Language Policy in the UK

The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005

Heiko F. Marten
Freie Universität Berlin, Germany/
Rēzeknes Augstskola, Latvia
Languages in the UK: English(es), migrant languages, autochthonous minority languages
Scottish Gaelic: demography, history, institutions
Developments since the Act has been in power, in particular the National Plan for Gaelic (2007)
1. Languages in the UK

- **English and Englishes**
- **Migrant Languages**
- **Autochthonous Minority Languages**
  - Wales: Welsh
  - Northern Ireland: Irish and Ulster Scots
  - Cornish (and Manx)
  - Scotland: Gaelic and Scots
2. Scottish Gaelic: Basics

Size and location of Gaelic populations: 1981 census.
Scottish Gaelic: Demography

Proportions of local populations speaking Gaelic in 1981.
## Gaelic Speakers 1881-2001 (MacKinnon 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Gaelic Speakers</th>
<th>Proportion of Gaelic Speakers of Entire Population in Scotland</th>
<th>Proportion of Gaelic Speakers who Live in the Highlands</th>
<th>Proportion of Gaelic Speakers who Live in the Lowlands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>231,594</td>
<td>6.76</td>
<td>87.84</td>
<td>12.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>65,978</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>60.97</td>
<td>39.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>58,652</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>55.51</td>
<td>44.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scottish Gaelic: History

- Originating from Ireland, Gaelic was used in official contexts in medieval times and also developed a rich literature.
- Throughout the Middle Ages, Gaelic was slowly replaced in the Scottish Lowlands, first by Scots, then by English, but remained strong in the Highlands.
- A more dramatic retreat set in in the 18th century (stigmatisation, perception as a threat).
- 19th century: Celtic revival, but weaker than in Ireland.
- At the same time, strong decline due to assimilation policies and technological development.
- Until the late 20th century no official maintenance efforts.
- There are many similarities with the history of the Sámi languages, but the question of ethnicity of Gaelic speakers is by far more complex.
Scottish Gaelic: Institutions

- An Comunn Gàidhealach: Cultural events (1891)
- Comhairle nan Leabhraichean: Gaelic Literacy (1963)
- Comhairle nan Eilean Siar: Western Isles Regional Council (1975)
- Comunn na Gàidhlig: Gaelic Political Head Organisation (1980s)
- Comhairle nan Sgoiltean Araich: Gaelic Pre-School Council (1982)
Scottish Gaelic: Issues and Presence in Language Domains until the 1990s

- A few Gaelic classes in primary, and even fewer in secondary education
- A small Gaelic-medium university college; in addition, Gaelic philology taught at several universities
- Low-scale Gaelic media presence
- Limited bilingual administration in parts of the Gaelic heartland
- Relatively strong Gaelic presence in traditional cultural activities
- In total, some presence of Gaelic in crucial domains of language in line with speakers' wishes, but no coherent policy based on aims of maintenance or revitalisation
Scottish Gaelic: Policy Issues in the New Scottish Parliament

- **1999 – 2000**: Some symbolic steps
  - Hopeful start
- **2000**: Debate on the role of Gaelic in the Education Act
  - No right to Gaelic-medium education granted
- **2000**: Gaelic Task Force Report
  - Account of the sad state of affairs
- **2001**: Gaelic Broadcasting Report
  - Some, but not sufficient commitment to Gaelic
- **2002**: Report "A Fresh Start for Gaelic"/"National Plan for Gaelic"
  - Suggestions for a possible kick-off with little follow-up
- **2002**: Establishment of the Gaelic Language Board
  - Only restricted powers
- **2002**: A Private Member's Bill
  - Rejected by the Executive
3. The Gaelic Language Act: Promises and Preparations

- A Gaelic Act as a Promise by the Labour/Liberal Democrat Coalition in the 2003 Elections
- A Draft Bill introduced by the Executive in 2003
- Hearing on suggestions by scholars, activists, and the general public
- Publication of a revised, strengthened Bill in 2004
- The Bill was passed in April 2005 unanimously, despite continuing criticism on its weakness and a general perception that the Act should only be the start of a determined Gaelic policy
The Gaelic Language Board (Bòrd na Gàidhlig) receives a statutory basis

A National Language Plan has to be published by Bòrd na Gàidhlig

The Bòrd may require public authorities in Scotland to publish Gaelic Plans and has to approve and to monitor their implementation

In case of disagreement on a Language Plan, Scottish Ministers decide on its implementation

Bòrd na Gàidhlig shall also provide advice on Education
The Gaelic Language Act: The Discussion

- In the debates in the Scottish Parliament, all political parties showed their general support.
- Opposition Members of the Scottish Parliament tried to strengthen the Bill through amendments.
- Some Members argued in favour of a rights-based approach, in particular concerning education.
- The Executive defended its language-planning approach: "An appropriate balance requires to be struck between responding to the needs of the Gaelic community and ensuring that a Gaelic language burden is not introduced where there is no demand for it."
- The lack of inclusion of broadcasting was another important point of critique.
- The most important controversy arose concerning the wording "Equal Validity" vs. "Equal Respect" of Gaelic and English.
The planning-based approach was criticised by many activists as by far too weak to ensure survival of Gaelic

Wilson McLeod:

- "The Bill should be amended so as to make clear that the national Gaelic language plan is legally binding and that the Executive will have a legal obligation to implement it"
- "Local education authorities should be required to make available Gaelic-medium education whenever reasonable demand is demonstrated"
- "Any persons appearing before any court of general jurisdiction (...) in Scotland should be entitled to use Gaelic."
- "Grants from public bodies to private companies over a certain size in Gaelic-speaking areas should be conditioned on the development and implementation of Gaelic language plans by such companies."
4. The National Plan for Gaelic 2007

Targets:

- A holistic process of commitment and action within and between individuals, families, communities, and public, voluntary and private organisations

In the immediate future:

- To see the number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland beginning to stabilise
- An increase in the number of children entering pre-school Gaelic-medium education and progressing through the Gaelic-medium primary and secondary continuum
- An increase in the number of adult learners progressing to fluency
- An increase in literacy among Gaelic speakers
The National Plan for Gaelic 2007: Targets

*Target for 2021:* All children being raised with Gaelic in the home progressing through Gaelic-medium education

*Target for 2031:* Restoration of the Gaelic language to a state of natural growth

*Gaelic speaker number targets for 2021 – 2031 – 2041:*

4,000 – 10,000 – 50,000 in first-year Gaelic medium primary education (2006/07: 313)

65,000 – 75,000 – 100,000 Gaelic speakers (2001: 58,652)

40,000 – 65,000 – 100,000 Gaelic speakers who can read and write the language (2001: 31,218)
The National Plan for Gaelic 2007: Strategies

Main domains of policy action: home, community, place of learning, workplace

- Increase the number of Gaelic speakers and learners making Gaelic their language of preference in the home, community and workplace
- Increase the number of people participating in Gaelic activities
- Increase availability, uptake, continuity and development of Gaelic-medium and Gaelic-learner education to facilitate lifelong learning
- Increase equal respect being accorded to Gaelic and English

Four policy strategies: Acquisition planning, Usage planning, Status planning, Corpus planning
The National Plan for Gaelic 2007: Concrete policy initiatives

- National publicity/prestige campaign
- Funding for those seeking to develop their Gaelic
- Annual awards to recognise achievement in acquisition and use in home, community and workplace
- Notices to public authorities requesting Language Plans
- Work with employers and appropriate bodies to actively promote the use of Gaelic in the workplace
- Advice and examples of good practice in the private/voluntary sector
- A campaign to promote use/transmission at home
- A review of childcare and early-years provision
The National Plan for Gaelic: Cooperations

- Partnership between Bòrd na Gàidhlig and other bodies as a central part of the Plan

- Development funding to support implementation in collaboration with a range of Gaelic groups and other bodies that have the necessary expertise

- Proactive engagement of all types of bodies – public, private, voluntary, Gaelic, non-Gaelic and government
The National Plan for Gaelic: Monitoring

- Bòrd na Gàidhlig will monitor implementation by reviewing its own actions and by monitoring the activities of other bodies.
The National Plan for Gaelic: Education

National Gaelic Education Strategy:

- Strategic, coordinated guidance for educational authorities and schools
- A comprehensive development programme dependent on the support of the Scottish Executive, local authorities, Gaelic organisations and public bodies
The National Plan for Gaelic: Reactions

- The National Plan was published with a call for a discussion
- Public and private institutions, scholars and private persons responded
- The overwhelming majority of respondents supported the idea of strengthening Gaelic in general, and more specifically the National Plan
- However, there was also critique, in particular regarding the vagueness of many issues
- Some scholars in particular stressed the urgency of the measures for survival of Gaelic
- In addition to the call for written comments, a number of information meetings were held throughout Scotland
A Recent Example of Bòrd na Gàidhlig activities: Gaelic Software

- In February 2007, Microsoft announced a joint venture with Bòrd na Gàidhlig, Strathclyde University and Learning and Teaching Scotland to develop support for Gaelic in Windows Vista and Office 2007.
- The venture is funded with £45,000 from the Bòrd.
- In July 2007, a call for consultation was launched to the public in order to get a user-oriented quality product.
5. Conclusion

- Similarly to Sámi and many other small languages, Scottish Gaelic has in the past years received a degree of attention formerly unknown.
- Low-level ad-hoc Gaelic policy has been replaced by a coordinated strategy, culminating in the Gaelic Language Act based on a language-planning approach.
- The general climate in society today is favorable to Gaelic, as long as measure do not become too strong.
- A rights-based approach, as demanded by many activists, was not granted.
So far, the provisions established by the Language Act are in the process of being implemented.

It is too early to make long-term statements on sustainability – much will depend on how the steps suggested in the National Plan will be implemented.

As many scholars argue, Gaelic is so weak that measures should be much stronger and implemented without delay if the language shall not vanish.

Compared with the Sámi languages, the demographic situation of Gaelic is better in terms of speaker numbers, but not in terms of intergenerational transmission.

The steps taken do not give Gaelic speakers the rights that Sámi speakers in Scandinavia have.
Tapadh leibh!

hfmarten@tiscali.de