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“New speakers” of Gaelic: perceptions of linguistic authenticity and appropriateness


Abstract: This article considers the experiences and views of “new speakers” of Gaelic, focusing on how they characterise their language production and its relationship to the language of traditional speakers. In contrast to some other European minority languages, a significant population of new Gaelic speakers in Scotland has emerged only recently, particularly with the development of Gaelic-medium education since 1985, provision that increasingly serves children who do not acquire Gaelic in the home. Given the ongoing decline of Gaelic in traditional “heartland” areas, it is apparent that new speakers of Gaelic emerging from urban Scotland will become increasingly important in coming years. This study of 35 new speakers in the cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow builds on emerging research on new speakers of minority languages across other European contexts (see O'Rourke et al. 2015) where traditional communities of speakers are being eroded as a consequence of increased urbanisation and economic modernisation. This article considers issues involving legitimacy, authority and authenticity amongst new speakers of Gaelic and the extent to which new speakers are producing their own set of contexts of language use and their own standards of performance or conversely, if they continue to reproduce ideals of localism, tradition and linguistic purity. Participants expressed contrasting views on these topics, some of them endeavouring to accommodate what they perceived as native speakers' perceptions and preferences, others expressing a rather more oppositional viewpoint, rejecting practices or assumptions that they view as impeding the modernisation and normalisation of the language.

Keywords: Gaelic, authenticity, new speakers, purity, language revitalisation

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1 Introduction

In this article we examine the emergence of new speakers of Scottish Gaelic, that is individuals with little or no home or community exposure to the language when they were growing up but who instead acquired it through an immersion programme in school or as adult language learners. The article builds on emerging research on new speakers across other European contexts (see O'Rourke et al. 2015) where traditional communities of speakers of regional or minority languages are being eroded as a consequence of increased urbanisation and economic modernisation. In contrast to some other European minority language communities where revitalisation programmes are better established, a significant population of new Gaelic speakers in Scotland has only emerged in the last two decades or so, particularly with the development of Gaelic-medium education since 1985, provision that increasingly serves children who do not acquire Gaelic in the home. The Gaelic community is therefore beginning to come to terms with sociolinguistic changes and challenges that have confronted other language communities for much longer. Given the ongoing decline of Gaelic in traditional "heartland" areas, it is apparent that new speakers of Gaelic emerging from urban Scotland (especially the cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh) will become increasingly important in coming years. This article looks at the experiences and views of new speakers of Gaelic, focusing on how they characterise their own language production in this changing sociolinguistic context. It will examine emerging issues around legitimacy, authority and authenticity amongst new speakers of Gaelic and the extent to which new speakers in this context are producing their own set of contexts of language use and their own standards of performance or conversely, if they continue to reproduce ideals of localism, tradition and linguistic purity.

To a large extent, as O'Rourke and Pujolar (2013) argue, studies on language revitalisation have focused and continue to focus on native and/or heritage communities, with significantly less attention paid to new speaker profiles and practices. They trace the idealisation of the native speaker in minority language research to anthropologically romantic notions which link nativeness to a particular community, within a particular territory, associated with an historic and an authentic past. Ideologies of place, language and identity thus became embedded in nation-building agendas and struggles for legitimation. The idea of authenticity draws on essentialist views about language, based on the assumption that someone can only be considered a "real" speaker by virtue of biology and culture (Bucholtz 2003). The concept and ideal of the native speaker was one which linguistics and related fields inherited from Herderian notions

about the origin of language and which continues to filter through to modern discourses in language revitalisation contexts (O’Rourke and Pujolar 2013). The native speaker community came to be idealised as speakers of the most “authentic” form of language, leading to a preservationist rhetoric that was sometimes based on an exoticising and romanticising view of local people locked in time (Cameron 2007; Pennycook 2010). Language planners in minority language contexts have tended to draw on these salvaging leanings, seeking to preserve indigenous cultures and languages and arguably to reconstruct earlier moments in history (Buchotlz 2003: 400).

As O’Rourke et al. (2015) explain, the traditional ideological model of language “shift” or decline in minority language research came to be seen as a rupture of essential connections between language, place and identity (in Fishmanian terms). This model presupposes linear linguistic trajectories and is therefore ill-equipped to interpret more complex situations in which people learn and “use” minority languages outside of the home domain and thereby become new speakers. As minority languages such as Gaelic move into different spaces as a result of revitalisation agendas, coupled with increased mobility of speakers due to globalisation (see, e.g. Coupland 2010; Blommaert 2010), new profiles of speakers emerge. These speakers are likely to narrate their experience of language and place differently and legitimise language ownership in different ways. In this paper we examine the degree to which language ideologies reflect these new conceptualisations of language, place and identity and how they are reformulated in discourses and practices amongst new speakers of Gaelic on the ground. Our discussion reflects on what is now defined as “authentic” language in this new context and whether or not hybridity is seen as valuable or as problematic. We question the extent to which new speakers of Gaelic see themselves as legitimate participants in the speech communities that have been historically constituted and imagined in contexts of language revitalisation.

2 Sociolinguistic change in Gaelic and the rise of new speakers

While the current sociolinguistic context of Gaelic is distinctive in several respects (McLeod 2009), its historical trajectory is fundamentally similar to that of other minority languages in Europe in that Gaelic speakers became subsumed within the framework of a linguistically unified nation state and thereby became relegated to the socio-economic and socio-political margins. Gaelic was spoken widely across Scotland in the Middle Ages but the number

of speakers has declined very considerably since the nineteenth century, gradually retreating to a shrinking rural hinterland in a context in which English became key to accessing new social and economic opportunities (Withers 1984; McLeod 2014).

The 2011 census showed 57,602 Gaelic speakers aged 3 and over in Scotland, a mere 1.1% of the national population. Until the 1970s and 1980s, there was very little place for Gaelic in the education system, even in the most strongly Gaelic areas, and even today only a very small proportion of Scottish schoolchildren study Gaelic. Although the language was given limited official status in Scotland by the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, the role of Gaelic in Scottish national life is both marginal and contested (McLeod 2014). The recent growth in new speakers of Gaelic can be understood as one manifestation of the improving provision for and status of Gaelic; for a variety of reasons, learning Gaelic has become more attractive to an increasing range of people. New speakers have emerged from several sources: the Gaelic-medium education programmes that have developed in schools since 1985 (increasingly catering for non-Gaelic speaking children),¹ the pioneering Gaelic college Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in the Isle of Skye (Dunbar 2011), and a range of adult education learning opportunities, most of them in urban communities (McLeod et al. 2010). The sociolinguistic profile of the Gaelic language community has changed considerably in recent years, as the increase in new speakers goes hand in hand with ongoing language shift in traditional rural heartlands. 48% of the Gaelic speakers recorded in the 2011 census were living in 'Lowland' areas of Scotland which have not been Gaelic-speaking since the late Middle Ages (McLeod 2014: 4). However, as the national census does not distinguish between different kinds of speakers, and there have been no national surveys concerning Gaelic knowledge and use, it is impossible to quantify the number of new speakers of Gaelic in Scotland.

We use the term 'new speakers of Gaelic' to refer to people who did not acquire Gaelic in the home when growing up, but have nevertheless acquired a significant degree of competence in the language and are now making active use of the language in their lives. In itself, this is an expansive definition and there are of course significant divergences in the learning trajectories of Gaelic new speakers. Unlike other minority language contexts where the idea of "newness" has become expressed in established terminology, in the Gaelic context explicit labelling has been absent. The term 'new speaker' is as yet not well known, and

1 A maximum of 13.9% of children receiving Gaelic-medium education in 2014 had Gaelic as their main home language (Scottish Government 2014: tables 1.13 and 1.14). From the beginning of Gaelic-medium education provision in 1985 a large proportion of the children enrolled came from homes in which Gaelic was not spoken (Dunmore 2015).

its potential for widespread adoption may be constrained by the linguistic unwieldiness of the Gaelic equivalent of ‘new speaker’, *neach-labhairt ùr* (plural *luchd-labhairt ùra*).

Although issues around speaker legitimacy and authority have been explored empirically (see MacCaluim 2007; McEwan-Fujita 2010a, McEwan-Fujita 2010b), our current research is the first study to focus specifically on adults who have learned Gaelic to a significant degree of competence and are making active use of the language in their lives. Earlier research on ‘learners’ of Gaelic (the usual term used in the Gaelic context; Gaelic *luchd-ionnsachaidh*) has tended to focus on individuals who are actively engaged in the process of learning the language, some of them still at an early stage (McEwan-Fujita 2010a, McEwan-Fujita 2010b; McLeod et al. 2010; cf. Armstrong 2013), or has not differentiated between those who are ‘learning’ Gaelic and those who might be said to ‘have learned’ the language (MacCaluim 2007). There is an obvious difference between people who are attending classes or engaged in other programmatic learning activities and those who have ceased such activities after reaching what they consider to be an acceptable level of competence (Morgan 2000).

An additional terminological difficulty is that there is no simple Gaelic counterpart to ‘native speaker’; participants in this study used a range of terms, including *fileantaich* (‘fluent ones’), *fileantaich bho thùs* (‘fluent ones from the beginning’) and *daoine aig a bheil an cànan bhon ghlùn* (‘people who have the language from the knee [of their mother]’). The most problematic term, used by a number of participants in this study with the meaning of ‘native speaker’, is *Gàidheal* or ‘Gael’. This traditional ethnonym has become increasingly opaque as language shift means that many people from Gaelic family backgrounds or who identify with Gaelic culture cannot speak the language, whereas new speakers without such ancestral links typically decline to describe themselves as ‘Gaels’ (MacAulay 1994: 42). One consequence of this decreasing clarity is that ‘when Gaels are spoken of, no one is quite sure what one is and few claim to be one’ (Oliver 2005: 21). On the other hand, recent survey data suggest that traditional speakers in ‘heartland’ areas would tend not to consider new speakers without ancestral ties to the language community to be ‘Gaels’, especially those who were born outside Scotland (Bechhofer and McCrone 2014: 125).

3 Research method

This research involved semi-structured interviews with 23 individuals (50 minutes in duration on average) and two focus group sessions involving an additional 12 people (7 in Edinburgh, 82 minutes in duration; 5 in Glasgow, 60

minutes in duration). This fieldwork was conducted between February and August 2013. The focus group sessions and all but one of the interviews were conducted in Gaelic, which demonstrates that all participants had reached a significant level of ability in Gaelic. The sample was essentially one of convenience. In the first instance, a number of individuals known to the research team (personally or by reputation) were contacted by e-mail and asked if they would be willing to participate in the study. Information about the project and a request for participation was also posted on several Gaelic social media sites and to various Gaelic organisations in Edinburgh and Glasgow. 17 participants were living in Edinburgh at the time of the research, 16 in Glasgow and the remaining 2 elsewhere in Central Scotland. In the absence of sociolinguistic surveys concerning the demographics of Gaelic speaking in Edinburgh and Glasgow,² it is not possible to know the size and characteristics of the 'new speaker' community in the two cities and the extent to which the research sample reflects the group as a whole. It is very unlikely, however, that the total number of new speakers (as defined above in terms of linguistic ability in Gaelic and regular use of Gaelic) in the two cities exceeds a few hundred. The participants in the current study include many of the individuals who are most active and visible on the Gaelic 'scene' in Edinburgh or Glasgow, and several work in Gaelic-related jobs (including teaching Gaelic to children or adults).

The majority of the participants were brought up in Central Scotland, with only a small number brought up in Highland Scotland. None originated in other parts of Scotland. Perhaps surprisingly, almost a third of the participants were brought up outside Scotland, and of these, only one had a Scottish parent or parents. The largest group of these non-Scottish participants came from England and others came from Germany, Ireland and the USA and one from another non-European country.

Another striking characteristic of the participants was the degree of their 'newness' as speakers of Gaelic in terms of their family connection to the language. Only one-fifth of the group had a Gaelic-speaking parent or grandparent and almost half of the participants had no known family connections to Gaelic at all, even going back centuries. The great majority of the participants began to acquire Gaelic between the ages of 18 and 25; it was noticeable that school was

² McLeod (2005) gathered data from 105 fluent speakers of Gaelic in Edinburgh (mainly native speakers but including some new speakers) but did not attempt to quantify the overall speech community in the city. Census data is of very limited use here as this includes native speakers of Gaelic and, very likely, a number of individuals who cannot in fact speak Gaelic fluently. The number of Gaelic speakers recorded in the 2011 census was 3,176 in Edinburgh and 5,907 in Glasgow.

not an important input. Three received their primary education through the medium of Gaelic and five others studied the language when they were of secondary school age, but the remaining 27 began to learn Gaelic as adults.

4 The native speaker as model and perceptions of deficiency and difference

There is no question that the new speakers who took part in this study looked to the traditional native speaker as the ideal model and assessed their own language against that benchmark. In doing so, though, they did not simply characterise all divergences from native speakers’ usage and practice as a kind of deficiency.

One interviewee provided the following assessment of the importance of looking to the native speaker, aspiring to model her Gaelic on the ‘richness of language’ associated with native speech:

R: So, would you say, then, that it’s important to communicate with [native Gaelic speakers]?

A1: Yes, because you see them as a model, as ummm ... because you want your Gaelic to be like theirs.

R: Exactly, uh-huh.

A1: You want, one day, to have such a vocabulary and such richness of language, that way.

Several of the participants who had experience as professionals in the Gaelic sector, working in Gaelic organisations or in language development activities of different kinds reported that they had developed distinct competences that differentiated them from most native speakers. They were able to draw upon registers and usages that have developed through the institutionalisation of Gaelic since the 1980s, described as ‘9 to 5 Gaelic’ by McEwan-Fujita (2008; see MacLeod 2008). While these new speakers recognise that their language is not as “rich”, “correct” or “true” as that of native speakers, they sometimes see themselves as possessing skills associated with more modern functions and new terminology required in these new contexts that many native speakers are seen to be lacking. Therefore, while lacking authenticity, they draw on what Heller (2010) refers to as a skills-based discourse about language:

A2: I would say that my language, for example, is very different from friends of mine from the islands. Again, it’s not as rich as their language

would be but but at the same time I think my language is really suitable for my work and [I have] language and terminology that they wouldn't have.

R: Oh definitely!

A2: I'm sure that many people would say that a lot of my language isn't correct or true, as it were, you know? And maybe that's true, I don't know. But without any doubt, I would have different language, very different language from someone of my age from the islands from a family with Gaelic at home, as it were.

It may be more helpful to conceptualise the language of this new speaker working as a Gaelic language professional as being different rather than deficient and involving a different rather than a diminished set of competences.

5 The link between language and place

As is typical of minority languages, the connection between the language and specific traditional communities, almost invariably rural, is assigned great importance in the Gaelic context, a linkage that poses challenges to new speakers lacking connections to such communities. Questions arise concerning how new speakers might acquire a specific variety of the language associated with a particular place, but also about the legitimacy and significance of such an attempt. Participants in the study expressed contrasting views on these topics, some of them endeavouring to accommodate what they perceived as native speakers' perceptions and preferences, others expressing a more resentful or defiant point of view.

A significant constraint on Gaelic language acquisition is the limited range of learning opportunities. Gaelic education provision in schools and community settings is patchy, and in parts of Scotland where Gaelic is little spoken there are few opportunities to use the language informally. Only six of 35 participants in this study had spent more than a month in the Gaelic-speaking areas³ in the Hebrides; it is important to note that ongoing language shift in island communities (Mac an Tàilleir et al. 2010) has reduced the effectiveness of such sojourns in terms of language immersion and that there are few structured language acquisition opportunities in these areas, such as courses, schools or internships

³ This figure excludes enrolment on courses at the Gaelic college Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in the Isle of Skye, which is located in an area in which Gaelic is relatively little used in the community.

(McLeod et al. 2010). The great majority of participants reported that their language acquisition trajectories involved multiple different inputs, typically involving a number of teachers (often from different dialect areas) and sometimes involving new speakers as teachers. For most participants the result was something of a linguistic hybrid, an emerging variety sometimes described as ‘middle of the Minch’, referring to the channel separating the Outer Hebrides and the Isle of Skye (Bell et al. 2014: 43).

One of the participants described her language acquisition trajectory as follows:

F2: I learned Gaelic in primary school and I don’t know how many teachers were had and they were from different places – from South Uist and Lewis or Harris and whatever place, Barra ... so I heard different dialects and I myself use varied vocabulary.

She went on to explain that this could sometimes leave her uncertain, not knowing which word to use when talking to speakers of particular dialects, and thus unable to adapt her speech and accommodate different interlocutors with confidence.

Similarly, one of the interviewees who began to learn Gaelic in her twenties described her linguistic production as one that involved accent-hopping in an arbitrary way. This was perceived as somewhat not quite right evidenced in her self-characterisation as “not a good student”. Nevertheless, her main goal is that people will understand her and this allows her to overcome any inhibitions that might relate to the use of mixed dialect features.

A21: Well, my Gaelic is pretty ... mixed. I ... I think I go from accent to accent.. I just use the first, the first thing that comes to mind. So, I’m not a good student for ... The main thing ... um ... in my opinion is that people understand me.

In contrast to such mixed or unmarked usage, linguistic markers of ‘localness’ might involve particular pronunciation features or lexical items. One participant who had family ties to the Hebrides reported how a neighbour living near her grandmother’s house identified a particular word (*aimsir* instead of *sìde* for ‘weather’) as being non-local. She ascribed her use of the ‘wrong’ word to the fact that she was not immersed in the language from the start, instead acquiring it later in life and thus lacking in idiomatic use of the local language. She justifies this saying by drawing on her learner status saying that it doesn’t matter. So here again there is a degree of tension between the new speaker’s

need to model language on that of native speakers who they see as being more authentic and real but at the same time front their new speaker identity which allows them to use language differently and not necessarily include idioms and local variations in their speech.

F3: Sometimes they [native speakers] make fun of me because of a funny word I used ... Two years ago I was talking to my neighbour in [island where her grandmother lives] and I was just saying something like ... what was it? I said *aimsir* [for 'weather'], and she said, 'och, we don't say *aimsir*, we call it *side*.' I said, 'yeah, ok, yeah'. And because I wasn't immersed from the start among people from [that island] – you don't have all the idioms, the same thing they do. But at the same time it doesn't matter, I'm someone who learned Gaelic, but at the same time there must be things, I'd say, that still belong to that area.

The link between language and place seems important in this regard, reflecting what Katherine Woolard (2008) says about the need amongst many minority language speakers to show that the language they have adopted is from 'somewhere'. New speakers of Gaelic show a preference for a particular accent or dialect but realise that because they do not have a close connection to any particular place, they are left with picking up what comes their way from native speaker teachers from different places and, in some instances, from other learners like themselves.

F9: I would prefer to have a particular accent or dialect. But because I don't have a close connection to any place, I never made a choice! I had teachers from different places, learners among them, and so I picked up different bits.

This participant went on to distinguish her experience acquiring a distinct dialect of a European language by virtue of residence in the dialect area, but explained that she had never had a comparable period of immersion in a particular Gaelic dialect.

Only a small minority of participants deliberately endeavoured to acquire a particular dialect of Gaelic. Most of these had a Gaelic-speaking parent, who chose to focus on the dialect of their parent's area of origin. However, this did not necessarily involve a period of residence in that area; some participants reported using archival field recordings, for example. In one case, the dialect chosen was almost moribund, with very few surviving speakers, and so resorting to archives was effectively unavoidable.

In contrast, new speakers with no close family connections to Gaelic or any particular dialect area – the great majority of participants in this study – perceived that endeavours to acquire a particular local dialect would be somewhat arbitrary or artificial. One participant who is now involved in teaching Gaelic to adults expressed this view, acknowledging that having a local accent from one of the remaining Gaelic speaking islands such as Lewis, Uist or Skye would be preferable to what she describes in somewhat pejorative terms as “mid-Minch”. She nevertheless shies away from adopting a local accent because these are places to which she has never been and therefore with which she has no ties or affiliations. In her role as a Gaelic teacher, however, she admits to identifying with one particular accent and uses it consistently with students so as not to sound “disembodied”, thus in some way contradicting what she said before and recognising the need to identify with one particular place:

A4: ...I’m certain and I expect that more people would be comfortable talking to me if I had a ... Lewis accent or a Uist accent or even a Skye accent ...

R: Local...

A4: Yeah, a local accent instead of mid-Minch or something like that. But I’m not sure you need that ... I’ve always felt it would maybe something inauthentic if I was to learn [a dialect] ... I could have learned a Lewis accent maybe ... But I wasn’t ... the thing I felt was, well, I’ve never been to Lewis, why would I have a Lewis accent, that would be really strange. Why would I have a North Uist accent? I’ve never been there. But ... it would be good to be consistent, I think it’s difficult for learners when they don’t have a consistent accent. So I try to do my best Uist accent in order to teach [Gaelic]. I try to be consistent about that so that my students learn a reasonably consistent accent and they won’t be, you know, when you hear someone who’s learned English and hasn’t learned a particular accent, sometimes they’re a bit *disembodied sounding*.⁴

But what of the alternative strategy? Would it have been appropriate for this interviewee to spend, say, 2 months living in the Isle of Lewis, a place she had never been before, where she knew no one before coming, and then adopted a speech variety that is normally spoken only by a small number of people in a close-knit rural community? Would it be socially meaningful or acceptable to people in that community? And from the standpoint of the new speaker herself, could it be perceived as ‘faking it’, ‘pretending to be something you’re not’?

⁴ The English phrase ‘disembodied sounding’ was used by this interviewee here.

Of course, input is not the same thing as output, and some participants had more noticeable non-native accents in their Gaelic than did others. One interviewee commented that native speakers would tend to react differently according to the perceived accent of a 'new speaker', claiming that those whose accent in Gaelic marked them out immediately as learners would be received differently by native speakers:

A3: I think that in a way I'm lucky; my accent is fairly, my accent even in English is fairly suitable for Gaelic, in a way. And so it's easy enough for me to speak in Gaelic and other people or other people with Gaelic, they don't think, 'O! You learned Gaelic', straight away.

R: Do you notice that when you're with other learners, say people from Lowland Scotland, with a Glasgow accent, an American accent?

A3: Aye.

R: Is that obvious?

A3: O, it's quite obvious, it's quite obvious.

R: And does that affect how Gaelic speakers feel about them?

A3: I think it does, aye. Aye.

Another participant expressed her view that identifiably non-traditional accents remained unacceptable to native speakers:

F2: If you have a strong Lewis accent or something like that, they [native speakers] won't think anything of it and that's all right, but if you're from [Lowland town] with an '[Lowland town] accent', you know ... they won't accept that, you know.

Another participant took a somewhat more defiant stance, placing emphasis on the high level of competence she had achieved as a learner as opposed to inherited competence by virtue of being a native speaker. This was something she was proud of and refuted the need to be identified with a certain geographical area or to be labelled according to what accent you had.

A5: I don't see anything wrong with saying that you learned Gaelic. And if you've learned Gaelic to the level that I've learned it you should be proud of it.. So, I don't see any reason to say, 'You know, actually I come from such and such an island.'. And with some people it's pretty obvious that they're learners... they'll have an English accent, or a Glasgow accent... or an American accent on their speech still, and there's nothing wrong with that.

However, some participants indicated that speaker judgements were not necessarily based entirely on linguistic output, but could change once ‘new speaker’ status was declared. Place of origin was identified by many of the new speaker participants as centrally important in defining speaker identities. This new speaker resented being ‘put into a box’ as being part of the in-group or not. His identity seems to be made doubly complex by the fact that not only is he not local to a specific Gaelic-speaking area in Scotland but he is in fact also lacking national roots as somebody from outside Scotland itself. “Where are you from?” is a question he and other new speakers say they are faced with, leading him to sometimes lie about this just for fun.

A18 Some people, sometimes, think I’m from [island], I think I’m getting nearer. You know, people from [that island] wouldn’t think that but some people ... ‘*An ann à [eilean] a tha thu?*’ [‘Are you from [island]?’] ‘No, no, I’m from [place outside Scotland]’ And then, and then you get moved to the other box.

I: I see, right.

M: And there’s a totally different ...

I: ...Ideological thing, yeah. Isn’t that strange?

M: People like to know which box you’re in and if you are in the in-group or you are not in the in-group. And Gaelic speakers – ‘*Cò às a tha thu?*’ [‘Where do you come from?’] There you go, straight in there. So what do you say? You know, do you lie? Sometimes I lie just for fun.

Conversely, another participant (who might be considered one of the most proficient speakers who took part in the study) indicated that she took pains to disclose her status as a new speaker in the presence of native speakers, who she refers to simply as Gaels (a common usage, as explained above). Instead she positions herself as an outside to the group and expresses a desire not to claim ownership of something which she does not consider is hers to claim.

F7: I think I would say that [I’m a learner], particularly among Gaels [i.e. native speakers], I wouldn’t bother in relation to learners anyway, when we’re together, but among Gaels, I think I’m more comfortable making clear – not at the beginning of the conversation, it’s not important, but somehow that it should come out that I’m not a Gael and that I learned Gaelic ...

Some of the participants identified more specific deficiencies in their Gaelic. The commonest was a perceived lack of ‘naturalness’. This new speaker justifies this perceived deficiency with the lack of opportunities afforded to use the language,

which, when coupled with the underlying pressure to speak the language “correctly”, makes the use of the language unnatural:

F1 The opportunities aren't there, we don't speak enough – Gaelic isn't common enough around us and we end up talking, you know, unnaturally, we're so aware that we ought to speak as correctly as possible, so we're not that natural.

Other participants referred to their lack of Gaelic ‘slang’ and to their difficulties in communicating strong emotions or discussing personal or intimate matters in Gaelic.

6 New speaker usage and native speaker usage

Participants in the study perceived a number of differences in their Gaelic usage and that of native speakers. Most of them expressed a view of Gaelic usage that was puristic in some respects and modernising in others – in many respects a mirror image of some traditional speakers' practices and preferences. Many of the new speakers were committed to using Gaelic in as many situations as possible, adopting new terminology as required, and they tended to characterise traditional speakers as being too ready to switch between codes (or simply to speak in English exclusively), while simultaneously adopting a conservative or static view of Gaelic, rejecting new terms and usages.

Native speakers cannot, of course, be treated as a simple undifferentiated group. The new speakers studied here tended to distinguish between older and younger native speakers, with several participants noting that the Gaelic of younger speakers was not as richly idiomatic as that of older generations. This assessment aligns with a recent large-scale study based on ‘focused conversations’ with 184 speakers which revealed that ‘the accepted model for “good” Gaelic (at both formal and informal levels) is the popular language of those born in the 1940s and 1950s’, with fluent speakers of this generation largely seen ‘as the source of authority and legitimacy on what is acceptable, natural and “good” Gaelic’ (Bell et al. 2014: B130). In addition, participants observed that some native speakers were more rigid than others in their attitudes to the modernisation of Gaelic and the adoption of new terminology and usage, and that a small minority of native speakers were described as being unwelcoming to learners. Participants observed that many native speakers active in Gaelic organisations were very willing to use Gaelic in a wide variety of situations, and that they seemed to have a different, more modernising language ideology in comparison to the wider group of native speakers. The closer alignment between

new speakers and native speakers who are actively involved in Gaelic organisations is perhaps predictable, given that both can be understood as expressing a commitment to language revitalisation and its modernising implications.

The clearest point of differentiation involved native speakers simply not speaking Gaelic at all. New speakers of Gaelic typically position themselves as active users of the language, unlike some of their native speaker counterparts, characterised as being less committed to the language and sometimes using English instead. This new speaker describes a willingness to speak the language and therefore to counteract the trend in traditional Gaelic-speaking areas where the language is being displaced, particularly amongst a younger generation of speakers:

A13: Some people ... some young native speakers of Gaelic, they're not as militant as some learners like myself or [my friends], for example. And ... now and again, I think that people who learned Gaelic – who aren't native speakers – we're maybe ... we're more willing to speak Gaelic with each other than native speakers who speak English all the time.

This dynamic led her to express a degree of frustration given the amount of investment in learning the language and perfecting their skills, a ‘precious thing’ which native speakers already possess.

A13: when people like me put in the time to learn Gaelic and make a big effort to learn Gaelic and there are native speakers who just speak English, it's like, och, well, I'm making such an effort and such a struggle just to reach the level you're at and it doesn't bother you at all that you've got this precious thing.

In other cases objections related to the use of loanwords and loan translations. Asked to give her view of what ‘good’ Gaelic was, one participant (originally from England and who learned Gaelic approximately 30 years earlier) gave a relatively straightforwardly puristic view. “Good” Gaelic was defined as that which was absent of English loan words while conversely “bad” Gaelic was defined as having English loanwords instead of a Gaelic equivalent:

A20: I would say that good Gaelic is Gaelic that doesn't use too many loans from English and that uses Gaelic idioms and Gaelic words and on the other hand, that bad Gaelic takes too many loans from English and uses Gaelic – English words when there are already Gaelic words there.

R: And is there a lot of that [bad] Gaelic to be heard?

A20: Oh yes, yes, every day; on Radio nan Gàidheal and especially – what's the word? Calques, verbal calques. I don't like that at all.

Another interviewee shared this concern about loanwords but expressed a somewhat more pragmatic view, suggesting that it is part of the modernising process:

A23: I'm more accustomed to use Gaelic if I can than to throw English in ... I try to avoid it since I think, if there's already a phrase or a verb in Gaelic, why can't I use it. But there's that and loan words will come into any language, but I think there's a danger there too. But, on another level, looking in another way, it's good to create new words for the language, and we need to do that if it's going to make sense in the world that we have ... I think that sometimes native speakers, people who are older, that they think there are too many new words that they don't understand and they complain about that.

Several other participants commented that new speakers were more accustomed to (or more confident in) using Gaelic in non-traditional contexts or to discuss non-traditional topics. In this regard, one respondent referred to dismissive attitudes of some traditional speakers towards new terms and usages stereotypically associated with the Gaelic college Sabhal Mòr Ostaig – dismissively labelled SMOG (Sabhal Mòr Ostaig Gaelic). While acknowledging the need to maintain traditional speech, this new speaker recognises the need to create new words such as those related to new spaces in which Gaelic is now being used:

A12: And I have noticed that there are really two kinds of Gaelic: people who say, 'Well, this is Gaelic, and this our Gaelic as fluent [i.e. native] speakers', then they think about SMOG and [say what is] this horrible thing. But for me, it's not – we need both things, just the old expressions and the old ways but also the new ways – every living language changes and creates new worlds. Well, I'm involved in computing and, therefore, we *have* to create new words in order to say things, because the words weren't there traditionally. And so we have to accept both things and work together.

Another interviewee expressed similar views, but with rather more frustration in a rather lengthy passage which lashes out at the perception that Gaelic words cannot be used to describe modern functions. The passage culminates with an

explicit criticism of older native speakers who are seen to have abandoned the language through not transmitting it to their children:

A7: In Gaelic, people expect that everybody who speaks Gaelic should understand every word in Gaelic. Now, there are words that everybody should have; words you use every day but, you know, if you don't understand the Gaelic for very specialised things, that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you or your Gaelic, or, on the other hand, maybe worse, that there's something wrong with the word, you know. And, so, people think, you know, if people see a word in English, they think, 'That's a word I don't understand, I should [inaudible] and, they will understand it from the context, or they will ask somebody or they will look it up on Google or something. But with Gaelic, people think, 'Oh, bad Gaelic!' or 'Bad translation!' instead of thinking 'That's a new word that I don't understand'.. But the thing is, if I'm speaking to someone, I would work out what their Gaelic is like, and I would use more English words, or more Gaelic words, depending on how it is. And ... that doesn't bother me but, at the same time, there's nothing wrong with using Gaelic for topics that not everyone with Gaelic would understand – I do that often ... And so, maybe it's a sort of spectrum, but you know, you hear people who really complain about this, 'Oh, the new words, I don't understand them'. That's wrong. If people want to use Gaelic for those words [*sic*] they will understand them. If they don't want to have those words, if they maybe don't use Gaelic for things like that, that does no harm at all. But if people say that we shouldn't have Gaelic for contemporary things, I don't accept that because there are people who want to use that. Also, the people who complain about it are usually old and their own children don't speak Gaelic.

Another participant with experience working as a Gaelic professional also described having begun to use more English words in her Gaelic in an attempt to appear more natural (*nas nàdarraiche*), observing that she felt this was a common strategy amongst new speakers of Gaelic.

One interviewee who worked as a language professional gave a detailed overview of the dynamics of new speaker/native speaker interactions. The very newness of the new speaker phenomenon makes some native speakers unaccustomed to the limited Gaelic proficiency of some learners of Gaelic, while some learners expect native speakers to take an active interest in the language itself and to be available for support in the learning process. She also notes the tendency for new speakers to speak Gaelic in a range of contexts in which many native speakers would normally use English. Interestingly, she suggests that

new speakers should 'attune their language to the person they're talking to'; several participants in this study indicated that they did indeed make such attunements and adjustments when dealing with native speakers, using more English terms and fewer neologisms.

A16: Native Gaelic speakers still aren't sufficiently accustomed to learners of Gaelic and you can understand why, as it's quite a new thing for people to be learning Gaelic ... It's not long since almost everyone who spoke Gaelic fluently was a native speaker and thus they'd have good Gaelic and they wouldn't be accustomed in the same way, say, as English speakers are accustomed to people who come from Poland or Russia or whatever country and you'll get bad English ... And the thing that would be good in my opinion, is if native speakers could become a bit more aware and a bit more flexible in relation to Gaelic learners. But, on the other hand, as I said, there are misunderstandings on both sides. Learners of Gaelic aren't wise and socially skilled enough when it comes to native speakers ... Learners usually think ... because they're interested in the language and in learning the language, that everyone who speaks the language should be interested in speaking the language with them. And, a lot of them think that everyone should be able to answer questions about grammar and things like that – and that's not true in any language. And that causes conflict and also ... learners are quite fond of new words and talking about things that older people – native speakers – wouldn't often discuss in the language. And they use this new language in front of native speakers and that doesn't work too well. Learners aren't wise enough to attune their language to the person they're talking to and that causes conflict between the two groups and that's unfortunate, in my opinion. There's a need for both groups; there's a need for Gaelic learners for many reasons and learners need native speakers – they're the people who have a good example of the language and it would be beneficial for both groups, I think, if there was less misunderstanding on both sides.

7 Conclusion

In this article we have set out to analyse emerging issues around legitimacy, authority and authenticity amongst new speakers of Gaelic. We have examined the extent to which new speakers are producing their own set of contexts of language use and their own standards of performance or conversely, if they

continue to reproduce ideals of localism, tradition and linguistic purity. Conversations with new speakers show that they tend to position themselves as a distinct group to “native” speakers of Gaelic. This leads to certain tensions between the two, similar to what has been shown in other minority language contexts, in which new speakers can come to endow “native speakers” with a higher claim to linguistic authenticity and ownership by virtue of having acquired the language through family transmission (see O’Rourke and Ramallo 2013; Ortega et al. 2015) although not elevated to the antagonistic levels identified in other minority language contexts (see Hornsby 2008, Hornsby 2015 in the case of Breton and Costa 2015 in the case of Occitan).

While new speakers of Gaelic in the study tended to accord greater legitimacy and authenticity to native speakers, there were instances when this did not happen. As in other minority language contexts, some new speakers of Gaelic seem to position themselves as important drivers of language revitalisation efforts, and as a group who purposely and consciously act as agents of social change. They take on a more strongly activist role, showing a strong sense of responsibility towards ensuring the future survival of the language, compared with their perception of some native speakers as lacking commitment to the language cause.

In contrast to many native speakers, new speakers of Gaelic tend to have a formal command of Gaelic grammar and strong Gaelic literacy skills, as well as a high level of education more generally. Those working in Gaelic-related posts, in particular, are often comfortable with a range of specialist terminology and with using Gaelic in professional contexts of different kinds. Even though some new speakers downplay these skills as against the ‘natural’ capacities of the traditional speaker, they do provide an alternative source of linguistic legitimacy or capital.

Nevertheless, the issue of authenticity remains important to most new speakers, leading them to question the extent to which they truly belong to the speech community as it has been historically constituted, or whether their role is (and should be) secondary or peripheral. The urban setting has clearly not yet developed sufficiently to constitute an alternative authentic space for Gaelic, although this dynamic may become stronger in the future as Gaelic becomes more institutionally embedded in the cities and traditional heartland areas continue their shift towards English dominance.

In contemporary societies, as we know, there is a blurring of the notion of language as fixed and bounded. As Woolard and Frekko (2012) point out, social and geographical mobility has led to shifts away from the traditional view of language as bounded and unitary and towards one which embraces hybridity, multiplicity and fluidity. This leads to a rethinking of what forms of language are

considered legitimate and authentic when taken up by new speakers when relocated in new spaces. The spread of Gaelic outside of traditional Gaelic-speaking strongholds and into spaces previously dominated by English unsettles the traditional ideology of sociolinguistic authenticity. The data in our study suggest that a rootedness in place continues to shape new speaker identities. However, there is also a sense that new speakers of Gaelic have at times a contradictory relationship with traditional speaker communities. Although they continue to show respect for the authenticity of native speech, there is sometimes a rejection of essentialist ideologies and the production of a discourse where the traditional values of place, rootedness and authenticity became secondary. There is an explicit positioning of new speakers as in some way different from native speakers and a demand – albeit typically a muted one – for their recognition as ‘real’ speakers.

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