

SCOTTISH GAELIC IDENTITIES: CONTEXTS AND CONTINGENCIES

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On September 27th 2004 the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill was introduced to the Scottish Parliament.¹ It is expected that the Bill, given the overwhelming cross-party support to secure the status of Gaelic in Scotland, will be enacted by the summer of 2005.² In some respects, then, this law will be the end of a long road for Scottish Gaelic. A 'Gaelic Renaissance' has been evolving in Scotland for several decades now, with the Gaelic language and culture becoming more celebrated and supported, acquiring an enhanced status and symbolic resonance. This renaissance does not strictly describe an organised or uniform movement; it better describes the emergence over time

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¹ See:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/bills/billsInProgress/gaelicLanguage.htm> for briefings on the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill. This Bill is Executive led and follows from a more limited Member's Bill for Gaelic that ran out of parliamentary time during the final months of the first session of the Scottish Parliament (1999-2003).

² *A Bill is enacted after a process of consultation involving 3 parliamentary stages from the introduction of the bill to its enactment; each stage culminates in a debate and vote in the main Chamber. The consultation process centres on the parliament's committee structure but there is a designated period for the submission of written evidence from the general public.*

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of a growing appreciation of indigenous culture (particularly since the 1960s, with the growth in identity politics and popularisation of ‘folk’ culture in western societies) and a parallel growth of Gaelic language activism in Scotland. This combination of activism with an enlivened awareness of local and national heritage has led to a greater sympathy for the Gaelic language, and subsequent revitalisation programmes have evoked and strengthened the concept of a Gaelic Renaissance. With roots in previous decades, a clear pattern of progress can be traced since the 1970s with the development of a bi-lingual education programme in the Western Isles and the establishment of a Gaelic College on Skye (*Sabhal Mòr Ostaig*); and especially from the 1980s with the creation of the first Gaelic development agency (*Comunn na Gàidhlig*), and the introduction of Gaelic-medium education; and then the initial growth of Gaelic television in the early 1990s (see Cormack 1994, 2004). Arguably, the most significant development of the 1990s was devolution for Scotland; subsequently, there has also been the formation of *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* – the new Gaelic development agency, effectively Scotland’s Gaelic language board, through which all Gaelic funding will be directed. Nevertheless, the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill and imminent Act would not have been so forthcoming if Scotland did not have its own parliament. As a concept and process, then, this renaissance has helped promote the development of interventions to revitalise the Gaelic language and culture, but within the historical dynamic of social, economic and political change in Scotland.³ So, within the context of change, ‘what identity or identities is Gaelic now articulating?’ (Macdonald 1999: 103).

RECLAIMING GAELIC

It has been discussed elsewhere that, in certain contexts, Gaelic has been symbolically appropriated (Chapman 1978) and politicised (Cormack 1994, Macdonald 1997) as a marker of the nation. In Edinburgh, the Scottish Parliament incorporates the Gaelic language in building signage, its publications and website, and by employing Gaelic parliamentary officers

³ *Not just change within the UK but the increased influence of Europe is also important; for example, the foundation of the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages in 1984 and the subsequent European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.*

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and interpretation facilities. Other national and local ‘gateways’⁴ also incorporate the language to some degree, largely via the Internet but also by other means of ‘signposting’ the language. In some respects this can be seen as a way of branding the nation but it also functions as a means of social inclusion, to provide for those who wish to use the language. The profile of the language, therefore, is set to increase further when the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill is enacted, with public bodies likely to be required to have plans in place for how they could or will make provision for Gaelic. Nevertheless, the place of Gaelic in Scotland is ambiguous: it is presented as a national language, yet has struggled to gain official status; it is often alluded to in public displays and exhibitions of the nation or the local, yet Gaelic is not the language of common usage in the public domain; and despite all the developments, the 2001 Census recordings reported the continuing decline in the crude numbers of Gaelic speakers – a paradox of the renaissance that has been highlighted before (Macdonald 1997, 1999; Rogerson and Gloyer 1995).⁵ This essay is not about this paradox but it would be misleading to suggest that this paradox is evidence of failure. Rather, my view is that such quantitative measures of success/failure do not adequately account for the unique dynamics of cultures, and minority cultures especially.

To a degree, then, the Gaelic language has been symbolically appropriated at a national level. However, a problem with this conceptualising is that it can, in different ways, imply assumptions of fixed borders and static cultures, giving rise to questions such as, *who does Gaelic belong to?* Given the ambiguity of Gaelic’s place in Scotland it becomes complicated to prescribe who the ‘insiders’ and who the ‘outsiders’ are, especially as the language is now promoted as Scotland’s language, whereas it was once considered bound by the domain of the Highlands (as opposed to the Lowlands). Gaelic is the language of the Gael, traditionally conceived of in Scotland as the

⁴ ‘Gateways’ for residents of Scotland or for tourists – BBC Scotland, the new National Parks, certain road signage, train stations, some tourist agencies, etc.

⁵ However, it is evident from the 2001 Census that the number of young speakers is now increasing, mainly due to increased numbers learning Gaelic in Gaelic-medium education. Nevertheless, there remains the problem that overall numbers are still in decline, emphasising further the significance of young people to the future of Gaelic.

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Highlander and the Hebridean, the people from the *Gàidhealtachd*,⁶ at least by heritage and culture if not by location.⁷ Although it has not disappeared, this quasi-ethnic concept of the Gael has weakened considerably during the period of the 'renaissance', partly because of a nationalising of the language but also because the majority of people living in the traditional *Gàidhealtachd* no longer speak Gaelic. Also, borders are not fixed and from the past two Census recordings (1991, 2001) it has become apparent that approximately 45% of Gaelic speakers now live outside the traditional *Gàidhealtachd*, with significant concentrations in the urban central-belt of Lowland Scotland. There are historical, social and economic reasons for this but the bounded concept of the traditional *Gàidhealtachd* has become weakened, as an equivalent number of Gaelic speakers now construct and maintain their identities in more metropolitan, non-traditional locations. This diversification is augmented by the national development of Gaelic-medium education, with its inclusion of children from homes with no Gaelic. For example, Scotland's only official all-Gaelic primary school is to be found in urban Glasgow (soon to be incorporated within an all-Gaelic campus for pre-school through to secondary school), and the majority of pupils attending Gaelic-medium in Glasgow come from homes where Gaelic is not spoken or used. With regard to adult learners, people even come from beyond the borders of Scotland and learn the language, become activists even. For an endangered language these are good things for revitalisation prospects, but it is also difficult to know who is the 'outsider' and who is the 'insider' in terms of claiming the language and culture, creating divergence in some quarters between some traditional native speakers and some Gaelic learners, although this should not be overstated. Nevertheless, the idea of 'native' Gaels belonging to a particular space, a bounded *Gàidhealtachd* (as Scots belong to Scotland, etc.) is problematic. In fact, the idea of 'the native' or 'nativeness' in Gaelic issues is generally flagged in association with linguistic acquisition and ability, but the ascription 'native-speaker' is now

⁶ The *Gàidhealtachd* is traditionally the area conceived of as the Highlands and Islands (excluding the Orkney and Shetland islands). It can also mean Gaelic-speaking areas, or the general Gaelic-speaking 'community'. In emphasising the *Gàidhealtachd* and Scottish Gaelic I do not forget Irish Gaelic or the Irish Gael; rather, that is another context.

⁷ See Withers (1998) for analysis of the migration of Gaelic speaking Highlanders to the urban centres of Scotland between 1700 and 1900.

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giving way to the notion of the 'fluent speaker', and although this still has connotations of authority and authenticity, quasi-ethnic notions are becoming attenuated. This is not an issue that particularly concerns Gaelic activists as it reflects inclusiveness; neither is it an important issue in itself, cultures being dynamic. I merely highlight it to emphasise an apparent shift in the public image of Gaelic as a marker of a particular traditional culture, of localness and of 'community' (*Gemeinschaft*), to become a more complex and dynamic symbol of nation, inclusiveness and 'society' (*Gesellschaft*).⁸ This shift is not uncontested or unidirectional but is part of the 'internal-external dialectic between self-image and public image' (Jenkins 1996, p.22) in identity negotiations. However, it is a public image shift that aids Gaelic's profile and revitalisation, emphasising that Gaelic belongs to all of Scotland and not just the traditional *Gàidhealtachd*; and it presents a subtle means of accessing and promoting difference through the notion of belonging.

In a particular sense, then, Gaelic has become politicised, broadening its national appeal and undermining perceptions of it as a marginal culture. However, the Gaelic Renaissance is not something that the majority of the population of Scotland (or Gaelic Speakers) are necessarily conscious of or party to, but through the combined efforts of groups of language loyalists and activists an effective force for change has emerged in the face of language decline. The end product has been an increased awareness of a 'Gaelic Renaissance'. In retrospect, there are shades of the chicken and egg argument: is investment a result of this renaissance, or vice versa? Has the language moved into the public domain because it has been politicised or has it become more *politic* to support Gaelic because it has become more visible in the public domain? Moot points. There has certainly been a mutual dynamic. Which brings us back to the question – what identities is Gaelic now articulating?

⁸ *The sociological dichotomies, **Gemeinschaft** and **Gesellschaft**, normally represent the dichotomies of Community and Society, Private and Public, Traditional and Modern, respectively. They originate from the sociological theory of Ferdinand Tönnies (1955 [1887]), who argued that there are two types of social group: one is perceived to be organic, where membership is self-fulfilling (**Gemeinschaft**), whilst the other is perceived to be artificial where membership is sustained more by instrumental reasons (**Gesellschaft**).*

A QUALITATIVE FOCUS

Most of the important qualitative social research on Gaelic in Scotland has taken the form of monographs of community life in the *Gàidhealtachd*, and is largely based on experiences from at least twenty years ago (Dorian 1981, Ennew 1980, Macdonald 1997, MacKinnon 1977, Parman 1990). I do not highlight this to devalue these texts in any way but to emphasise that social contexts change, and the position of Gaelic in Scotland has continued to change in that time. This is especially significant in its visible shift from the preserve of relatively private and localised domains of use (the otherwise predictable domains of use for a language in decline) to a language that is now promoted in the public domain. More recently, however, social research on Gaelic has not tended to have an overt qualitative focus, and the most visible research tends to have a quantitative focus (e.g. with a focus on Census figures, classroom numbers).⁹

In his book **Language, Society and Identity**, sociolinguist John Edwards called for more research to be carried out on minority cultures, engaging with the ‘perceptions of ordinary group members’ (Edwards 1985, p.170). Whilst the notion of ‘ordinary’ is problematic, Edwards’s emphasis on the subjective and qualitative is important. And in the Scottish Gaelic context, a similar call for more qualitative work was made when Rogerson and Gloyer (1995) called for a definition of cultural identity, ‘based on a perspective from within the group’ (p.52). I do not think it is helpful to prescribe a cultural identity, but, in context, the spirit of their paper is that quantitative accounts only tell us so much; for example, statistics do not adequately reveal what being a ‘Gaelic speaker’ actually means to people, nor do they reveal how the Gaelic language interfaces with peoples’ identities. Therefore, reflecting on the cited appeals for qualitative research, I contend there has been a shortage of such analysis in the case of Scottish Gaelic, especially given the increased public profile of the language.

⁹ *Some recent research with a qualitative element is MacNeil and Stradling (2000) and Stockdale et al (2003). Such research is often not very visible, as it may be published within academic disciplines, or is produced for organisations with no scope for public dissemination. However, more research is forthcoming, as recently demonstrated at a conference for research on Gaelic (Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 3, University of Edinburgh, 2004). For a bibliography of some Gaelic research see: www.arts.ed.ac.uk/celtic/poileasaidh/gaelbib.html*

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Edwards called particularly for the study of culturally ‘symbolic and non-symbolic markers, and their perceived role in identity continuation’ (1985, p.170). This article brings together interviews with young people, using the Gaelic language as a symbolic marker and Gaelic-medium schools as a non-symbolic marker (the research setting),¹⁰ providing a problematised context (McCrone et al 1998) where Gaelic identities are potentially more explicitly confronted and imagined. In this context, an analysis of interviews with young people is broadened to encompass not just fluent Gaelic speakers but young people who have no Gaelic and those who are learners. This inclusion of non-Gaelic speaking informants is important as a means of comparison in light of Gaelic’s apparent shift into the public domain, but also because it should not be assumed that ‘cultural identity’ is predicated on language (Edwards 1985, p.159).

THE RESEARCH

Briefly, Gaelic-medium education has been the most significant development in efforts to revitalise the language in Scotland. The first two official Gaelic-medium classes opened in 1985 in Inverness and Glasgow, and Gaelic-medium classes are now found throughout much of the Highlands and Islands and in places beyond. Yearly figures vary but 2889 young people were engaged in Gaelic-medium education (nursery, primary and secondary) in 2003/04. The vast majority of these young people are at nursery and primary school level but there are currently 15 secondary units catering for a national total of some 300 students each year. It should be noted that all the secondary school streams of Gaelic-medium education are currently situated within mainstream English-medium schools.¹¹ This creates an interesting dynamic for both the Gaelic-medium and the English-medium pupils. I focus on young people in both streams in secondary schools because they are the generation that will potentially carry the language forward, and also because their articulations may best represent any new and changing conceptions of language and culture in Scotland. To further emphasise the dynamic, and

¹⁰ *Of course Gaelic-medium education is itself symbolic of the improved status of Gaelic. Politicians and activists will sometimes refer to it as a symbol of progress and the normalisation of the language, representing Gaelic’s shift to the public domain; however, Gaelic-medium, per se, is not necessarily symbolic of Gaelic and its culture.*

¹¹ *The new all-Gaelic campus in Glasgow is not expected to open until 2006.*

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reflect the diversity of the Gaelic-speaking population, young people from both Glasgow and the Isle of Skye were interviewed, providing six main subsets within the research, three from each school (fluent speakers, learners, those with no Gaelic).

Informants were first interviewed in focus groups, to prime them for their individual interviews, where they would encounter the same open-ended questions (relating to identity in Scotland and perceptions of Gaelic), and it is hoped that responses are more reflexive and articulate as a result. The informants were all volunteers and were interviewed during school time, on school premises. A total of 45 informants were involved in my six focus groups, split according to language ability; therefore, volunteers were sought from Gaelic classes for both fluent Gaelic speakers and learners, and from private study classes for those with no Gaelic. The aim was to engage between six and eight in each group for ease of management in a restricted timetable, depending on volunteers; however, because of small class sizes and some reluctance from students to participate, all volunteers for each group were accommodated.¹²

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Firstly, all of the informants felt they were Scottish, and for the greater majority this was their primary national identity.¹³ The four core reasons given for Scottish identification were: birthplace, upbringing (encompassing residence), ancestry and culture. All these markers are fundamentally linked to 'place': place of birth, place of upbringing, place ancestors are from, and the culture of the place they identify with. Furthermore, two of these markers

¹² *Some students in Gaelic-medium schools in Skye and Glasgow are wary (weary?) of people coming into the school and asking questions, as they have been subject to various reporters and researchers interviewing them in recent times. Interviews, whatever the nature, are maybe all perceived to be the same and maybe too much hard work. In the case of the non-Gaelic speakers, many were reluctant to give up their private study time, for various reasons. The interviews were conducted in the first six months of 2000. For full details of the research see Oliver (2002).*

¹³ *38 from 45 – the other seven were conscious of competing identities, six said they were British and one said Irish. They all felt Scottish too but for various reasons were inclined to flag a competing identity.*

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are fixed (a person is born in only one place, as are cited ancestors), while two are more fluid (upbringing and culture), playing a more dynamic role in the construction of identities. This distinction between fluidity and fixedness reflects one of the ‘two key dimensions of identity markers’ (Kiely et al 2001, p.37). The other dimension is how accessible these markers are to ‘significant others’, pointing to the dynamic internal-external dialectic of identity negotiation (Jenkins 1996). I highlight this to emphasise the dynamic mobilisation of both fixed and fluid markers in identities, noting that seemingly ‘fixed’ markers are not monolithic but are subject to more fluid markers and reflexive negotiations, both by the internal self and the external ‘other’. So how does this map to the negotiation of Gaelic in identity claims? For example, in Gaelic’s apparent shift to the public domain in Scotland, can anyone be a Gael? Is the Gaelic language a fixed and monolithic marker of Gaelic identities? Or is its relevance as a marker contingent on other factors?

When making claims on national identity, the Gaelic language was rarely referred to by the informants, and even then usually in a very personalised or adjunct manner. Therefore, the issue of Gaelic identities had to be addressed more explicitly; informants were asked if they would call themselves a Gael,¹⁴ and asked what they thought a Gael was. Due to the nature of qualitative research and the constraints of space, and not least issues of repetition and readability, it is not practical to present detailed analysis of all 45 informants. However, Table 1 below helps to describe the profile of responses from the informants.

Table 1

Responses to question ‘would you call yourself a Gael?’, by informant’s language status

Are you a Gael?	All fluent speakers	All learners	All with no Gaelic	Total claims
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¹⁴ ‘Gael’ is a problematic and contested term; however, its very ambiguity makes it a useful touchstone in order to investigate if/how the informants make a connection between Gaelic and their identities, as opposed to asking if they have Gaelic identities, which may impose on them the idea that they should be making a connection between language and identity.

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Yes	11	0	0	11
Maybe	7	0	1	8
No	3	12	11	26
Column totals	21	12	12	45

At first glance there appears to be a clear division between the fluent speakers and the rest, as only fluent Gaelic speakers unreservedly claimed to be a Gael. However, there are more interesting profiles that stand out from the table: 3 fluent Gaelic speakers did not think themselves Gaels and a further 7 were unsure, revealing almost half of the fluent Gaelic speakers unable to claim outright to be a Gael; the other intriguing profile is the individual who had no Gaelic but made a partial claim to be a Gael. This would appear to suggest that the language-identity link is not so straightforward. So what or who is a 'Gael'?

In analysing the above identity claims, there is an apparent and assumed dichotomy of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in the young people's attempts to negotiate Gaelic identities. But who the insiders are is not always clear. A simplified instrumental perception of Gaelic identity might assume that a 'Gael' is someone (anyone?) who speaks Gaelic (this could be the equivalent of a 'native' concept where Gaels speak Gaelic¹⁵). However, the 'maybe' responses above suggest the issue is more problematic than that. But this is not a search to prescribe the 'native' or the 'authentic', and it is not suggested that there is some primordial Gaelic identity. It is an analysis of the articulations and negotiations of Gaelic in the identities of the informants. The fact that not all Gaelic speaking informants were comfortable with claiming to be a Gael, with some even turning the question on me, asking me what a Gael is, highlights the blurring of boundaries between 'Gaels' and 'non-Gaels'. This ambiguity, perhaps ambivalence, over Gaelic in identity

¹⁵ *This is the philosophy of some activists, most notably the concept of the New Gael (by which is meant those who are not traditional native speakers but those who have become Gaelic speakers as adults or through the new Gaelic-medium education system).*

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claims is interesting and it reflects the shifting ground for Gaelic, from private domains to public domains. To paraphrase Anthony Cohen, the Gaelic language as ‘the community’s public face is symbolically simple; but as the object of internal discourse, it is symbolically complex’ (Cohen 1986, p.13). The ‘community’, in this context, is also ambiguous, as it could be taken to mean the private domain of Gaelic speakers or the public domain of the nation. As with negotiations of national identity, then, where informants used different local, micro identities to mediate Scottish identities (see also Cohen 1982, p.13), negotiations of Gaelic identities are also dependent on the individual and their context.

SELF-ASCRIBED ‘GAELS’¹⁶

The analysis begins with the informant below, who makes one of the most assertive and what she may feel is an unassailable claim on being a Gael.

Somebody who speaks Gaelic and has been brought up with Gaelic and whose parents were Gaelic speakers, and from the Highlands too. (Fluent female, Skye)¹⁷

It is a claim based on language but it also displays contingency. Language competence alone, then, is not *the* marker of a Gael for this informant. She alludes to being a native-speaker (‘being brought up with Gaelic’) and having Gaelic-speaking parents to reinforce the claim on a Gaelic identity. This is further elaborated on with the reference to place (the Highlands, conceived of as the *Gàidhealtachd*). This reference to both language ability *and* being from the Highlands and Islands features most commonly amongst ‘Gaels’ from Skye, and ‘place’ appears integral to their negotiation of Gaelic identities. So much was this the case that other Skye ‘Gaels’ did not even mention Gaelic when they talked about being a Gael.

¹⁶ Henceforth the term *Gael* will sometimes be in inverted commas to highlight personified, self-ascribed ‘Gaels’.

¹⁷ Every interview extract in this article is from a different informant, however, all are designated in a similar way (language ability, gender, location) for clarity, replacing a more specific coding system.

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A person who lives in the Highlands and who has... eh, parents who've been born and brought up in the Highlands. (Fluent female, Skye)

Of course, the Gaelic language is potentially taken for granted amongst fluent speakers; nevertheless, a contingency is displayed here again with reference to the Highlands. This may relate to the informants knowing fellow Gaelic-speakers who are not originally from Skye or the Highlands. Nevertheless, contingency like this belies an implicit hierarchy in identity negotiations. This reference to language and place suggests an adherence to rather fixed markers of identity. But a language can be both learnt and lost, and 'place' can be represented by different locales and experiences, hence the contingencies often displayed in negotiating Gaelic identities.

It's just... speaking Gaelic, but you don't really have to speak Gaelic but I suppose it helps, and just being exposed to the typical Highland way of life, you know, like crofting, digging peat and all that... The community, the community way of things up here, you know. Get together to do things. I think that's a very Highland thing. (Fluent male, Skye)

Here, the role of 'place' is made more explicit, with an assertion that language is not so important (it has not been forgotten or taken for granted here). This reference to place is slightly different from a mere association with the Highlands, because there is an inference that the Gael is more rural, perhaps traditional (notions of *Gemeinschaft*). There is an emphasis on community and traditional work like crofting and digging peat, further suggesting that language is not necessarily the central pillar of identity for everyone who claims to be a Gael (c.f. Edwards 1985, p.159). The implication is that, for some, the negotiation of a Gaelic identity is more than just the acquisition of the most symbolic cultural element (language) of the Gaelic Renaissance. Of course, all these references to place point to a bounded ('ethnic'?) imagining of Gaelic identities, which differs from Gaelic's apparent shift to the public domain and a pronounced national imagining. But almost half of Gaelic speakers now live outside of the Highlands, with large concentrations in and around Glasgow. Nevertheless, another Skye informant suggests a Gael is:

...not really someone who lives in the city, someone who lives out in the country, in small communities. (Fluent female, Skye)

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So how do the Glasgow 'Gael' compare with the Skye 'Gael'? Most notably there actually is a similar pattern of association between being a Gael, the Highlands and the Gaelic language. Of course, the Glasgow respondents live in a different, urban context and consequently their Gaelic identity claims are largely based on language, but they do defer to the notion that Gaelic is not from the city. However, other contingencies are articulated, which often centre on family and the fact that they have relations who are/were from the Highlands. The following extracts demonstrate this:

A Gael is somebody that... speaks Gaelic... sometimes comes from... up north, like the Outer Hebrides... cause my family's from up there as well... (Fluent female, Glasgow)

Only cause of my parents though and where they're from. Well, I don't think people, I think Gaels are people that are more up north and speak a lot of Gaelic and use it a lot. (Fluent male, Glasgow)

During the Glasgow interviews, reference to, and emphasis on, language was more pronounced amongst self-ascribed Gaels than on Skye, displaying a consciousness of a discontinuity through their different invocations of the Highlands. I suggest this relates to their urban context; because they are removed from the traditional *Gàidhealtachd* area they do not have a sense of belonging to a Gaelic locale in the same way that the young people from Skye have. The Glasgow 'Gael' are clearly conscious of having a relationship with the traditional *Gàidhealtachd* (not least through historical narratives) but display their spatial distance by speaking of the Highlands and Islands as 'up north' and 'up there'. That spatial dimension is an important factor when considering differences between the identity claims of the young people in this study, because it symbolises more than just a physical gap to be bridged. Most of the young people from Glasgow, for example, considered Gaelic more relevant to the Highlands. Nevertheless, that does not (and should not) prevent young people from Glasgow claiming to be Gaels. Despite the fact that there is distance from the Highlands, the fluent speakers feel they have a legitimate claim on Gaelic identity, by virtue of language in particular but also through contingency and their marking of family heritage.

So, beyond appeals to language, the primary contingency is 'place' (nominally the Highlands and Islands, conceived of as the traditional *Gàidhealtachd*), which is negotiated through other contingencies like family heritage. Or through a sharing of culture:

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... I suppose it's really people from the Highlands but, like, I'm a Gael because I go to Ceilidhs and things like that... I'm into Gaelic stuff. Well I'm not really into it but I go to *Mòds* and whatever... (Fluent female, Glasgow)

The informant here cites participation in cultural events such as ceilidhs¹⁸ and the *Mòd*¹⁹ as evidence of being a Gael, further to language competence. This reference, as with the references to family above, acts as a contingency to compensate for not being from the Highlands, which she conceives as the domain of the Gael. Nevertheless, she appears to be claiming that a sharing in traditional culture is important to her personal claim to be a Gael. From the articulations of Gaelic identities, such references to sharing in a culture come the closest to representing Gaelic's apparent shift from the private to public domain.

On brief reflection, it emerges that the informants from both Skye and Glasgow generally understand Gaelic identities to be constructed through negotiations (some more metaphorical than others) of language and place, and perceive Gaelic to belong to the Highlands and Islands, despite perceptible shifts to the national and public domain (through education for example). However, language is a stronger single marker for those in Glasgow who wish to claim to be Gaels, largely because they are conscious of not being from the Highlands and are part of a different social context, perceived as a non-traditional, non-*Gàidhealtachd* place. This is especially clear when compared with some Skye 'Gaels' who do not appeal to language, but to place and community. It appears, then, as if there is an implicit hierarchy in negotiating Gaelic identities. But as discussed earlier, the idea that the authentic or 'native' Gael belongs to a bounded *Gàidhealtachd* is problematic, not least because almost half the population of Gaelic speakers now live outside the Highlands and Islands, but also because of the Gaelic Renaissance and a shifting of Gaelic from private and local to public and national (and beyond) domains. Therefore, claims on language ability as a fixed marker of Gaelic identities, or other perceived fixed markers like place

¹⁸ She means dances, as opposed to the traditional *ceilidh* (visit, gathering at house to sing, tell stories, gossip).

¹⁹ For those unfamiliar, the *Mòd* is an annual Gaelic cultural festival similar to the Welsh *Eisteddfod*.

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and community, are more ambiguous than might be imagined. Glasgow 'Gael's' may refer to discontinuous links with the traditional *Gàidhealtachd*, with notions of *Gemeinschaft* as a means of authenticating claims on Gaelic, but they are also part of a modern Gaelic-medium education 'community', and a broader, if diffuse, national Gaelic cultural 'community', reflecting not only Gaelic's shift to the public domain (and *Gesellschaft*) but a fluid *Gàidhealtachd* that does not have fixed margins (further reflecting *Gesellschaft*). Therefore, as a means of contingency to legitimise claims on the language amongst the informants, markers of family, heritage and culture for Glasgow 'Gael's' equate with claims on place and community from the Skye 'Gael's'. Nevertheless, as can be seen from the extracts, place and context inform identity negotiations; consequently, not all Gaelic speakers are unequivocal about being Gaels.

'MAYBE A GAEL'

When negotiating Scottish identities, all Gaelic-speaking informants found it an unproblematic claim. However, almost half of the fluent Gaelic speakers interviewed are unable to call themselves Gaels, or at the very least are unsure as to what a Gael is. Is this further evidence of Gaelic's shift from the private to public domain? If the young people, especially the Gaelic-speakers, find negotiating Gaelic identity more problematic than a Scottish identity does this mean that Gaelic identity is becoming less relevant for them, and that being Gaelic-speaking, as a micro or local identity, is subordinated as part of a Scottish identity? Certainly the following two fluent Gaelic speakers are bemused as to what a Gael is:

... I'm not really sure what a Gael is, like... do they originally come from, where is it? I can't remember. I'm not very sure. What is it? What is a Gael? (Fluent male, Skye)

I don't know... No one's really said a Gael is anything... (Fluent female, Skye)

These responses from fluent Gaelic-speakers clearly reflect a lack of acquaintance with the concept of the Gael. Other informants are more reflexive:

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... What would you mean by Gael, you know, because anybody can say that they're a Gael, or whatever, because they've got the language but, you know, someone can move in and they can start speaking Gaelic, probably wouldn't even be Scottish, probably from a European country, and they could class themselves as a Gael because they've got Gaelic.
(Fluent male, Skye)

This informant is reticent not just because of a lack of certainty as to what a Gael is but because he is aware it is a contested identity. He articulates this through the notion that 'anybody' might claim to be a Gael by simply learning Gaelic, thus complicating things. This reticence, then, contests the pre-eminence of language in Gaelic identity claims. It also reflects the deploying of contingency markers by self-ascribed Gaels. The informant here is from a Gaelic-speaking household, has Highland ancestry and has been brought up in the Highlands, but is hesitant in claiming to be a Gael. The perceived ambiguity of Gaelic identity is problematic for him to negotiate, and there is a tacit acknowledgement that there is a hierarchy of identity markers when claiming a Gaelic identity. So, as in the previous section, this takes us back to issues of perceived authenticity, and essentially this is at the root of the problematising of Gaelic identity, even for Gaelic speakers. This can be compared with the following 'maybe a Gael' informant who has no Gaelic.

Maybe in some situations, not in run of the mill conversation, 'oh, I'm a Gael'. I suppose I don't have the language. Maybe I don't have the right to call myself a Gael. I don't know. (No Gaelic, male, Skye)

This informant has little claim on the language but two personal factors appear significant to his 'maybe' claim: heritage conferred through his father, and living on Skye. So conceptions of place (again) and family are substitutes for language. However, in his ultimate equivocation, it may be that by asking people if they think that they are Gaels I have further problematised identity negotiations. 'In some situations', people can unproblematically imagine a Gaelic identity for themselves, when not expected to justify it.

As discussed in the previous section, fluent speakers in Glasgow focused on language because of their distance from the traditional *Gàidhealtachd*. This was evident in contingent claims on the Highlands, but the link to language was not so strong that all fluent speakers in Glasgow claimed to be Gaels:

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I don't know. That's quite hard because I'm surrounded by the Highland, Gaelic culture but you've still got, like, your clubs and all that, so I don't know. Sometimes you'd say, oh yeah, I'm a Gael, but then sometimes you're not... Eh, somebody that's involved with Gaelic a lot and somebody that's into folk music and goes on holiday to the Islands or stays in the Islands, perhaps, or just somebody not from the cities...
(Fluent male, Glasgow)

The quotation here displays an interesting dichotomy where the respondent is conscious of two culture contexts. A clash of cultures is perhaps what makes him reticent: his urban, modern, clubbing identity competing with a particular home life, immersed in traditional Highland, Gaelic culture: *Gesellschaft* meets *Gemeinschaft*. This again hints at assumptions of Gaelic belonging to a bounded *Gàidhealtachd*, especially through the reference to 'the Islands' over cities. A different example of an urban 'maybe' response highlights how the culture clash is represented across the generation gap too:

Somebody who... speaks Gaelic and lives in the Highlands, probably, but... sometimes I would and then other times I wouldn't. Like, if somebody asked me I'd probably say I wouldn't but, like, my mother would, like I call my mum, and everything, a Gael, but she lives here, but... Um, she probably classifies me as a Gael but I wouldn't myself.
(Fluent female, Glasgow)

Not unusually, there is the notion of the Gael as a Gaelic-speaking Highlander. However, in the negotiation of identity, the informant measures herself against her mother. Essentially, she perceives herself and where she has been brought up ('here' – Glasgow) to be less Gaelic than her mother's context of socialisation (Isle of Lewis). So despite her ability to speak Gaelic, Glasgow is not perceived to be as 'Gaelic' as the Highland context in which the mother was brought up. But she is also consciously reflexive of the fact that her mum, as 'a Gael', now lives in the city. This makes the informant equivocal about rejecting a claim to be a Gael.

As with all the examples given for 'Gael' and 'maybe Gaels', issues of language ability and Gaelic identity are contingent on other contextualised claims. There is the recurring inference from the extracts of the problem of hierarchy and authenticity, and the internal-external dialect of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Such evidence goes some way to demonstrating the fluid

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nature of the *Gàidhealtachd*, as represented by Gaelic's shift to the public domain.

'NOT A GAEL'- FLUENT SPEAKERS

The fact that there are fluent Gaelic speakers in this study who do not consider themselves Gaels is immediately interesting (which is not to say that Gaelic is not informing their identities). The three Gaelic speakers who did not claim to be Gaels were all from Skye, and they highlight the importance of local context.

Oh a Gael, I would say, is probably someone who's been brought up in the Highlands and speaks Gaelic, and whose parents speak Gaelic... I wouldn't really call myself a Gael but I wouldn't really call myself a Lowlander either... I haven't really got a very Highland accent. I've got a very mixed up accent and my parents, my mother's a semi-Glaswegian accent, my step-brother's got a very Glaswegian accent, so that sort of rubs off. (Fluent male Skye)

Again there is reference to place and language; however, the most interesting factor is the reference to accent (that is when speaking English!). This shows how local context impinges in identity negotiations, and highlights how family and heritage can also have a negative impact on claims to a Gaelic identity: where in-migrants live *in* a place yet still have a disconnectedness. Such is the premium placed on authenticity, and no less so in the local cultural context of somewhere traditionally conceived of as *Gàidhealtachd*. The two other Gaelic speakers who did not claim a Gaelic identity further exemplify this, flagging markers they cannot claim for themselves.

Someone whose parents and grandparents, or whatever, come from the Highlands and they've lived there for ages as well. (Fluent male, Skye)

Someone... brought up more in Gaelic culture and that speaks Gaelic as their main language. (Fluent male, Skye)

Being situated on Skye, then, has a particular impact on these informants' negotiations, where they have peers that they think are more Gaelic, who have a stronger connection to the locale. None of the three have two Gaelic speaking parents either, and so Gaelic is not such an important feature of

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home life. This is not an unusual consequence of Gaelic-medium education. And, as reported in other research (Stockdale et al 2003), in-migrants to the Highlands are more likely to send their children to Gaelic-medium education than native Highlanders (Gaelic speaking or not). Therefore, a perceived 'full-set' of identity markers is then imbued with more significance for them, especially as everyday use of Gaelic, outside of the classroom, has diminished in the local communities.

Interestingly, there are actually no denials of Gaelic identity from fluent Gaelic-speakers in the Glasgow school, despite some cases where Gaelic is not the language of both parents. However, at least one parent is a Gaelic speaker in all cases. As shown in the 'maybe Gael' cases, some informants are ambiguous about Gaelic identity, as they perceive an urban context to be somewhat incongruous with the Gaelic culture. But the relevance of locality and extra-linguistic markers do not appear as important in the context of Glasgow as they do in the context of Skye. One reason for this could be that the significance of language in Gaelic-medium units is a clear marker of both unity (with other Gaelic speakers) and difference (from mainstream Glasgow) for them, especially in the *Gesellschaft* context of an urban setting. In Skye, on the other hand, where there are many more students involved in Gaelic education, and many others with Highland heritages, the language is a less powerful marker of identity when competing with local histories and contexts.

'NOT A GAEL' – GAELIC LEARNERS AND THOSE WITH NO GAELIC

It is not surprising that the majority of 'not a Gael' responses come from informants who are not fluent Gaelic speakers. Amongst these informants there is a degree of uncertainty as to what a Gael is. Indeed, the fact that amongst Gaelic learners there is an admission of ignorance of the term 'Gael' suggests that the concept has regressed beyond even being a contested identity for some. However, there is still the recurrent association of the terms Gaels with the Gaelic language and the Highlands.

Probably someone who's fluent in Gaelic, or Gaelic was their first language, or something, and that was all they'd spoken and they'd learnt

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English later on, and they could hold conversations in Gaelic. (Female Gaelic learner, Skye)

I think that's somebody from the Highlands that... is pure into Gaelic in a big way and they're... fluent speakers, like... they're just from the Highlands really, like one of the islands. That's what I would call a Gael. (Female Gaelic learner, Glasgow)

Somebody who's fluent Gaelic... That's what I think it is anyway, a Gaelic person, a fluent Gaelic speaker... Born in Harris, wherever Gaelic places are. (Female Gaelic learner, Glasgow)

The reference to language fluency here emphasises the informants' contexts of not being so able to 'hold conversations in Gaelic'. A primacy is given to language and they feel they cannot claim to be Gaels. The extracts therefore reveal patterns that have emerged before, particularly on Skye, where informants have peers they deem to be more Gaelic, again raising issues of hierarchy and authenticity; and, amongst the Glasgow informants, discontinuity with the traditional *Gàidhealtachd* is also flagged, by the comment, 'wherever Gaelic places are'. Consistent with other informants though, there is no sense of irony displayed that the Gaelic-medium unit in the Glasgow school might be a 'Gaelic place'. There is a resistance to conceiving Gaelic as part of urban life and *Gesellschaft*.

So again, themes of contingency and context arise with regard to language, and there is the inference that a Gael is different, the 'other'. Continuing the theme of irony, on Skye this time, another contingency is used to ironically flag authenticity and express difference, notably the stereotype.

... the Gaelic speaking, sort of teuchy, sort of person. (Female Gaelic learner, Skye)

The word 'teuchy'²⁰ is a Scottish term that, in this context, invokes not just the traditional *Gàidhealtachd* and *Gemeinschaft*, but is a disparaging inference of a somewhat old-fashioned and backward Highland culture. The informant clearly perceives this to be different to her upbringing, and she

²⁰ The word 'teuchy' is derived from the word 'teuchter': see the *Scottish National Dictionary* (1976 [1931]) for a comprehensive etymology – c.f. Blaustein (2004).

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does not appear to have an affinity with the label 'Gael'. This is not unusual but further reflects the almost universal negotiation of Gaelic identities through language and place; and it further assumes the *Gàidhealtachd* to be bounded and insular. Such assumptions are based on local context, where informants from Glasgow perceive the *Gàidhealtachd* to be 'up there' and 'up north' (not urban Glasgow); but on Skye it is negotiated in more localised and qualitative ways, whilst also conceived as *not* urban, and by implication, in both settings, not *Gesellschaft*. This is further demonstrated below:

I think a Gael is somebody who's lived around here, the islands or the Highlands, and has the Gaelic language and just that kind of mentality, which would be, you know, kind of, they just want to stay here and guard their islands. (Male, no Gaelic, Skye)

... it might be a bit of a stereotype but I do think that a Gael is a teuchy, crofter type, you know... speaks a lot of Gaelic... they're probably 90-year-old grannies and that's about it, left of them. I don't think there's any proper Gaels left... You know, sort of very strict, Free Presbyterian background. No hanging out washing [*on Sunday*]. Speaking amongst friends in Gaelic and no other language. Taking very much interest in the livelihood of the Gaelic community, etc. (Male, no Gaelic, Skye)

These views present concepts of the Gael as very tied up with notions of *Gemeinschaft*, as traditional, old-fashioned and disappearing. The suggestion that there are no 'proper' Gaels remaining relegates the Gael to be a thing of the past, part of a culture from the past, and the second informant virtually lists cultural elements he considers to be vanishing. The other informant thinks of Gaels as only relevant to the Highlands and Islands, and the reference to a 'mentality' further implies a culturally bounded-ness. The implication is that both conceive of themselves as being modern and progressive, informed by *Gesellschaft*.

What persists over the course of this article is that language and place emerge as common markers in Gaelic identity negotiations but they are also variously imagined and contingent on context. Different opinions emerge from the traditional *Gàidhealtachd* context (Skye) that do not exactly match the opinions from the urban and not traditionally *Gàidhealtachd* context (Glasgow), and within these contexts are the micro-contexts of the informants.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON GAELIC IDENTITIES

The biggest problematic for the informants in this research is context: self versus the other: traditional versus the modern: *Gemeinschaft* versus *Gesellschaft*. This is particularly emphasised in negotiating a cultural identity that is embedded in the assumed boundedness of the traditional *Gàidhealtachd*. It is therefore useful to contrast this persistent notion with the context of the Gaelic Renaissance, a renaissance that has seen Gaelic symbolically unbounded and shift from the traditional, private and local domain to the inclusive public and national domain, where Gaelic is now promoted in school as a language for widening opportunities, not disparaged as an educational hindrance. However, analysis of the extracts above shows Gaelic identities may be waning or becoming less important. The fact that Gaelic identities are seemingly ambiguous suggests a fluidity reminiscent of Edwin Ardener's concept of 'hollow categories' (Ardener 1989): when Gaels are spoken of, no one is quite sure what one is and few claim to be one. But some people do still consider themselves to be Gaels, as is evidenced by this research. A major factor impacting on the seeming ambiguity of the term 'Gael' is the pervasiveness of *Gesellschaft* and Gaelic's shift from the private to public domain. With almost half the Gaelic-speaking informants ambiguous about a Gaelic identity it may be that Gaelic's apparent shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* has distanced the informants from traditional affiliations. Of course, almost half of the actual population of Gaelic speakers in Scotland are now situated outside the traditional *Gàidhealtachd*, but that is also a crude observation because modernity and *Gesellschaft* have permeated all geographies of Scottish cultural life.

Several related points emerge from this article. Despite Gaelic's apparent shift to the public domain and *Gesellschaft* (evident with Gaelic-medium education, the Gaelic media, in government and through some national 'signposts'), there persists the idea of a symbolically and culturally bounded *Gàidhealtachd*, with associated notions of the traditional, of *Gemeinschaft*, and rankings of the 'authentic'. Related to this is evidence from the interviews suggesting that the external and instrumental interpretation of Gaelic language competence (i.e. 'Gaelic speaker') as a marker of a cultural Gaelic identity is over-simplistic (Edwards 1985, Rogerson and Gloyer 1995); therefore, measures of the health of the Gaelic language should not be predicated on quantitative analysis alone, and localised contextual factors are potentially more relevant in perpetuating the language than ascribed language

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ability. Further related is the question of how much the evidenced contingencies of Gaelic identities are a symptom of, or contributor to, the decline of Gaelic-speaking areas?

As language revitalisation efforts continue, then, different identities are emerging. Young Gaelic speakers are more conscious of identities other than those traditionally associated with Gaelic-speaking communities. That being so, in a changing Scotland, the Gaelic language (and its cultures and identities) is now even more open to appropriation, as a symbolic 'marker' of being Scottish, or allegiance to Scotland. This may help strengthen Gaelic-medium education but it may not promote language use, or strengthen Gaelic identities. Ironically, Gaelic-medium education may now be acting as a substitute for the use of Gaelic at home for many young people. This is inevitably the short-term scenario for a revitalisation programme of an endangered language, where many of the young people in Gaelic-medium education do not have Gaelic-speaking parents. Nevertheless, the use of Gaelic outside of school, the classroom even, is low, as found amongst my informants and as reported elsewhere (MacNeil and Stradling 2000, McPake 2002, Stockdale *et al* 2003).

Actual language use, then, suggests a different imagining of Gaelic identities: despite the persistence of *Gemeinschaft* notions of the Gael, through consistent reference to the traditional *Gàidhealtachd*, many fluent Gaelic speakers do not use or have Gaelic at home, and are not using the language as a means of recreating *Gemeinschaft*, or to authenticate a primordial identity. Rather, Gaelic is used more pragmatically and instrumentally, as a part-element in the negotiation of *Gesellschaft*, the context where they are often using the language most (in Gaelic-medium education, with the teacher, thinking about career opportunities): hence the ambiguity of Gaelic identities. Of course that is not the case for all young Gaelic speakers. For some, Gaelic *is* part of home life and the re-creating of *Gemeinschaft*; and for some, attitudes to language will change when they leave school. However, the further growth hoped for in Gaelic-medium education will introduce more young people to Gaelic who do not have Gaelic at home, adding to the dynamic of Gaelic identities, identities that in increasingly complex social contexts are subject to multiple competing identities as young people become adults, weakening the prospects for the future everyday use of Gaelic by these people.

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Nevertheless, it is possible that Gaelic use can be strengthened and increased through the reimagining of Gaelic identities; and *vice versa* Gaelic identities will be revitalised and reimagined through the increased use of Gaelic. This would coincide with the normalisation of the language, with measures to build up everyday language use in community contexts, beyond the instrumental function of formal education structures and settings; where persisting notions of the traditional *Gàidhealtachd* would become more fluid, conceiving *Gesellschaft* as a dynamic and alternative context for maintaining Gaelic identities.

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