

A STRATEGY FOR SCOTLAND'S LANGUAGES: CONSULTATION

A response to the draft consultation document

The publication of this draft version for consultation represents a very welcome development in public policy for language in Scotland. The earlier McGugan Report (1) was a landmark document in drawing together disparate policy initiatives in the field of public provisions and policies for various languages in Scottish life and education under a comprehensive banner of policy for language. This had long been called for both at Scottish and UK levels, as had attention to our indigenous and ethnic minority languages, and to British Sign Language as an indigenous minority language in its own right. (2) The present initiative seem to be the response to McGugan, and to other voices (my own included), which have long sought a comprehensive policy for language in Scotland, and positive action in support of Scotland's languages.

The thinking underlying this document marks a major step forward. The view is very much to be welcomed that sees language as an important aspect of cultural or societal diversity, deserving to be respected, cherished and promoted. Scotland is recognised as a multilingual country, and the document unequivocally acknowledges Gaelic as an official language of the land.

The especial virtue of this document is probably in marking baselines from which policies start. For the most part the various initiatives which this document identifies are already extant and in existence. The virtue lies in associating them together, and in pointing forwards to policy development which must surely come if the objectives are to be achieved.

For these reasons, this commentator is able readily to agree with the questions 1 – 3 under Public Consultation: reasons for promoting and learning language on pp. 4 – 5; the initiatives on pp. 6 – 12 etc., as key areas for language promotion; and the key principles on pp. 14 – 15 as shaping language activity. In response to Question 4: (concerning other comments), my further points are discussed below. In response to Question 5 (on personal contribution), I forward papers and research studies of my own in these areas, and am very happy to contribute research experience in these areas in support of this initiative.

I comment in detail on various points in the text as follows:-

Executive Summary

I draw attention to the different wordings regarding Gaelic and Scots, namely,

- That the Gaelic language will be protected and promoted, and
- That the Scots language will be treated with respect and pride.

This raises several points. The basis of official status of Gaelic under the Act of 2005 is the principle of equal respect with English. Does the above wording mean that Scots is also to be regarded as an official language in like manner? Is Scots not to be 'protected and promoted' because it is not seen as a threatened language? It is

threatened – even if in ways different to Gaelic. As an *ausbau* language it is even more threatened with accommodation and assimilation with English, as its distinctive lexis and syntax drop out of use, and as accents increasingly anglicize. These realities need to be appreciated at official levels.

Introduction

The first paragraph lists the languages with which the document is concerned. Whereas here the principal concern is with recognition of these cases, here or elsewhere it would be useful to have some account of the size, numbers of speakers and users, etc. With the exception of Gaelic, there are in fact no readily-available data on numbers, and as a basis to policymaking, it would be appropriate for fundamental research on these matters of fact to be undertaken. There is later an estimate of numbers of BLS users, based on numbers of born deaf (especially as result of maternal rubella). In 1994 I undertook an estimation of ethnic-minority language speakers based on 1991 census data of country of birth of heads of households and numbers in their families. (3) This now needs to be updated to 2001 census data. In both cases however these estimations clearly need to be replaced by actual numbers, and this would require specific questions in the population census.

I was a member of the 2001 Census sub-committee on census questions and question content. Together with Bencie Woll (a specialist in deaf languages, now at University College, London), I tried to get a census question on deaf languages, especially BSL, and ethnic-minority languages. (4) The official answer was that there was no demand for such questions from English local authorities. However, there is now a Scottish Executive and it should have a more powerful voice. There was also an estimation exercise on Scots carried out by Ian Maté of Census Customer Services (5) This too now clearly shows the need of a census question as such.

Paragraph 5 refers to the responsibility for other world languages with their roots now in Scotland. The point is made that these languages will derive their main support from communities outwith Scotland. This may be to duck responsibility for legitimate support for such languages within Scotland. Experience with our own indigenous languages clearly demonstrates that the realities of modern life: marriage and family formation across language groups means that without supports outwith the family, family members will shift to English and the original family languages will be lost. The experience of Gaelic-medium education and Gaelic as second language in education might readily be sought in similar provisions for other languages.

If as this document later discusses, it is valuable to have bilingual native speakers of other world languages within Scottish society, this will quickly cease to be unless positive steps are taken. My own experience teaching minority-language students, and supervising many research dissertations on the language situation within their own communities and families, has indicated to me that language-shift to English is happening with increasing rapidity. The third generation in the UK becomes English monoglot. For some this may be seen as a positive indication of assimilation. It is not however true integration, and it also indicates an acute cultural and economic loss. Again we have no true idea of the numbers and distributions of the speakers of such languages and the basic research needs to be done.

Rationale

The first paragraph speaks of 'enriching education' with Scotland's languages. This is an opportunity for inclusion in *3-18 A Curriculum for Excellence*. Hopefully joined-up government will 'kick in' here.

Promoting respect and confidence

'The languages that are used in Scotland should be valued and respected.' The principle of equal respect was the basis for official recognition in the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act of 2005. Will this be extended to Scots, BSL and maybe other languages also?

Facilitating access and inclusion

'...ensure that language does not become a barrier..' One might likewise add 'ignorance about language'.

Increasing economic opportunity

'...a wide language base is a valuable resource.... Agreed. The point is however, how to maintain and extend it. These languages will not maintain themselves in the family alone and unaided. Marriage, family formation and processes of assimilation will see to that, unless there are effective supports outwith the family in education and access to multilingual media.

Enriching education

Language education also implies education about language and language awareness. In monolingual contexts this type of thinking is poorly developed and education and the curriculum do not do a great deal to foster it. In bilingual and second language learning contexts there is a practical basis for such metalinguistic awareness to develop and to be promoted. The various language-related initiatives in Scottish schools marks a way forward. It would be good for all children to develop an appreciation of language in national, community and global contexts as part of their school experience. It would be good too for children's own home and community languages to be fostered by their schooling. It would support this principle if ethnic-minority background children were able to study their own home languages as one of their languages of education. It would also be likewise supportive if all our children could be given an appreciation of our own national languages: Gaelic, Scots and Scottish English in our national culture and history.

Gaelic

This is the most developed of the document's strategy areas. It notes that Gaelic is still alive and an official language of Scotland. The section notes the various recent developments which have enhanced these aspects, most importantly: legislation, official recognition, Gaelic medium education, the establishment of Bòrd na Gàidhlig, and improvements in teacher education and supply.

These are all tremendously important steps forward from the situation only 20-30 years ago. However, by themselves as presently constituted they cannot sustain the language as a living community language for very much longer. It can however be shown that these measures have had an effect. This has been more in terms of slowing down the rate of attrition of numbers of speakers, rather than of arresting the process and reversing it – as has occurred for Welsh in Wales. This document does not seem to appreciate the nature of these processes, nor to have an evidential basis whereby they can be measured and evaluated.

Policymakers at local and national levels do not seem adequately to appreciate that the Gaelic language group is now in acute demographic crisis. Marriage and family-formation is increasingly taking place across the ‘language-line’. In 1991 one in three Gaelic speakers lived in a family all of whose members spoke Gaelic. By 2001 this had dropped to one in five. In 2001 there were 13,906 households in Scotland with Gaelic-speaking adults, and only 5,126 cases where all adults were Gaelic-speaking (- or 36.9 %.) Today that is probably appreciably less – and will result in even further diminished numbers of speakers in the 2011 census.

Without powerful supports outwith the family in education, the community, and the media, the potential to transmit the language to an oncoming generation will not be achieved. Between 1991 – 2001, and probably as the result of Gaelic-medium education, the number of children of primary and secondary school age increased by about 4-5%. We do not know what increase if any has occurred since then because our schools census does not collect data on Gaelic-speaking ability *as such* of all children in Scottish schools, only numbers in GME and Gaelic classes. This is not the same thing, and this does not seem to be realised. This increase in numbers of Gaelic speakers of primary and secondary school age, although welcome, does not go far in overcoming the net annual loss of Gaelic speakers. This was around 733 per annum between 1991-2001, and would require at least that number *in every school year* of Gaelic-medium or fluent Gaelic preschool, primary and secondary education to overcome it.

It will be clear from this brief discussion that policymaking on Gaelic needs to be informed by basic relevant research which informs, guides and underlies the whole process of policymaking and strategies for the language. Until that occurs policymaking will be a hit-and-miss affair, targets will be unrealistic and unrelated to anything in particular, and little more than ballpark figures. Agencies will for the most part be working in the dark.

British Sign Language

Our recognition of the importance of BSL and provisions for it here in Scotland is envied by institutions concerned with the Deaf Community south of the Border. The size of the BSL-using community in the UK and in Scotland is based upon medical statistics for the incidence of deafness from birth (e.g. resulting from rubella in pregnancy). Proper statistics on the incidence and use of BSL are long overdue, and this needs to be included as a census question in 2011. The Scottish Executive have the powers to require this to be done in our own census by GROS. Now is the time to do this for 2011. Similarly we should have research studies of the Deaf Community and BSL from a Scottish perspective, and these need to be commissioned from

relevant agencies, to take further the research initiatives on access and training reported here. This will need to be the basis for any realistic language-planning for the Deaf Community and BSL-users.

Other Minority / Community languages

The strategy notes that speakers of such languages should be able to continue to develop their skills. This implies a place for such languages in schools serving these communities. Acquisition of English in an EAL and ESOL context is important. This is going to happen in any event as integration into host society takes place. What is not so likely to happen is maintenance of these languages into the second and third generation. A process of language-loss and shift to English is in full swing – very comparable in fact to what is happening for Gaelic. Unless these processes are understood, even those who might wish to maintain their languages in a bilingual / multilingual context, come to realise that it is not happening. Then we lose what this document identifies as valuable cultural, community and economic assets.

So far very little research is investigating these matters, and there is not a very well-developed apparatus for representing ethnic-minority language issues, in comparison with Gaelic or Scots.

Language Learning,

The Eurobarometer study (2006) was undertaken in the context of EU member-states. It is not at all clear how the Scottish population compares in ability in other European and world languages. Neither do we know whether Scotland is better or worse than the rest of the UK. It would not be at all difficult for such information to be forthcoming, either from questions on our own national population census, or from Scottish household, social attitudes, opportunity or manpower and labour force surveys. It would be a relatively simple matter of the Scottish Executive instructing that such questions be put, and arranging that the data be analysed and reported.

The draft *3 –18 Curriculum for Excellence* seems to hold out the opportunity for other world and EU languages to feature in Scottish schools. A strategy is needed to enable these aims to be realised.

Key Principles

These represent highly desirable societal objectives. As with many such statements, there needs to be detailed strategic thinking unless they remain as a highly desirable wish-list, for example concerning provisions for the Gaelic language.

‘The Gaelic language will be protected and promoted.’ If the Gaelic language is to ‘thrive within Scotland’, there needs to be a strategy for sustainability. This seems so far to be unappreciated by policymakers at Executive, Bòrd and local levels. The provision of Gaelic classes, encouragement of adult learners, disbursement of funds to Gaelic organisations and initiatives, or provision of Gaelic education, etc, etc., will not in themselves bring this about unless there is a strategised approach based on appropriate basic research.

The Gaelic language group is in acute demographic imbalance, and will not become a self-sustaining and self-reproducing entity until this fact is properly realised by policy-makers at national and local levels, and measures taken accordingly. The basic research on what is going on at household and family level has not yet been undertaken. Nobody knows what motivates Gaelic speakers to use their language or abandon it, or Gaelic parents to pass on the language to their children – or not. Until this work is done, the Gaelic speech-community will continue rapidly to diminish, whatever else money is spent on in support of the language. There is a priority for motivational, attitudinal and psycholinguistic research which has so far not been attempted. This research then needs to be applied through initiatives within and in support of Gaelic in the family.

Gaelic-medium education is one of the most important supports for the reproduction of the language outwith the family. This needs to be the second priority. At present it is not functioning at anything like the level which will enable the children of the next generation to reproduce their parental or family language adequately. Scotland is a highly mobile society (over 11% move home annually – and Gaelic speakers are now as mobile as anyone else.) The implications of this are in marriage across the language-line, and an increasingly dispersed speech-community. How will provisions for Gaelic in education be made on a Scotland-wide basis? There will need to be an appropriate strategy.

Public Consultation

The document ends with a final question, ‘How do you think you may be able to contribute to the success of the strategy?’

I have been involved in research into Gaelic and other lesser-used language communities over 35 years, and feel that I am able to bring a uniquely-informed research perspective on to these issues. I am very happy to contribute any research which I have undertaken to this end, and also to act as a research consultant on appropriate aspects of current policy and practice. I have contributed such research to the Macpherson Task Force (6), and to the McGugan Inquiry and Report into Scotland’s Languages. I have been a member (for language planning and research) on the Ministerial Action Group for Gaelic (MAGOG), and the first Bòrd na Gàidhlig (whose research sub-committee I chaired). I have subsequently been employed by the Bòrd as Research Consultant for Language Strategy, reviewing and analysing the public consultation on the National Plan for Gaelic, and advising on Targets and ‘Triggers’. I would be very happy to act in any such a capacity for the present initiative.

Summary of Recommendations

- Recognise Scots in similar terms to Gaelic.
- Parity of policy provisions between Scots and Gaelic.
- Census questions on Scots, BSL, and ethnic-minority languages.
- Support for ethnic-minority languages in family, education and media.

- Research on ethnic-minority languages: numbers and maintenance.
- Equal respect for all Scottish language: Scottish English, Gaelic, Scots, ethnic-minority languages , and deaf languages.
- Need for research into incidence of EU and world language abilities in the Scottish population.
- Use of Scottish governmental social surveys for language questions
- Need for Gaelic language strategy to be based upon research.
- Gaelic language-group in demographic crisis – urgent need for motivational, attitudinal and psycholinguistic research.
- Need for GME to function at level to overcome net annual loss of speakers.

Ken MacKinnon

19th. February 2007

Professor Kenneth MacKinnon
SGRÙD Research;
Honorary Professor: Celtic / Language Planning,
University of Aberdeen.

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- 5) Maté, Ian. (1996) *Scots Language Research Report* (1996). Edinburgh: Census Customer Services, General Register Office for Scotland.
- 6) Macpherson, John A. (ed.) (2000) *Revitalising Gaelic – a National Asset* (The Macpherson Task Force Report). Edinburgh: Scottish Executive. ISBN 1-84268- 025-0

An cois seo gheibh sibh na beachdan a chuir an t-Ollamh Coinneach MacFhionghuin chun an Riaghaltais an lùib na co-chomhairle air an Ro-innleachd Chànanan aca.

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Public Consultation

The document ends with a final question, 'How do you think you may be able to contribute to the success of the strategy?'

I have been involved in research into Gaelic and other lesser-used language communities over 35 years, and feel that I am able to bring a uniquely-informed research perspective on to these issues. I am very happy to contribute any research which I have undertaken to this end, and also to act as a research consultant on appropriate aspects of current policy and practice. I have contributed such research to the Macpherson Task Force (6), and to the McGugan Inquiry and Report into Scotland's Languages. I have been a member (for language planning and research) on the Ministerial Action Group for Gaelic (MAGOG), and the first Bòrd na Gàidhlig (whose research sub-committee I chaired). I have subsequently been employed by the Bòrd as Research Consultant for Language Strategy, reviewing and analysing the public consultation on the National Plan for Gaelic, and advising on Targets and 'Triggers'. I would be very happy to act in any such a capacity for the present initiative.

Summary of Recommendations

Recognise Scots in similar terms to Gaelic.

Parity of policy provisions between Scots and Gaelic.

Census questions on Scots, BSL, and ethnic-minority languages.

Support for ethnic-minority languages in family, education and media.

Research on ethnic-minority languages: numbers and maintenance.

Equal respect for all Scottish language: Scottish English, Gaelic, Scots, ethnic-minority languages , and deaf languages.

Need for research into incidence of EU and world language abilities in the Scottish population.

Use of Scottish governmental social surveys for language questions

Need for Gaelic language strategy to be based upon research.

Gaelic language-group in demographic crisis – urgent need for motivational, attitudinal and psycholinguistic research.

Need for GME to function at level to overcome net annual loss of speakers.

Ken
MacKinnon
19th February 2007

SGRÙD Research;
Honorary Professor: Celtic / Language Planning,
University of Aberdeen.

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