	Isabel	*they're so ver- they are so childish*	they're so childish
9	Nana	aye	aye
10	Isabel	*they're so too they're still t- too child-like themselves*	they're still too child-like themselves
11	Nana	aye 's dòcha	aye perhaps

Table 6: Conversation extract adapted from Smith-Christmas (2012, p. 99)

A notable finding of Smith-Christmas' work is that children raised in Gaelic-speaking environments do not necessarily reply in Gaelic when addressed in this language, and overall have low rates of Gaelic use (Smith-Christmas, 2017). This finding has also been noted in research with children in Gaelic Medium Education (Nance, 2020; Will, 2012). Through a qualitative research design, Smith-Christmas is able to explore the reasons

why this might be. For example, Smith-Christmas (2017) demonstrates that in a multi-generational household, Gaelic is portrayed as a performative language in the youngest family member, 'Maggie' (age 8). She is called upon to speak Gaelic in front of family members or demonstrate her abilities. At the same time, use of Gaelic is 'denormativised' i.e. older generations highlight Gaelic as a language which deviates from Maggie's usual code choice (English). In this way, the older generations reinforce an ideology that Gaelic is something which is reserved for performance, for school, and is not a 'natural' interactional style for Maggie. The role of different generations in this process is highlighted (Smith-Christmas, 2014). Maggie's father and paternal extended family maintain English as their peer group language and use Gaelic as a language for disciplining Maggie. These code choices are a further reason behind low rates of Gaelic use in Maggie's generation even within Gaelic-centred households.

The choices families make in relation to transmission of Gaelic are clearly important for the future of the language. In sociolinguistics, the framework of Family Language Policy (FLP) has proved extremely fruitful for understanding the emotional, social, and ideological complexity of choices faced by parents as they plan how to raise their children (King et al., 2008; Smith-Christmas, 2016a). It is argued that transmission of language in a minority context such as Gaelic, or heritage language setting, should be evaluated against three pillars of 'success': achieving competence of linguistic structures, achieving competence which is socially authentic and relevant, and achieving a level of competence which is natural and desirable for the child to express themselves (Smith-Christmas & Ruiséal, 2022). In the context of Gaelic this is not always straightforward. For example, the micro-interactional analysis in Smith-Christmas (2022) indicates a very strong sense of pro-Gaelic FLP from 'Billie's' mother, but responses in English from Billy. However, Billie later chooses to use Gaelic in a context of play indicated 'success' in terms of naturalness and a desire to use Gaelic. This body of work demonstrates that, due to the context of community language shift, the meanings behind (explicit and implicit) code choice differ between generations of the Gaelic community.

Linguistic structure: Summary

In this section, I have discussed research which has aimed to investigate language production in Gaelic communities. I have focussed on language use in Hebridean settings, for language use among new speakers see Chapter 18. The research indicates strong evidence for dialectally based variation, but (perhaps surprisingly) little evidence in support of the widespread and rapid change within linguistic systems, which is predicted in the canonical works on language shift. In addition, I highlight the difficulty of comparing different generations when the social context of a language is in flux. At the same time, micro-interactional and ethnographic work indicates the multitude of complex discourse, ideological, and emotional factors and generational differences which contribute to code choice among individuals. It is likely that in this current context of language revitalisation as well as language shift, the 'expected' direction of structural change might be slowed or redirected altogether. This emerging body of research in Gaelic sociolinguistics is thus able to make an important contribution to understandings of dynamics of change and language choice in a variety of sociolinguistic contexts.

What is the future of Gaelic?

Finally, here I consider future prospects for Gaelic in light of the sociolinguistic context and research discussed so far. Despite historical persecution and minoritisation, decades of activism has led to important steps forward in the Gaelic revitalisation movement. Major legislation in 2005 and 2025 language acts have provided some structure to language planning and led to specific targets and strategy for revitalisation. Recognition of Gaelic in 2025 as an 'official' language of Scotland has not yet led to any substantial increase in allocated resources but does represent a huge symbolic step forward for Gaelic's position in national culture and heritage.

In some respects, the revitalisation of Gaelic is increasingly successful: speaker numbers on the 2022 Census increased. Although these self-declared speakers represent a proficiency continuum, it is clear that attitudes and awareness of Gaelic are changing and have resulted in some increased declarations of speakerhood. In

addition, the expansion of Gaelic Medium Education across Scotland can be seen as a positive story. For example, in Glasgow there are now three stand-alone Gaelic primary schools as well as the Gaelic Medium secondary school. However, at the same time, progress in GME expansion is slow and there is demand for increased provision in many areas. A concrete right to Gaelic Medium would allow expanding the offer in line with parental demand in the future.

The language use and abilities of child Gaelic speakers as well as adults in traditional and urban communities have now been the subject of multiple detailed analyses of linguistic use. The results demonstrate that changing social context and ideologies of language revitalisation in comparison to when classical sociolinguistic research was conducted in the 1980s. Where perhaps the literature would lead us to expect widespread reduction in structures and loss of phonemic contrast, this is not always the case. In addition, micro-analysis of code-switching indicates that Gaelic users deploy linguistic resources as competent multilinguals, rather than necessarily relying on one or other dominant language.

Within many traditionally strongly Gaelic-speaking areas it is clear that the community language is gradually shifting to English in many domains including private family settings, religious use, and official use. Education is a clear exception as well as provision for Gaelic medium activities and spaces dedicated to Gaelic both online and offline. One highly positive step in this respect is the shift to enrolling pupils in the Western Isles in Gaelic Medium Education by default. However, other domains show a trend towards greater proportions of English use. However, this is of course not a simple and straightforward one-way trajectory to English monolingualism, rather a re-organisation of the social position and use of Gaelic. At the same time, Gaelic is growing and thriving in new locations such as Edinburgh and building institutional presence in Canada. In this sense, the classic metaphor of language ‘death’ does not fit Gaelic: there is no indication that Gaelic will cease to be spoken. The nature of community structure and the identity of speakers is changing but not ending.

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[i] The datasets for plots with census data were obtained from the following sources:

- Gaelic census data from https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk.
- Civil parish shape files and codes from https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/geography/our-products/other-national-records-of-scotland-nrs-geographies-datasets/civil-parishes.
- Local Authority shape files from https://www.data.gov.uk/dataset/8e3a4564-8081-42ec-8772-03ade11d4acf/local-authority-boundaries-scotland1.
- Scotland outline shape file from https://datashare.ed.ac.uk/handle/10283/2409.

[ii] Note these data are plotted by Local Authority rather than parish. This is to give an aggregated picture but also because many areas increased from zero, therefore making a calculation of percent growth non-sensical.

[iii] Data on GME provision are from https://www.parant.org.uk/gme-provision.

[iv] Data are from https://www.gov.scot/publications/pupil-census-supplementary-statistics/.

[v] Data on early years Gaelic provision from https://www.parant.org.uk/test-for-menus and information on school websites available through https://www.parant.org.uk/gme-provision.