

RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE SURVIVAL AND GROWTH OF GAELIC LANGUAGE COMMUNITIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY: BACK TO THE FUTURE?

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Abstract

The survival of minority languages in a world dominated by major languages which impinge on them from all sides is often problematic today. In this paper we will explore the strong parallels between minority language groups and minority religious groups in Europe and in North America. Drawing on the successes of some religious groups in maintaining their distinct ways of life, we will ask what kind of personal commitment might be required to ensure the transmission of minority languages and cultures in Gaelic-speaking areas.

Background

Minority languages around the world are struggling to survive in a world dominated by major languages which impinge on them from all sides, especially through the mass media, through the Internet and through national educational systems. For example, in a country such as the Republic of Ireland where the minority language shares official status as a national language with

English, the position of Irish remains fragile, even in the areas where Irish is traditionally spoken. A similar fragility characterizes other Celtic languages such as Breton, where the demographic situation was far more favorable to the survival of the language at the turn of the twentieth century, but the language has subsequently experienced a dramatic decline.

This paper will focus on the problems faced by three language communities (in the widest sense) on the Gaelic side of the Celtic language divide: speakers of Irish Gaelic, of Scottish Gaelic and of Manx. In so doing, we will try to discern possible survival strategies for the broad Gaelic language areas in both Europe and in North America – strategies directed not only at the survival of the languages themselves, but also at the survival of the cultures which those languages transmit.

In so doing, we will make reference to the strong parallels between minority language groups and minority religious groups in Europe and in North America over the last 500 years and their efforts to keep and gain adherents on the one hand, and to maintain continuity of tradition (cultural integrity) on the other hand. This link between language and religion will not seem so strange if we recall the ever-present links between language, religion and nationalism in the modern history of Europe from the time of the Reformation onward.

The argument will be made here that, as is obvious from the case of Irish Gaelic in the Republic of Ireland, political change or a change in the legal status of a minority language is not enough to ensure its long-term survival in the environment of a powerful majority language. Thus, the frequent goal of nationalists to restore a suppressed or abandoned language to the status of a dominant language used over the whole of a territory occupied earlier by an ethnic group may founder in the absence of deeply felt need to use that language in the face of a more convenient language of wider communication.

In other words, a purely secular approach to the restoration of a minority

or regional language to its former status may founder in the absence of the zeal that characterizes the initial stages of nationalist movements. Thus, a much deeper personal commitment to the language and to the cultural heritage which is enshrined in the language – a commitment characteristic of minority religious groups – seems to be vital in this regard.

Such a commitment need not imply fanaticism or rigid conservatism in the transmission of the cultural heritage. In fact, the development of textual criticism in the examination of Biblical manuscripts by humanists from the time of Erasmus onward shows that a deep appreciation of a cultural heritage does not preclude open discussion of tradition or a multitude of interpretations of traditional beliefs and forms.

An attempt will be made in this paper to outline what kind of personal commitment might be required to ensure the transmission of minority languages and cultures in Gaelic-speaking areas, but to do that, we must travel back some 500 years, to Europe on the eve of the Reformation.

Sixteenth Century Europe: The Intellectual Ferment during Gutenberg's Revolution

The Europe of the early sixteenth century looks strangely like the Europe of today. It was a Europe of relatively fluid national boundaries within a loose overall unity – the Holy Roman Empire. This rather fluid, sprawling political unit was ruled – at least theoretically – by a secular ruler, the Holy Roman Emperor, who found himself in frequent conflict with a religious ruler, the Pope in Rome.¹ These two rulers represented twin powers claiming the allegiance of all citizens of the empire.

The main difference between the Europe of that time and the Europe of

¹ Or elsewhere! One must remember that there were as many as three individuals claiming to be Pope in the early fourteenth century, with each of them representing a different faction and residing in a different place in western Europe.

today is that though we have moved back to a political unity of Europe, we show no signs of moving toward a religious unity. The forces of humanism, the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, and often violent secular nationalism have rent the spiritual fabric of medieval Europe, and the rise of the ideologies of Soviet communism, fascism and German national socialism came close to obliterating what remained of the cultural landscape of medieval Europe.²

If we leave aside the complex issue of Spain, we would note two notably nationalist lumps in the Holy Roman stew – England and France. England, insular by definition, had recently reasserted its cultural identity by throwing off the Norman yoke, mainly by replacing the French language with English. Nevertheless, despite their own cultural experience, the English people saw no reason to recognize the right of their Celtic neighbors to any independent linguistic or cultural identity, and promptly stepped into the shoes of their Norman forebears in prosecuting wars of conquest in Scotland, Ireland and Wales over the next few centuries. In so doing, they deliberately assimilated Celtic ethnic groups to English language and culture as a matter of national policy.

France itself, reacting to wars of aggression by England on its own territory, instituted a similar highly centralized monarchy, and jealously guarded its national rights in the face of possible aggression from England or the Holy Roman Emperor. We can leave France aside at this point and turn back to Europe as a whole.

Two revolutionary things had happened in Europe in the previous century. First, Europe had been flooded with Greek manuscripts after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks, allowing both a far greater

understanding of the pre-Christian classical world and a far clearer look at the early manuscripts which formed the basis for the Latin Vulgate Bible. The humanist scholars began a major project – not only of re-envisioning the classical world, but also of examining far more closely the religious texts which formed the basis of the Latin Vulgate Bible.

Second, Johannes Gutenberg devised his revolutionary printing process utilizing moveable type to produce printed books, which allowed diffusion of both ancient texts and their translations as well as textual criticisms of both texts and translations, thus laying the groundwork for the Reformation.

These two developments produced an explosion of information and of discussion of that information, prefiguring with extraordinary accuracy the present Information Age, with the ubiquitous Internet and its bloggers. It is worth keeping these cultural (and linguistic) parallels in mind.

As we well know, the explosion of information led to religious explosions all over Europe. Religious reformers had long regretted the collusion of religious leaders with secular leaders, associated with the compromise made at the time of the Roman emperor Constantine, when the Catholic Church was effectively made the official religion of the Roman empire. The Anabaptists in particular sought to sever all religious ties to secular rulers, so that religious communities could function free of secular interference.

The Catholic religious leaders, on the other hand, sought to legitimize the compromise made with Constantine and to preserve the relationship with secular authorities, who were seen as the secular arm of the Church, both together making up the Christian Commonwealth.

The main Protestant leaders, however, reacting to both the oppression of the Papacy and its Holy Roman arm and to the revolutionary program – both secular and religious – of the Anabaptists, made their own secular compromises, relying on the support of local princes and of free cities of the empire in order to carry out their reforms.

² This account of events in Europe of the Reformation era is based heavily on MacCulloch (2003), which provides a detailed account of the growth of ideas and institutions within a complex social context in constant flux.

Cujus regio, eius religio and Individual Conscience/Individual Identity

As a result, by mid-century a deal had been hammered out between the political powers of the Holy Roman Empire and of the new Protestant states whereby the religion of the ruler would determine the religion of his/her subjects – the principle known as *cujus regio, eius religio*. The Papacy rejected the compromise on principle, but the mainline (“magisterial”) Protestant leaders had already been acting in accord with this principle from the beginning.

I would maintain that these religious outlooks have had long-lasting linguistic consequences.

One consequence is that the primacy of the individual conscience was little in evidence on either side of the religious divide. Pragmatic compromises were often made, especially in Holland, in France (during the period of the Edict of Nantes), in the Swiss Confederation, in various Hapsburg domains in eastern Europe, and especially in the Grand Duchy of Poland/Lithuania, where Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Orthodox Christians, and even Muslim Tartars lived side by side in separate communities. Even in the best of circumstances, however, it was the community – not the individual – which chose the local form of religion.

A second consequence arises from the crushing defeat of the Anabaptists in the early sixteenth century and their subsequent persecution throughout Europe on both sides of the religious divide. The Anabaptists believed that a Christian must freely choose his/her form of religious belief. Since a child cannot understand the issues implicit in accepting a form of religious doctrine and practice, they felt that infant baptism must be rejected. The child might be raised as a Christian, but the actual choice of a religious denomination had to be made by the individual as an adult. As a result of the suppression of the Anabaptist point of view, however, the remaining religious communities on both sides of the religious divide sanctioned the conscription of children into

the local religious communities.

It is my contention that such overall decisions in the sphere of religion in Western Europe set the pattern for forced assimilation of individuals and communities in more secular spheres, those relating to language and culture, in Europe and elsewhere in succeeding centuries, culminating in the kidnapping of children from their families and their placement in boarding schools in the United States and in Australia in order to completely assimilate children of minority cultures to the dominant culture. “Kill the Indian and save the man” is still remembered as the motto of the Bureau of Indian Education in nineteenth century America.

Indeed, the same questions arise in the spheres of language and culture that arise in the sphere of religion: what are the rights of the individual, the family and the community in choosing one’s religious, linguistic or cultural identity? Keeping this framework in mind, let us now examine briefly the evolution of the separate Gaelic-speaking communities since the watershed of the Reformation.

The Fortunes of the Gaelic Languages in the Age of the Printing Press

From the standpoint of access to the printing press, the publication of bishop John Carswell’s *Foirm na n-Urrnuidheadh* in 1567, combining a translation of the Kirk of Scotland’s *Book of Common Order* with a version of John Calvin’s small catechism, should have led to a Golden Age of Gaelic language publishing in a Scotland where reformed Christianity flourished. It didn’t. In fact, the Bible itself was not available in Scottish Gaelic for a full two hundred years after the triumph of the Reformation in Scotland. (The New Testament translation was published in the year 1767, and the Old Testament translation followed in 1801.)³

The translation of the Bible into Irish Gaelic fared little better. The

³ A detailed account of the development of Scottish Gaelic as a written language in this crucial period is given in Withers (1984). See pages 162-163, especially.

Irish scholar Uilliam Ó Domhnaill, with the support of Queen Elizabeth I of England, translated the New Testament into Irish Gaelic as early as the year 1603, and the Old Testament was translated under the supervision of William Bedell towards the end of the century, in 1685. Despite the importance of such materials to the spread of the Reformation in Ireland, however, both editions of the Bible encountered manifold problems in their distribution, due to profound opposition to the Gaelic language itself from the English authorities.⁴

To put things in a wider European perspective, however, these cases are by no means unique. The fine translations of the Bible into Lithuanian by both Jonas Bretkunas and Samuelis Boguslavas Chilinskis suffered similar misadventures at the hands of secular and religious authorities. Bretkunas' translation was allowed to languish unpublished by the German-speaking government officials in Lutheran Prussia, and Chilinskis' translation was dismissed as linguistically flawed by Polish critics in the Protestant Synod in Lithuania and the printed proofs were largely destroyed. Thus, despite the vigorous literary activity of Lithuanian-speaking Reformers from the very beginning of the Reformation, no edition of the Bible in Lithuanian was actually published until the year 1701, when the first edition of the New Testament finally appeared.⁵

The Destruction of the Gaelic-Speaking Communities

This nearly complete denial of access of Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic to the printing press by English authorities was followed by physical destruction of the Gaelic-speaking communities in both Ireland and Scotland in succeeding centuries. If we follow the remnants of these persecuted linguistic

⁴ Cf. Cronin (1996), 51-59.

⁵ For a detailed account of the development of written Lithuanian in both the Duchy of Prussia and in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania during the Reformation period, cf. Zinkevicius (1996), 227-255.

communities overseas, however, we will perhaps learn some lessons for linguistic and cultural survival.

A large number of Scottish Gaelic speakers were exiled to North Carolina on the eve of the American Revolution. Physically isolated in remote mountain communities, a number of them apparently managed to preserve their language for nearly a century – even families who followed the frontier westward toward the Mississippi River.⁶

In contrast, the Scottish Gaelic speakers deliberately settled in Nova Scotia to strengthen the hold of Britain on French-speaking Canada had a different history. Those settled in “mainland” Nova Scotia quickly assimilated into the English-speaking population.

Those settled on Cape Breton Island, however, maintained not only their language, but their original communal identities, based on the islands from which they had come. Only in recent decades has the influence of the outside world become so strong that the Scottish Gaelic language and the local identities have begun to erode.⁷

What conclusions can we draw from these brief examples? It is plain from the experiences of Scottish Gaelic speakers in North Carolina that rural isolation, while a help, is not a guarantee of linguistic and cultural preservation. On Cape Breton Island, however, rural isolation and the continuity of community from their original island communities overseas helped to form an ethos which stressed loyalty to their individual local Scottish Gaelic communities in Cape Breton. The fact that their neighbors spoke Acadian French

⁶ Grady McWhiney mentions that “nineteenth-century English visitors discovered ‘so many Highlanders settled’ in parts of North Carolina ‘that they are obliged to have a clerk in the Post Office who can speak Gaelic’”. Another visitor, on a trip through southern Mississippi in the 1840’s, remarked that, of the numerous families of Highland descent who originally settled the area, “that ‘there are yet living in Greene [County] some of the original inhabitants who speak nothing but the Gallic’”. Cf. McWhiney (1988), 36-37.

⁷ For the classical account of Scottish Gaelic-speaking settlers in Nova Scotia, cf. Dunn (1953). A more detailed account of the language situation in Nova Scotia both past and present is given in Ó hIfearnáin (2002).

and Micmac helped support the general multilingual, multicultural ethos, an ethos which minimized the local importance of English despite its utility as a medium of wider communication on Cape Breton Island.

Nevertheless, even in Cape Breton Island, Scottish Gaelic is yielding to English among the younger generations. Is this linguistic and cultural erosion inevitable in North American communities?

The Hutterite Communities in North America

A clear answer in the negative is given by a competing group of linguistic and cultural communities, the Hutterite communities in North America. These descendants of the persecuted Anabaptists of sixteenth-century Europe have thrived in the rural areas, even where other farming communities would have difficulty in surviving. Most striking of all is that the rural German dialects of their ancestors remain their daily language and that Martin Luther's Bible in its original sixteenth-century German remains central to their liturgical life.⁸

What can account for this difference? Here we must turn to the sphere of religion, and more specifically, to the Anabaptist concept of commitment to religion.

The Hutterites are living their ideal of a religious community, a community which requires the totality of commitment that a Catholic religious order would require. But like a Catholic religious order, children are not conscripted into the community. They are raised as children within the community, but upon reaching adulthood, they must make a solemn choice to join the community or to leave the community freely to live their lives elsewhere. As a result, all those who remain in the community are committed individuals, though free to leave at any time. And those who leave normally retain a deep affection for the community they have left, with deep respect for the ideals of

⁸ Cf. Hostetler and Huntington (1967).

the community.

As a result, the Hutterites form "intentional communities", and most of the individuals who might be sources of tension within the community are released into the wider world. Similarly, tendencies to group schisms within the community are perhaps attenuated by the continual "hiving off" of new communities as existing communities become too populous.

Language and Culture as Twin Pillars of Communal Continuity

But of course, the reason for the existence of these communities is not to preserve sixteenth-century German dialects. It is to perpetuate a distinct way of life, a distinct culture in the language of anthropologists. And this brings us to the question of cultural content. Is a language a *tabula rasa*, a value-free medium in which any cultural content may be expressed – or is it ultimately rooted in a world-view which betrays its remote pre-industrial origins? Creative writers would stress the infinite flexibility of language, while cultural anthropologists would stress the organic nature of language in a cultural evolutionary process which stretches over millenia.

Through a strong religious ideology and a wonderfully pragmatic adaptation to their physical circumstances – including being good neighbors to the surrounding communities, the Hutterites have managed not only to survive but to thrive over several centuries since the initial disasters of the early sixteenth century. Other linguistic minority communities – without such an ideology and without such communal discipline, usually find themselves suffering from linguistic and cultural erosion – particularly in the youngest generations of the community. In other words, for the average teenager, Fionn Mac Cumhaill is not "cool".

Such lack of interest in the culture heroes of the traditional culture is widespread among teenagers all over the modernizing world. Even in Finland, where the traditional poems of the Kalevala are the basis of the national ethos,

teenagers are less than enthusiastic about the rich literature of rural Finland. A notable exception are the Orthodox “Old Believers” in Karelia, who transmit the Kalevala orally. Such people reverence the verses of the Kalevala, with its frankly pagan content, since it is an inheritance from their forefathers, and the Bible admonishes them to honor their mothers and their fathers. Even here though, the particular singers who transmit the Kalevala were usually raised in the same household with their grandmothers, from whom they had learned their Kalevala runes, and this is a situation which differs from that of many modern households in the modern world.⁹

A Way Forward?

Nevertheless, in the Gaelic-speaking areas some small communities do manage to buck the trend. The Gaeltacht of Ráth Chairn in County Meath in Ireland is a striking example of a Gaelic-speaking settler community in an English-speaking rural area which has managed to develop a fine *esprit de corps* despite the urban pressures coming from the greater Dublin urban area. Sabhal Mór Ostaig itself, embedded in the Gaelic-speaking Hebrides and with its vision of a Gaelic-speaking future for the western islands of Scotland and their adjacent mainland, is another example of going against the tide of cultural erosion. The most outstanding example, however, is the growth of the Manx language in the Isle of Man, due mainly to the vision, sagacity and tenacity of one man – Brian Stowell.¹⁰

Similar efforts are underway in North America to revive “dead” languages or moribund languages among the Native American population. In the San Francisco Bay Area down to Monterey and San Juan Bautista, some 1,500 descendants of the original “Costeño” population – *fuíoll an áir* – still survive,

⁹ The Karelian rune singers have been well-documented. A detailed account is given in Pentakainen (1989: 97-124).

¹⁰ I have not mentioned the Gaelscoil movement in Ireland nor similar educational enterprises in other Celtic countries, since people who participate in such projects do not yet form communities in the fullest sense. Nevertheless – like many religious groups – they are on the threshold of forming true communities. When the members of such groups intermarry, reside in close proximity, and engage in many-stranded social and economic activities, I would regard them as true communities.

and some of these have begun to learn their closely related ancestral languages with the assistance of trained linguists from University of California, Berkeley. Similar efforts are underway in New England on the east coast.

It is worth noting that such small potential language communities are often easily the size of the smallest viable population unit – the “deme”, comprising a little less than 1,000 people. Such a unit is tiny, but large enough to sustain its numbers through intermarriage within the community without the genetic dangers of inbreeding. Of course, adding outsiders to the marriage pool will add “fresh blood” to the community.

Thus the Manx speech community is already large enough to sustain itself demographically if it continues its efforts,¹¹ and the Cornish community could easily become so – and remain so. The addition of new members to such “intentional communities” through recruitment from the wider community could increase the viability of the communities in a number of ways.

Of course, the efforts described above have nothing to do with the pragmatic utility of minority languages, and they certainly have nothing to do with “nationalist” aims. In contrast, they have a lot in common with the outlook of Hutterites and Karelian Old Believers in that the languages and the traditional cultures in which they have been embedded for centuries are preserved for what might be called religious reasons – because they form part of the sacred cultural inheritance of individuals and communities.

Viewing things in this light, we might avoid the numbers game so often

¹¹ In recent newspaper accounts, based on interviews and census results, there are over 1,600 people professing some knowledge of Manx, though competent speakers may number only 100, and fluent speakers may number only 60, out of a population of 76,000. Nevertheless, there is much goodwill toward the language, with some 40% of the primary school students (with parental support) wanting to learn the language, and some 900-1,000 children learning Manx for a half-hour per week. Though it is a very “Irish” situation, where the spirit is willing but the flesh is still weak, I think that is certainly feasible that a “deme” of 1,000 speakers could be coaxed out of a favorably disposed population of 76,000 which regards itself as Manx – even if we don’t have a “deme” already.

played by language activists, alternately elated and depressed by demographic figures, and engage in real dialog with present and prospective Gaelic language speakers, in order to find out what it really takes to foster the growth of Gaelic languages in a world where the rights of individual speakers of minority languages and of their communities are finally taken seriously.

In so doing, however, we will have to tackle the issues long ago resolved by the Anabaptist communities: what are the rights of the individual, the family and the community – particularly of those who have not yet grown into adults? Is it possible that through sitting down and reasoning with kids and teenagers that we might persuade at least some of them that Fionn Mac Cumhaill – and his language – are really “cool”?

Remember, in 2001 the British government ended 400 years of hostility to the Gaelic languages by joining with the governments of the Republic of Ireland and of Northern Ireland in establishing *Iomairt Cholm Cille/Colmille Éirinn's Alba*, a project intended to foster contacts between Gaelic communities on both sides of the Irish Sea – and making £1,000,000 in funding available for the purpose! If that can happen, anything is possible! We live in interesting times indeed. Meanwhile, back to the future, and hello Bishop Carswell!

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