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## **Oracy and ideology in contemporary Gaelic: Conceptions of fluency and its perceived decline subsequent to immersion schooling**

### **Abstract**

Notwithstanding the considerable extent of intergenerational disruption within contemporary Gaelic communities in Scotland, the development of national language policy has tended to focus on Gaelic-medium, immersion education (GME) as a means of revitalising the language. Gaelic education is prioritised alongside increasing language use and promoting a positive image of the language in the most recent iteration of the *National Gaelic Language Plan (2018-2023)* as was the case in the two previous Plans (*Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2007, 2012*). Yet fine-grained and mixed methodological research conducted by the author found extensive evidence that Gaelic tends not to be used to a substantial degree by former-GME students, years after their formal schooling is completed. In this article I focus on previously unpublished qualitative data which illustrate understandings of oracy and fluency among interview participants (N=46) and their perceptions of language attrition since attending immersion education in childhood. As the analysis of interview material shows, such demonstrable attrition of Gaelic oracy years after immersion provides clear challenges to current language planning priorities in Scotland.

### **Introduction: Sociolinguistic perspectives on oracy and Gaelic education**

The development of speaking ability or ‘oracy’ in children frequently becomes a matter of heightened emotional and political significance in minoritised languages. The concept of oracy has a long pedigree in educational linguistic research, Wilkinson (1965: 11) having defined the term as ‘the ability to put one word of one’s own next to another... in speech, to create, rather than repeat’. Whilst somewhat distinct from the concept of ‘fluency’, the notion of oracy thus clearly shares a degree of semantic overlap with the former term. In Scotland, oracy in Gaelic is now professed by just 1% of the national population, the language having been effectively minoritised by the (Scottish, and later British) state over several centuries. This article presents findings from a wider study of language use and ideologies among 130 adults who started in Gaelic-medium education (henceforth ‘GME’) during the first years of its availability in Scotland (Dunmore 2019). Qualitative and quantitative analyses conducted as part of this wider project demonstrated that the majority of research participants’ social use of Gaelic is limited today, although notable exceptions were found among speakers who were substantially socialised in the language at home during childhood, or who are employed through the language at present (Dunmore 2017, 2018, 2019). This finding is perhaps unsurprising in light of existing research on second language acquisition and pupils’ generally limited use of target languages outside of education systems (see e.g. Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin 1979; Fishman 1991, 2001a; Heller 1995; Hickey 2001; Potowski 2004).

The significance of the finding, however, has important consequences for present language policy priorities in Scotland. This article focuses specifically on the degree to which participants in this research regarded themselves to be fluent in Gaelic, 10 to 15 years after completing GME. I consider interviewees' metalinguistic discourses surrounding the meaning of fluency, before moving on to an analysis of language ideologies surrounding the maintenance of speaking ability, as well as the perceived importance of 'having' Gaelic, irrespective of reported degrees of oracy. Elsewhere in the analysis of linguistic practices among former-GME students, I demonstrated that socialisation in Gaelic at home during childhood, and continuation with GME after primary school both appeared to play a crucial role in bolstering Gaelic use after completion of immersion schooling (Dunmore 2018, 2019). Yet frequently occurring language ideologies reflected in survey responses and interview material that were analysed tended to rationalise (and possibly reinforce) limited overall Gaelic use among most participants in the research (Dunmore 2017).

Evidence from the second language acquisition literature suggests that such patterns of linguistic practice and ideology may not be entirely unpredictable. On the basis of various meta-analyses of the effectiveness of French immersion education in Canada (cf. Harley 1994; MacFarlane and Wesche 1995; Johnstone 2001), Edwards (2010a: 261) notes that despite attaining generally higher levels of oracy, immersion pupils appear not to make any more social use of their second language than students studying it as a subject. As Baker (2011: 265) phrases the issue, '[p]otential does not necessarily lead to production' of target languages outside of the immersion classroom. Whilst the limitations of education for the purposes of minority language revitalisation have therefore been widely theorised, empirical research on long-term outcomes of minority language-medium education has been notably scarce internationally. Case studies of former immersion students in Wales (Hodges 2009), Ireland (Murtagh 2008) and Catalonia (Woolard 2011) offer some revealing conclusions in this regard, however. Use of Welsh and Irish by past immersion students in those contexts was found to be limited in Murtagh (2003, 2008) and Hodges' (2009) studies respectively. Catalan language use by former immersion students in Woolard's (2011) research was notably greater, reflecting the Catalan language's demographically divergent setting, improved institutionalisation and stronger social base after the death of Franco (cf. Pujolar and Gonzalez 2013). Yet whilst it remains a keen aspiration in various settings that immersion education will instil bilingual oracy in children, the long-term success of this outcome has not previously been assessed among a substantial sample of former pupils.

The overarching justification of this research is thus to contribute to filling a wider lacuna on long-term outcomes of revitalisation immersion education in the wider international context. The specific rationale for the present article is to better understand how past GME students perceive their own oracy and language ability in Gaelic generally, since greater (perceived) ability and confidence is widely assumed in current policy discourses to lead to greater language use (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2014, 2018; Scottish Government 2014). I discuss these specific policy discourses and priorities below, with a view to providing evidence around the efficacy of current policy strategies for revitalising minority languages through education. As will be demonstrated, there is an identifiable lacuna in current research on language policy and practice concerning the perception and reality of oracy subsequent to immersion schooling.

### **Gaelic in the 21st century**

In 2011 the UK census recorded a 2% decline in the number of people claiming an ability to speak Gaelic in Scotland compared to 2001. This was a notable decrease in the rate of decline from ten years previously, when the equivalent loss was 11% from the 1991 figure. At the same time, however, ethnographic and survey data in the remaining Gaelic ‘heartland’ communities of the Western Isles has demonstrated that language decline, even in areas where a nominal majority of community members report an ability to speak Gaelic, is accelerating rapidly (Munro *et al.* 2010; Ó Giollagáin *et al.* 2020). Dire predictions for the future of Gaelic as a community vernacular were propounded by researchers in Ó Giollagáin *et al.* (2020) and it remains unclear what the next census—delayed in Scotland until 2022 as a result of Covid-19—is likely to show in these communities.

In 2011, a total of 57,602 people over the age of three were reported as being able to speak Gaelic, amounting to 1.1% of the total Scottish population (National Records of Scotland 2013). The census also showed marginal growth in the number of Gaelic speakers under the age of 20. Although the proportion of individuals in this group reporting oracy in Gaelic increased by just 0.1%, the actual increase in numbers of speakers under 25 amounted to 8.6% growth from the 2001 figure (National Records of Scotland 2015: 9). This growth compared to a 4.6% decline in numbers of speakers over 25, and policymakers made much of its importance in demonstrating the success of GME in Scotland. Bòrd na Gàidhlig, the statutory public body responsible for developing and implementing language policy under the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, stated of the figures that:

The number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland has almost stabilised since the census of 2001. This is mainly due to the rise in Gaelic-medium education [...and] shows that within the next ten years the long term decline of the language could be reversed. (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2014)

The significance attached to GME for language policy objectives is similarly emphasised in the following extract from a 2014 consultation paper published by the Scottish Government on a prospective Gaelic education bill. The principles of this document, and the consultation it invited, were subsequently carried over into the Education (Scotland) Act 2016:

The Scottish Government's aim is to create a secure future for Gaelic in Scotland. This will only be achieved by an increase in the numbers of those learning, speaking and using the language. Gaelic medium [sic] education can make an important contribution to this, both in terms of young people's language learning but also in terms of the effects this can have on language use in home, community and work. (Scottish Government, 2014: 3)

Thus the importance invested in GME as a means not only of increasing Gaelic language acquisition, but also of socialising children to use Gaelic in the home, community and at work, is clearly apparent in such statements of policy (cf. *National Gaelic Language Plan 2018–23*; Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2018). Ó hÍfearnáin (2011: 104) summarises an apparent disparity between policy rationales of this kind and international evidence concerning the efficacy of immersion education for creating active language users, observing that while the 'emphasis on immersion [education] as the most effective way to create new speakers' in diverse contexts is understandable, in international perspective 'it is rare for schooling to lead to revitalisation or revernacularisation' in the longer term (see also McLeod 2020).

Whilst there is thus an observable aspiration in current language policy that GME will increase numbers of Gaelic speakers by creating fluent students who will use the language habitually throughout adolescence and adulthood, very little research has previously been conducted on whether GME does indeed lead to demonstrably higher rates of Gaelic oracy in the long term. Whilst it is the intention of many policymakers in the international context that such systems will equip children to lead bilingual lives after school, it has not generally been clearly or convincingly demonstrated that this objective is in fact frequently realised. As a response, the principal research objectives of the present investigation sought to address the role that Gaelic may play in the day-to-day lives of former Gaelic-medium students by assessing the sociological and ideological correlates of participants' professed language practices. The specific focus of this paper concerns former students' conceptions of fluency, perceptions of changes in Gaelic oracy since leaving school, and language ideologies.

## **Language revitalisation and immersion education: Theoretical approaches**

The expression ‘immersion education’ was first coined by Canadian linguists Lambert and Tucker (1972: 225) who described a pioneering French-medium programme for L1 Anglophone children in 1960s Quebec as ‘immersion in a “language bath”’, that would lead to effective bilingual oracy by the end of primary school. This model, through which children receive full immersion in the target language for the first year(s) of primary schooling, was subsequently replicated in diverse contexts internationally as a means of revitalising minority languages. It is interesting to note, in that sense, that whilst Anglophones in Quebec constitute an official linguistic minority in Canadian law (if not pragmatically within Canada, or North America at large), the immersion system they instituted, and which was subsequently replicated internationally, was specifically designed to inculcate bilingualism in children rather than to maintain the community’s L1.

Lyster and Genesee (2019) differentiate one-way and two-way immersion education programmes, discussing the varied effects of these different kinds of immersion on students’ academic achievement generally, and their development of (L1 and L2) target languages in particular. GME officially operates as a two-way immersion system, supporting both L1 Gaelic-speaking children’s language development and socialisation, as well as that of L1 English speakers who learn Gaelic as an L2. Since the earliest years of its availability in Scotland, however, GME has effectively become a one-way immersion system for L2 Gaelic learners/L1 English speakers in the vast majority of cases (cf. Fraser 1989; Dunmore 2019).

In contexts of language shift which employ a modified one- or two-way system of immersion schooling, García (2009: 128) has described the pedagogical rationale as ‘immersion revitalisation’, and GME was established in 1985 on this particular basis (largely via the experience of Welsh-medium education, which began some three decades earlier). Whilst, as previously noted, GME occupies a prominent position in contemporary language policy, various scholars have theorised that the long-term impact of immersion education on language revitalisation initiatives may be critically undermined by complex social and psychological factors. Fishman (2001b: 471), for instance, stated famously that minority languages at which RLS (‘reversing language shift’) efforts are directed require spaces for their habitual use in the domestic domains of home and community before, during and after the completion of education, ‘when formal schooling is over and done with’.

Romaine (2000: 54) similarly observed that a fundamental factor in many instances of language shift has been ‘[the] inability of minorities to maintain the home as an intact domain’ for speaking their language, rather than failing to acquire the domain of formal schooling for its use. This point parallels Fishman’s unwavering emphasis on the difficult task of securing the minoritised variety as the language of the home – and constant avowal that the failure to do so has critically undermined language revitalisation initiatives in diverse contexts (Fishman, 1991, 2001a, b, 2013; see also Edwards 2009, 2010a, b; Heller 2006, 2010; Jaffe 2007a, b; Romaine 2006).

### **Ethnography of Gaelic in the education system**

In the last decade, a wealth of research employing ethnographic perspectives has been brought to bear on Gaelic language use in the domains of home (Smith-Christmas 2011, 2013, 2019, 2021), community (Falzett 2010, 2015; McEwan-Fujita 2010a, b; 2020) and school (MacLeod 2017; NicLeòid 2013; O’Hanlon 2012; Will 2012). A generation earlier, on the basis of extensive fieldwork undertaken East Sutherland, Dorian’s (1981: 76) seminal study noted that intergenerational transmission of Gaelic in many families was critically disrupted in the aftermath of the First World War, as Highland and Island communities struggled to recover from proportionally overwhelming losses of young men. Limited and declining intergenerational transmission of the Gaelic language even in ‘heartland’ areas continues to be a matter of uttermost concern to scholars, policymakers and language advocates (Munro *et al.* 2010; Ó Giollagáin *et al.* 2020). The trajectory of the language’s ongoing decline in Scotland has been documented at length by various researchers in linguistics and anthropology over the last fifty years (MacKinnon 1977; Dorian 1981, 2011; Macdonald 1997; Oliver 2002, 2006; McEwan-Fujita 2010a, b, 2020).

For the purposes of the present research, I summarise below findings from two recent sociolinguistic ethnographies of Gaelic language transmission and immersion education (MacLeod 2017 and Will 2012), juxtaposing these studies’ key conclusions with those of Dorian’s (1981) formative East Sutherland study. MacLeod’s (2017) ethnography of sociolinguistically contrasting communities in Edinburgh and Barra stressed that only a very small number of young families in either of these locations now use Gaelic with regularity and commitment in the home domain. A notable exception to this overall pattern were the (relatively few) parents who continue to use Gaelic with their own parents, among whom ‘use of the language with their own children was common’ (MacLeod 2017: 198).

Irrespective of the sociolinguistic makeup of the community in question, availability of parental resources, such as access to Gaelic childcare or plentiful availability of Gaelic-medium books and media can greatly increase parents' ability to deliver Gaelic language socialisation before and outwith formal education. On the basis of her observations in Barra and Edinburgh, MacLeod (2017: 226) concluded that even with the best of intentions, 'for some parents the effort required [to transmit Gaelic in the home] can be unsustainable.' The finding that Gaelic language use with young children was so limited in either location essentially means that Gaelic language socialisation outwith the formal education system tends now to consist only of 'Gaelic use with parents or other adults [... which] can often only be occasional' (MacLeod 2017: 227). The formal education system was thus found to have become a key context for such younger speakers' Gaelic socialisation and use in contemporary Scotland (MacLeod 2017; cf. Dunmore 2019).

Will's (2012) analysis of intergenerational communication in a Lewis community, however, found limited transmission of and socialisation in Gaelic among GME pupils, identifying a clear barrier to communication to exist between generations. She observed that 'most older community members had trouble placing children socially' because they were no longer culturally connected to them through the social ties that used to predominate in island communities (ibid: 69). Will's (2012) ethnography was conducted within a Gaelic-medium primary class and in the homes of four families with children in the GME stream of the local primary school. She found that Gaelic was seldom used outside of the school between children and adults, concluding that children socialised primarily through GME tend to lack the 'semiotic tools necessary for interacting with adults' in Gaelic, and that GME conveys to pupils a notion of 'Gaelic speakerhood that is at odds with that held by many older Gaelic speakers' (Will 2012: 3). These findings have crucial implications for the present study of fluency in Gaelic, and former-GME pupils' understanding of that term.

Conversely, Dorian's (1981: 82) ethnography of East Sutherland communities stressed that longstanding lack of provision for (and active discouragement of) Gaelic in Highland education had fostered a widespread feeling that the language was relatively worthless in comparison to English. Against this background of historic decline, Dorian (1981: 103) stated that the 'bitterest accusation' that could be levelled against a bilingual speaker in East Sutherland was that they were 'too proud' to speak Gaelic. Such 'pride' was explicitly linked by speakers in her ethnography to the decline of the language. Yet higher levels of 'language loyalty' among individual community members, and resentment of those seen to 'betray'



Gaelic, rarely seemed in fact to translate to greater transmission of the language to children. Indeed a ‘largely negative attitude’ to the transmission of Gaelic was identified by Dorian in the communities she examined (1981: 104). Parents who had themselves acquired Gaelic within the home domain tended to adopt a ‘pragmatic’ attitude to the language’s perceived value for their own children, frequently voicing the opinion that ‘times have changed’, and that English was now the more appropriate code to transmit (Dorian 1981: 106). It was thus conformity to such recognised local wisdom, rather than language disloyalty per se, that was observed to be circumscribed by the behavioural norms of the community.

This type of family language policy often produced what Dorian termed ‘semi-speakers’; speakers with passive abilities who were raised in homes where the minority language was spoken to some degree, but who never attained ‘communicative competence’ in the language (Dorian 1981: 107; cf. Hymes 1972). In respect of Gaelic oracy, rapidly accelerating language change was identified in East Sutherland Gaelic morpho-syntax, including ‘marked decay’ in pronominal gender (Dorian 1981: 125) and confusion in the nominal system generally, including erroneous lenition of initial consonants in the adjectival phrase (*ibid*: 127). Whilst the dative case was ‘rather poorly maintained’ even by younger fluent speakers in East Sutherland, the genitive had become ‘essentially a relic’ for all speakers, having been largely replaced by the use of prepositional phrases to denote possession (*ibid*: 136).

Decreasing use of the language itself was seen as insufficient to explain declining Gaelic oracy in East Sutherland; Dorian (1981: 154) reflected that sociolinguistic conditions that are unique to advanced language shift may ‘help to account for the rather high degree of change among even fully fluent, language-loyal speakers’. The interplay of these different factors is clearly complex, but speakers’ Gaelic-English bilingualism in and of itself was thus clearly not the determining factor in the obsolescence of East Sutherland Gaelic.

Since the 1970s, various scholars have juxtaposed increased Gaelic revitalisation efforts with the ongoing decline of the language in Highland and Island communities (MacKinnon 1977; Dorian 1981, 2011; Macdonald 1997; Oliver 2002, 2006; McEwan-Fujita 2010, 2020). In a detailed exposition of Gaelic verbal taxonomies in L1 speakers’ oral narratives in Highland Scotland and Nova Scotia, Shaw (1999: 311) observed that within sociolinguistic ethnography ‘an interest in speech styles has emerged only fairly recently, beginning in the 1960s’. This development was regarded as a response to the work of Dell Hymes, whose ethnography of speaking framework forms the basis of the analysis undertaken in this article. Shaw (*ibid*) locates the central space occupied within this framework of what he terms ‘the

deceptively commonplace skill of communicative competence, including appropriate use of speech, its relationship to cultural attitudes and values, and the value placed by a culture on language itself'. Hymes's (1972) notion of communicative competence, viewed here in tandem with his ethnography of speaking framework, is central to conceptualising notions of oracy among former-GME students.

## **Summary and Research Questions**

The wider study from which the present analysis is drawn thus builds on a significant body of ethnographic research on Gaelic in the Scottish education system (MacKinnon 1977; Dorian 1981, 2011; Oliver 2002, 2006; O'Hanlon 2012; Will 2012; MacLeod 2017). Its immediate justification is to address one part of a wider lacuna within international research, concerning long-term outcomes of immersion education in minoritised language settings (although see also Murtagh 2008; Hodges 2009; Woolard 2011). The specific rationale for the present study is to better understand how former Gaelic-medium immersion students perceive their own oracy in the language, since greater (perceived) ability and confidence is frequently assumed in current policy discourses to lead to greater language use (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2014, 2018; Scottish Government 2014). Evidence concerning the efficacy of current policy to revitalise minority languages through education will be generated through addressing the following research questions:

- How do former immersion students in the Scottish Gaelic context conceptualise the notion of fluency?
- What changes in relation to their own Gaelic oracy and fluency are former immersion students aware of? And;
- What language ideologies concerning oracy are conveyed by former immersion pupils in their discussion and rationalisation of present linguistic practices?

In order to effectively address these principal research questions, a methodological framework grounded within Hymes's (1974) ethnography of speaking, and utilising his (1972) notion of communicative competence, was adopted. I outline this further below.

## **Methodological framework and research procedure: Ethnography of speaking**

A comprehensive survey of former Gaelic-medium students' language abilities, use, and attitudes was designed as part of the present study, and ethnographic, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 46 individuals to explore these issues in greater depth. These

interviews elicited detailed narrative responses from participants regarding their home, community and linguistic backgrounds, their experiences of GME in childhood, present use of Gaelic, and their language ideologies – glossed here as cultural systems of ideas and beliefs around the language (cf. Silverstein 1979; Kroskrity 2004; Makihara 2010) – in relation to Gaelic and its community. The degree to which the structure contained within this broad topic schedule was adhered to varied depending on the manner in which interaction unfolded in the interviews, with certain interviewees requiring greater questioning and prompting than others. Following disciplinary convention, however, I use the term ‘semi-structured’ to refer to the method by which the interviews were collected for the present research.

As ethnographic interviewer and co-constructor of the discourses that were produced through these interactions, it is important to reflect here on my own positionality within the meaning-making process of the interview (cf. Bucholtz & Hall 2005). I am not an L1 speaker of Gaelic and neither did I attend GME in childhood, but rather made a conscious effort from the age of 15 to learn Gaelic, before undertaking university study of the language as part of a linguistics degree, and subsequently enrolling in various structured immersion courses and informal learning opportunities in Edinburgh, the Western Isles and Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. At the time I conducted interviews for the research outlined in this article, I had become a conversant Gaelic speaker with high levels of oracy in the language, having studied Gaelic languages at undergraduate and Masters level at the Universities of Edinburgh and Oxford and undertaking fieldwork bilingually throughout Scotland. Providing this linguistic background and reflexively unpacking my positionality in the research, as well as my own pathways to language acquisition, can thus be seen as a requisite for interpreting the dataset I outline below.

The choice of language for conducting interviews was decided by interviewees over the course of our interactions; 21 of the 46 participants (46%) chose to carry out the interview principally in Gaelic. 31 of the interviewees were female and 15 male; 17 were raised in the urban Lowlands of Scotland, 12 in the Highlands, and 17 in the Inner and Outer Hebrides. All interviews were transcribed in full by the author, and coded thematically for the most salient categories of discourse that emerged in interviewees’ accounts of their linguistic experiences with Gaelic. After performing an initial review of transcripts for general impressions, I coded salient and recurrent themes as I identified them through careful, repeated reading of transcripts. I subsequently identified the following system of six overarching themes:

- metapragmatic discourses pertaining to present-day Gaelic language use and ability;
- narratives of language socialisation;
- acquisition of Gaelic in childhood;
- ideologies of language use, including perceptions of the Gaelic community;
- ideologies about the Gaelic language and how it should be used; and lastly
- ideologies concerning Gaelic and sociocultural identities at various levels (see also Dunmore 2019).

I then made further detailed readings of each transcript, which allowed me to code the text and label the emerging themes that I discerned in the dataset. These were further organised by category, examined for the most strongly emerging qualities, and labelled accordingly. At this stage the data were also examined for consistency and differences across the corpus, and the corresponding sub-categories coded accordingly.

The methodological framework central to the analysis presented below draws on the ethnography of speaking, a central premise of which conceives of spoken interaction in terms of the speech situation, event and act (Hymes 1974: 52). Cameron (2001: 54) describes the ethnography of speaking as the application of ethnographic methods of this kind to language use in its sociocultural context. As noted by Shaw (1999: 311) Hymes advocated a greater emphasis on performance and ‘communicative competence’, focusing on interactional norms and rules of speaking. With specific relevance to the current study of Gaelic oracy after immersion, Hymes (1974: 119) described bilingual education as ‘a sociolinguistic subject par excellence’, insofar as a central goal of education was ‘to enable children to develop their capacity for creative use of language as part of successful adaptation of themselves’ (cf. Wilkinson 1965). In order to adequately investigate such considerations, Hymes (1974: 4) argued that it is necessary to ‘take as context a community, or network of persons, investigating its communicative activities as a whole’.

A central premise in the ethnography of speaking is the conceptualisation of spoken interaction in terms of the speech situation, speech event and, at the most minute level of analysis, the speech act (Hymes 1974: 52). A speech situation can be understood as the type of interaction a particular setting represents; overwhelmingly in my own dataset the speech situation analysed is that of the semi-structured interview, whilst discrete speech events encompassed asking and responding to questions, narrating experiences and reflecting on

language abilities. Speech acts, meanwhile, are defined as the smallest individual units of spoken interaction, governed by sociocultural ‘norms’ such as turn-taking or repetition.

By focusing on these three levels of analysis, Hymes emphasised that analysts’ conception of language ought not to be separated from how and why it is used in practice. In particular, my analysis foregrounds the notions of ‘act’ sequence, ‘keys’, or context-based clues that can be utilised in order to establish the ‘tone, manner, or spirit’ of a particular speech act (Hymes 1974: 57), and the various ‘instrumentalities’ within linguistic repertoires that participants draw upon to convey speech acts (Hymes 1974: 60). Within the analysis developed below, codeswitches between English and Gaelic function both as linguistic ‘instrumentalities’ to convey speakers’ meanings, and as ‘keys’ by which analysts can interpret the tone and manner of those meanings. Furthermore, the speech ‘act sequence’ contained in each interview excerpt foregrounds the role of the interviewer in co-constructing meaning within the discourse. My own positionality as researcher and analyst is thus key to further understanding the wider context of the speech events I describe (cf. Bucholtz & Hall 2005).

Hymes’s methodological framework has been productively employed previously in the examination of L1 Gaelic communities in Scotland and Atlantic Canada by Shaw (1999) and Falzett (2015). The analysis presented in this article will focus on interview participants’ discourses illustrating their conceptions of fluency and reported levels of oracy in the Gaelic language. Lastly, I draw attention to a set of language ideologies frequently expressed in interviews, which conceives of Gaelic use as secondary to notionally ‘having’, and possessing Gaelic as a facet of personhood.

### **Analysis: Uncertainty over the meaning of fluency**

One of the key objectives of the wider research from which the present study was drawn was to assess through interviews the degree to which participants used Gaelic in their lives. A key finding in this research was an apparent disparity between reported ability in Gaelic, and actual language use by former GME students. High levels of Gaelic oracy were reported by 22 interviewees (48%), whilst just 10 reported using Gaelic on a daily basis at present (22%). I propose that one of the possible reasons for this observed mismatch may be the sense of uncertainty that interviewees frequently expressed over what it means to be a ‘fluent’ speaker of the language when discussing the issue in either English or Gaelic. Early on in the interview, all research participants were invited to describe their present abilities in Gaelic. The issue is perhaps complicated by the use of two discrete Gaelic lexemes to convey the

meaning of ‘fluent’, as described in Dwelly’s (2001 [1911]) authoritative Gaelic-English dictionary. As is clearly exemplified in the following extract, there is a rather nuanced distinction between the Gaelic words *fileanta*, meaning ‘fluent’ (with literary connotations ‘eloquent’, ‘poetic’, ‘melodious’ etc) and *siùbhlach*, again meaning ‘fluent’ but derived instead from the verb *siubhal* ‘to move, travel’ (cf. Dwelly 2001 [1911]):

**Ex. 1.**

- IM01 Chanainnsa gu bheil mi siùbhlach sa Ghàidhlig- chan eil mi cinnteach gu bheil mi fileanta- chan eil mi a' tuigsinn dè th' ann am fileantas  
*I would say I'm fluent [/conversant] in Gaelic- I'm not sure I'm fluent [/eloquent]- I don't understand what fluency [fileantas] is*
- SD Direach uh huh  
*Exactly uh huh*
- IM01 Tha mi fhathast- chan eil mise fileanta sa Bheurla [a bhith a' bruidhinn (x)]  
*I'm still- I'm not fluent [/eloquent] in English [to speak (x)]*
- SD [Chan eil no mise] sin e- aidh  
*[Neither am I] that's it- yeah*
- IM01 Sin an rud, ann an dòigh **I mean** deagh cheist a tha seo- 's urrainn dhomh bruidhinn airson (.) tòrr ùine [...] 's urrainn dhomh bruidhinn sa Ghàidhlig glè mhath, 's urrainn dhomh deasbad sa Ghàidhlig fìor mhath feumaidh mi a ràdh ((laughs))  
*That's the thing, in a way I mean it's a good question- I can speak for (.) a long time [...] I can speak in Gaelic very well, I can argue in Gaelic very well I have to say ((laughs))*

I would have characterised IM01 as a fluent speaker without hesitation, but his own emic reflections on the meaning of fluency reveal a degree of uncertainty over exactly what that term means to him in respect of his current Gaelic oracy. Indeed, this sense is reflected in the speaker’s alternate use and consideration of the terms ‘*fileanta*’ and ‘*siùbhlach*’. Falzett (2015) discusses the semantics of this terminological disparity in detail, offering a complex interpretation of the meanings of these respective terms. Yet the above speaker’s sense of ambiguity around this specific terminology, reflected clearly in excerpt 1, is expressed frequently throughout interviews conducted with former GME students in Gaelic. Whereas some speakers may be inclined to under-report their Gaelic language abilities (as informant IM01 appears to do), others display a tendency to overplay them. This may of course arise in part from the fact that many interviewees were not entirely sure how their abilities may have changed, having not perhaps spoken the language much for a period of several years. This possible interpretation is evidenced in the following exchange:

**Ex. 2.**

1. LF01 Um I would say I'm fluent but because I don't use it daily um: when I'm using it conversationally it can take a while to sort of come back again
2. SD Hmm sure
3. LF01 But still I would describe myself as fluent [...] I still can speak it fluently so I think that even if there's not the opportunity to use it regularly, it's still a good thing to speak it
4. SD Hmm yeah [...] **a bheil thu cofhurtail cumail a' dol sa Bheurla no am b' fheàrr leat Gàidhlig a chleachdadh?**  
*are you comfortable continuing in English or would you rather use Gaelic?*
5. LF01 Eh bhiodh e math /a' cleachdadh/ Gàidhlig [...] tha mi smaoini' gu bheil sin- /na/ clann agam- tha iad a' dol /ag/ ionnsachadh/ Gàidhlig- /tha/ sin an rud as motha a tha: tighinn bhuaithe airson /mi fhìn/ [...] nuair a bha mi /ann an/ sgoil sin (.) um- tha mi a' dol a chleachdadh Beurla cuideachd  
*Eh it would be good /to/use Gaelic [...] I think that- my child/ren/ they are going /to/ learn Gaelic- that /is/ the biggest thing that: comes from it for /myself/ [...] when I was in /a/ school there (.) um- I'm going to use English as well*
6. SD O na gabh dragh idir **yeah that's fine**  
*Oh don't worry at all*

As she had previously reported low levels of Gaelic use at present, I was surprised to hear this speaker describe herself as fluent in turns 1 and 3, and I subsequently initiated a switch to Gaelic (turn 4). Acquiescing to this code-switch, she continued in Gaelic for a time but it was clear that she was struggling to express herself, as I have indicated with angled brackets for the atypical usages she produces in terms of recognised grammatical conventions in contemporary spoken Gaelic. This extract highlights the ambiguity that surrounds the concept of fluency for many of my interviewees. She consequently pauses and initiates a switch back to English at the end of turn 5, a request with which I comply in turn 6. Whilst the speech act depicted in turn 5 is thus conveyed with some considerable difficulty by LF01, her reported intention to raise her future children with Gaelic demonstrates a high degree of language loyalty on the speaker's part, at least on a linguistic ideological level (cf. Siverstein 1979; Dorian 1981). Nevertheless, the speaker's claim to Gaelic fluency in turn 1, albeit qualified by the admission that 'it can take a while [for Gaelic fluency] to sort of come back again' is rather called into question by the substantial difficulty she subsequently displays in communicating this supportive Gaelic language ideology in turn 5 (cf. Dorian 1981). In the following extract, speaker LF04 displays a similar set of hesitations and atypical usages when responding in Gaelic:

**Ex. 3.**

1. SD [H]ow would you describe your abilities in Gaelic today- would you say you're a fluent speaker?
2. LF04 ((sighs)) Uh y:es- or like I could be a bit rusty when I- when I come back to it (.) I think so um [...] I definitely- I'm definitely fluent in it
3. SD Uh huh
4. LF04 and it's just a case of (.) not using it  
[...]
5. SD **Am biodh tu cofhurtail beagan Gàidhlig a bhruidhinn dìreach an-dràsta?**  
*Would you be comfortable speaking a bit of Gaelic just now?*
6. LF04 Um (.) ceart ma-tha!  
*Um (.) okay then!*
7. SD A bheil sin ceart gu leòr?  
*Is that all right?*
8. LF04 Mm hmm [...] uh nam/ /beachdsa /tha/ Gàidheal cuideigin a tha (.) um (.) bhon/ /àitean de/ /Alba a tha: ah ((sighs)) a tha- [...] far an robh Gàidhlig (1.5) /a' bruidhinn/ an toiseach [...] ma tha thu (1.1) ma tha thu erm (1.7) airson eh eh dèanamh rudan a tha (.) um (2.5) oh ((sighs)) an/ /Gàidhlig agam cho sgrathail a-nis! ((laughs))  
*Mm hmm [...] uh in /my/ opinion a Gael /is/ someone who (.) um (.) from /places/ of/ /Scotland ((sighs)) that- [...] where Gaelic was (1.5) speaking [sic] initially [...] if you (1.1) if you erm (1.7) want to do eh eh things that (.) um (2.5) oh ((sighs)) /my/ Gaelic is so terrible now! ((laughs))*

Whilst displaying some uncertainty in turn 2, evident in her production of a sigh, elongation of the initial consonant in ‘yes’, and subsequent repairs and repetitions, interviewee LF04 clearly states unambiguously ‘I’m definitely fluent in [Gaelic]’. Again, being surprised to hear the speaker’s emic profession of fluency, in spite of limited present use of Gaelic, I initiate a switch to Gaelic. The interviewee is willing to continue in Gaelic, while attempting to explain what the significance of the ethnolinguistic identity label ‘Gael’. Once again, however, it is clear that speaker LF04 is struggling to adequately express herself, as indicated by the extended pauses, sighs and atypical usages in turn 8. She states at the end of the extract that her Gaelic skills are ‘terrible’ (*sgrathail*) now, producing laughter at the end of the speech act. This rather awkward laughter appears to reflect surprise and discomfort at the apparent decline of the interviewee’s Gaelic oracy since leaving immersion schooling. Although only a small number of interviewees reported their oral Gaelic proficiency to be short of ‘fluent’ but still somewhat articulate, the reflections of those that did so are enlightening nevertheless. For example, the following speaker described the decline she perceives in her own Gaelic language skills when I ask if she would describe herself as fluent:



**Ex. 4.**

- SD An canadh tu gu bheil thu fileanta sa Ghàidhlig?  
*Would you say you're fluent in Gaelic?*
- IF01 Em (.) ((laughs)) tha lis- tha fhios 'am nach eil mi cho fileanta anns a' Ghàidhlig ach an-dràst' tha caran de (.) erm: (.) Gàidhlig **revolution** – sin 's a tha mi ag ràdh ri/ /h-uile duine – pearsanta agam an-dràst' **you know** [...] a chionn 's nach eil a' Ghàidhlig agam cho fileanta ach nuair a tha mi a' bruidhinn Gàidhlig tha mi a' cuimhneachadh faclan [...] chan urrainn dhomh sin eh (.) fhreagairt- freagairt- fhreagairt **really** a chionn 's gu bheil mi a' smaoinich' gu bheil e cho brònach gu bheil mise a' dol /ag/ ràdh nach eil mi fileanta – agus 's e caran a' chiad chànan agam a bh' ann **you know?** ((laughs))  
*Em (.) ((laughs)) I- I know I'm not so fluent in Gaelic but at the moment I'm having a sort of personal Gaelic **revolution**- that's what I say to everyone- **you know** [...] because my Gaelic isn't so fluent but when I speak it I remember words [...] I can't (.) answer- anse- answer that **really** because I think it's so sad that I say that I'm not fluent and it was kind of my first language **you know?** ((laughs))*

Keys to the manner and spirit of the speech acts depicted in the above extract are evident in the speaker's hesitation, pause and laughter at the start of her answer, and relatively frequent use of English lexemes and speech markers as instrumentalities to convey her meaning, Informant IF01 refers to her recent experience of using the language again as a 'Gaelic revolution', reflecting on the manner in which she is increasingly able to recall and retrieve Gaelic lexemes when actively pursuing opportunities to speak the language. This experience may be qualitatively distinct from the kinds of attrition speakers reported for Gaelic as an L2 (as in the previous 3 extracts) since speaker IF01 was raised in the Western Isles and reported Gaelic as her L1. She nevertheless describes it as sad (*brònach*) that her first language has attrited due to relative disuse in the urban Lowlands, demonstrating a degree of that attrition when displaying uncertainty over whether to lenite the initial consonant of *freagairt* ('answer') when employing the syntactically inverted phrase 'chan urrainn dhomh sin a fhreagairt' (*I can't answer that*). It is possible that the personal 'Gaelic revolution' this speaker refers to may in future remedy the apparent attrition of Gaelic oracy she describes. The idea that it is possible to re-develop Gaelic language abilities that have previously declined is also expressed in the following extract:

**Ex. 5.**

- IF05 My ability in Gaelic is em (.) ((sighs)) (.) I would say if you're putting it in comparison to a lot of other speakers of Gaelic may be quite good but em the problem is that because I'm not using Gaelic an awful lot

em [...] I can use it- I went to a job interview and I managed to use it for a presentation for about em (.) forty five minutes I was up there speaking fluent Gaelic- or what I consider fluent Gaelic (.) I can get back into the mindset of being a fluent speaker

Again, the idea that previously eroded Gaelic oracy may be retrievable is elaborated here; according to this speaker it is a case of re-acquiring the right ‘mindset’ to speak it. Therefore although a majority of the interviewees reported that their levels of Gaelic oracy had attrited due to limited use since leaving school, many nevertheless entertained the impression that it would be possible to recover such abilities in future. Furthermore, it is notable that even interviewees with the lowest levels of reported oracy expressed this language ideology (cf. Silverstein 1979; Kroskity 2004). As exemplified in extracts 2, 3 and 5, many interviewees who reported relatively limited oracy in Gaelic described feeling as if the language was still accessible somewhere in their minds. Similarly, many reported passive ability to understand Gaelic, but expressed difficulties retrieving structures and words when speaking it, a finding verified by participants during semi-structured interviews. This experience is a common finding in the large literature on language attrition generally (Andersen 1982; Lambert 1989; Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer 2010; Schmid 2011) and in Gaelic languages specifically (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin 1979; Murtagh 2003, 2008). The feeling that the language is still ‘in one’s head’, albeit somewhat difficult to access in conversation, is clearly described in the following excerpt:

**Ex. 6.**

|      |  |
|------|--|
| SD   | How would you describe your abilities today in the language?   |
| LF05 | In my head I can speak it much better than in real life  |
| SD   | Uh huh=  |
| LF05 | =so like I can have conversations with myself in my head   |
| SD   | Right okay so it's like it's- it's still there but=  |
| LF05 | =Oh yeah [...] if somebody speaks to me in Gaelic fluently like (.) I can understand it you know what I mean [sit there]   |
| SD   | [Yeah]   |
| LF05 | nodding along and then they ask you a question you're like (.) ‘I know <u>how</u> to answer and how I <u>should</u> answer this’ but it's just finding the words |

The above interviewee’s observation that in her opening speech act that ‘[i]n my head I can speak it much better than in real life’ reflects the same difficulty in accessing Gaelic words and structures that various other participants described elsewhere in the dataset. In Hymes’s (1974) terms, keys to the interpretation of this speaker’s meaning are apparent in her heavy stress on the words ‘how’ and ‘should’ in the constructed dialogue: ‘you’re like (.) “I know

how to answer and how I should answer this”’. Although such interviewees tend not to refer to their own levels of Gaelic oracy in particularly positive terms, they often do report passive ability in the language, particularly if the co-conversant doesn’t speak ‘too quickly’, as the following participant describes:

**Ex. 7.**

|      |  |
|------|--|
| SD   | [H]ow would you describe your current abilities in Gaelic?   |
| HF06 | Oh, not very good (.) I just don't use it enough anymore (.) m: I think my: I think I can read Gaelic better than I <u>think</u> I can |
| SD   | Okay   |
| HF06 | Em: and spoken Gaelic I can understand (.) if it's spoken not too quickly  |
| SD   | Okay   |
| HF06 | Em: but I don't  |
| SD   | You wouldn't call yourself fluent?   |
| HF06 | Not any more no  |

While by no means feeling fluent in the language, this interviewee implies having had such competence in Gaelic in the past, and states that her reading ability is generally better than she would imagine after having used the language so seldom in recent years. Having the language stored somewhere in one’s mind is elucidated by the following interviewee as an ability ‘to pick up’ again on where he ‘left off’ with Gaelic previously:

**Ex. 8.**

|      |  |
|------|--|
| SD   | [W]ould you still consider that you have the ability to speak Gaelic? Or to sort of re-develop that ability? |
| LM05 | Eh [I think I've got the ability to em (.)]  |
| SD   | [Would you call yourself a Gaelic speaker?]  |
| LM05 | to pick up where I left off in the past  |
| SD   | Yeah uh huh  |
| LM05 | Like em (.) so I'd probably describe myself as a previous Gaelic learner                                     |
| SD   | Yeah yeah (.) and it sort of gives you a base level to work off  |
| LM05 | It's sort of dormant at the moment   |

This informant’s description of himself as a ‘previous Gaelic learner’ and of his Gaelic language skills as ‘dormant’ is particularly pertinent to my considerations here in relation to bilingual oracy. Speakers within the interview corpus who reported low abilities in Gaelic in the present day often framed their spoken Gaelic proficiency in these terms, but it was unclear that ‘picking up’ the language again is actually an objective that many would actively pursue in the future. Very few of the informants indicated any specific plans or strategies to re-develop their Gaelic oracy in the future. Some insight in this regard is available from the analysis of interviewees’ language ideologies regarding Gaelic use (below).

Interviewees throughout the study thus generally reported low levels of Gaelic language use, especially in the informal ‘home-community-neighbourhood’ domains that are often regarded as crucial for intergenerational transmission and reversing language shift generally. Although low-to-intermediate levels of current ability in Gaelic were only reported by a slight majority of interviewees, it is likely that some self-reports of ‘high’ oracy were exaggerated. It was possible to discern that this was the case in the case of several interviewees discussed (as in extracts 2-3, above). Furthermore, uncertainty over exactly what ‘fluency’ denotes in either language abounds in the dataset as a whole. If the general picture that emerges, then, is of relatively weak Gaelic language use and widely varying degrees of oracy among Gaelic-medium educated adults, we may turn our attention to the possible ideological correlates underlying this pattern.

### **Ideologies of oracy: Disuse, loss and ‘having’ Gaelic**

Two competing linguistic ideologies were conveyed by interviewees in relation to the attrition of Gaelic language skills. A large proportion of participants reported feeling that their abilities in Gaelic had declined because of their limited use of the language in past years, while a smaller number stated the belief that using the language frequently had prevented such attrition. By contrast, other interviewees reported feeling that ‘having’ Gaelic, without necessarily speaking or using it in their day-to-day lives, was valuable to them in and of itself. Firstly, therefore, the following two extracts exemplify the ideology expressed by various speakers that attrition of Gaelic language skills arises because of disuse:

#### **Ex. 9.**

1. IF13 I think I'm quite **lapach** (*rusty*) because (.) I don't really have anybody that I speak it [*i.e.* Gaelic] to regularly
2. SD Uh huh
3. IF13 Like you know if you're not using it it does kind of like (.) it's probably- it would be fine if I started speaking- speaking it right now but I wouldn't feel very confident [kind of thing]
4. SD [Yeah that's the thing-] just a question of confidence I suppose
5. IF13 I think (.) I probably- I probably sh:ould go along to stuff ((laughs)) [... ] I know if I don't use it then (.) I'll lose it kind of thing

The above participant reports feeling less fluent in the language than she used to be, a situation she blames on having limited opportunities to use the language. Participant IF13 claims in turn 1 that she is ‘*lapach*’ or rusty in the language because of a lack of Gaelic-speaking peers and interlocutors with whom she could use it. In turn 5, she states ‘I probably

sh:ould go along to stuff [in Gaelic]’, elongating the initial consonant of ‘should’. It is notable in this sense that the speaker expresses a degree of culpability in the decline of her language abilities, an emotional response I have addressed in greater detail elsewhere (Dunmore 2019). As noted, the informant first states in turn 5 that she ‘probably should go along’ to Gaelic events, placing particular emphasis on and elongating the initial consonant of ‘should’ – and laughing, perhaps betraying a sense of discomfort at the admission she has implicitly made. The informant therefore considers use of Gaelic as the best way to prevent the loss of oracy and other linguistic proficiencies in the language. The complement to this point is made in the following extract by a speaker raised with Gaelic in the urban Lowlands but who is now based in the Western Isles:

**Ex. 10.**

1. LM04 Mura bheil Gàidhlig làidir agad cha bhi thu ga cleachdadh  
*Unless you have strong Gaelic you won't use it*
2. SD Cha bhi  
*No*
3. LM04 Às dèidh **so** (.) tha mi (.) 's dòcha eagallach mura /bhios/ (.) **you know** Gàidhlig /m/ath aig daoine a tha a' fàgail an/ /sgoil [...] shuas an-seo airson a' mhòr-chuid tha Gàidhlig eh (.) och dè /an/ Gàidhlig airson em **you know 'less important'?**  
*Afterwards so (.) I am (.) maybe fearful if people who leave school don't have good Gaelic [...] up here for most people Gaelic is eh (.) och what's Gaelic for you know 'less important'?*
4. SD Dìreach- chan eil e cho cudromach, air neo?  
*Exactly- it's not as important, or?*
5. LM04 **Yeah** chan eil e cho cudromach [...] dè /G/àidhlig airson- tha mi (.) **yeah** ((sighs)) er '**interest**'?  
*Yeah it's not so important [...] what's Gaelic for- I am (.) yeah ((sighs)) er 'interest'?*

Intriguingly, the language that this informant uses to describe decline resulting from disuse provides a number of metalinguistic cues to the nature of this phenomenon. Up to this point the interview had proceeded in English, as the informant reported using the language only rarely himself. He nevertheless acquiesced to speak Gaelic towards the end of the interview following my invitation to do so. Yet he is clearly struggling in this excerpt to communicate his meaning in Gaelic, as I have indicated with angled brackets for atypical usages, such as use of incorrect verbal and case forms in turns 1, 3 and 5.

The Gaelic equivalents for ‘less important’ and ‘interest’ also escape his memory, while his constant pauses and sighing at the end of turn 5 reveal a relative lack of fluency at present. As

such, his point in turn 1 – that unless speakers have a good standard of Gaelic they are unlikely to use it – seems well made. In contrast to the above extracts, however, exemplifying speakers’ belief that disuse leads to decline in Gaelic oracy, various participants expressed an altogether different view. Informant IF03 expounds on this alternative language ideology in greater detail in the following account. Whilst the force with which she does so is unusual in the dataset more generally, what is most remarkable is the way in which she convinces her friend (IF04) of how reasonable and common-sense this position is:

**Ex. 11.**

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| IF03 | I like knowing that I have <u>got</u> the language  |
| SD   | Okay yeah   |
| IF03 | It's not important for me to be able to speak it every day and I don't know if I want to have it in my world every day  |
| SD   | Yeah  |
| IF03 | Maybe it's because I know it's so separate and so cliquy that I just wouldn't want to be part of that kind of thing anyway [...] But it doesn't- it wouldn't bother me- I wouldn't be fussed about using it every day in everyday language [...] I <u>have</u> it and I like having it cos it's like a little personal thing that you have that not everybody has [...] |
| IF04 | I haven't thought of it like that before- I guess there's so much pressure and so much kind of learning it to use it in a Gaelic world you know?  |
| SD   | Yeah  |
| IF04 | And stuff- but you know what's wrong with just having it?   |

Interviewee IF03 therefore appears to regard it as a matter of pride to ‘have’ Gaelic as an icon of personal identity and a ‘little personal thing’ that distinguishes her from others. The language is not especially seen as being useful for ‘every day’ communication, and in fact she states that she ‘wouldn't want to be part’ of the Gaelic community because of its perceived ‘cliquiness’. In response, informant IF04, her friend and flatmate, seems to be persuaded by her reasoning, and defends the position of ‘just having it’, as opposed to using the language ‘in a Gaelic world’. In this way it may be seen that language ideologies of this kind can spread rather surreptitiously, taking root through discursive constructions even as they are negotiated by speakers (*cf.* Kroskrity 2004; Makihara 2010). The apparent common sense of this ideology of language, however, positing that using Gaelic is less important than ‘having’ the language in the first place, is undermined by the lack of apparent oracy exhibited in extracts 2, 3 and 10, above.

The above extracts (9-11) exemplify two competing discourses advanced by different speakers in the dataset. Some participants readily associate the attrition of their Gaelic

language skills with their disuse of the language subsequent to leaving GME. Among others, however, the discourse of ‘having Gaelic’ appears to militate against the belief that using it regularly is important for maintaining abilities in the language. Yet even among those who subscribe the former viewpoint, regular use of the language was generally only reported occasionally, with many blaming this on a lack of opportunity to speak Gaelic in their daily lives subsequent to leaving immersion education (Dunmore 2018, 2019; cf. McEwan-Fujita 2008, 2020).

## **Conclusions**

Whilst high levels of Gaelic oracy were reported by 22 interviewees in the present study, only 10 of these reported using Gaelic on a daily basis at present. On the other hand, 21 participants chose to carry out the interview principally in Gaelic, a higher proportion than might be anticipated in light of the latter finding. Interviewees’ responses in respect of their Gaelic language abilities – and their reflections on the degree to which past linguistic proficiencies might have declined are revealing in this regard. It is clear that for many former immersion students, decline in Gaelic oracy only becomes apparent when attempting to use the language after many years of relative disuse. This interpretation was particularly evidenced in extracts 2 and 3 of the interview dataset discussed above. In Hymesean terms, keys to the manner and spirit of speech acts within interviews were particularly reflected in speakers’ hesitations, pauses and repairs in the discourses they produced. Atypical usages that interviewees produced in extracts 2, 3 and 10, in particular, recall certain aspects of the erosion of Gaelic morpho-syntax that Dorian (1981) documented in East Sutherland.

Similarly, limitations that have previously been identified by Will (2012) and MacLeod (2017) in relation to Gaelic language socialisation through GME are reflected among former-GME students with regard to both limited Gaelic use and oracy in the present study. In part, widespread uncertainty among participants (in both Gaelic and English) in respect of the meaning of ‘fluency’ betrays widely varying perceptions of decline in oracy, after significant periods of relative Gaelic disuse. Such disuse was explicitly associated by interviewees in extracts 10 and 11 with perceived declines in their language abilities. By contrast, however, interview participants in extract 12 rejected the importance of using Gaelic, and of thereby maintaining higher levels of oracy. The ideology reflected here and elsewhere in interviews maintained that ‘having’ Gaelic as a facet of personal distinctiveness, quite apart from actual linguistic practice, was valuable in and of itself. Again, however, the clear attrition of oracy

exhibited elsewhere in the interview analysis betrays the fact that simply ‘having’ Gaelic (in the absence of habitual language use) may often in fact obscure an inability to coherently convey meaning or communicate cohesively in that language. In many respects, the conclusions presented here may come as little surprise to researchers who have investigated the delivery and impact of GME since the late 1980s (cf. Fraser 1989; Oliver 2002, 2006; O’Hanlon 2012; Will 2012; MacLeod 2017). Notably, the majority of research participants in the present study claimed informally not to expect many of their old classmates to continue to speak the language in the present day. Fishman’s (1991, 2001a, b, 2013) theories of reversing language shift would predict exactly this outcome, and from that perspective the key conclusions of this research may well be rather unsurprising.

Significantly, however, this research provides evidence for the likely long-term attrition of oracy skills, in the absence of continued target language use after immersion education is completed. As such, language policy to revitalise Gaelic should consider how the language can be normalised in the home and community lives of GME students to mitigate such loss of skills. This finding has clear implications not only in the context of past (and present) GME students, but also of minority language ‘immersion revitalisation’ education systems (García 2009: 128) elsewhere in the Celtic world. For parents, teachers and policymakers who initially campaigned for the establishment of GME, were responsible for its delivery over the past 35 years, or who continue to promote its development as a means of creating new speakers, attrition of oracy among many former-GME students may be a cause of considerable frustration. Such frustration is particularly understandable in the context of present language planning priorities in Scotland (cf. Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2018) and policymakers’ estimation that higher levels of oracy instilled through GME will endure beyond school, leading in turn to greater language use.

As Dorian (2011: 468) has observed, the long-term effectiveness of current policy to revitalise Gaelic remains to be seen, and the language’s position remains particularly precarious in the contexts of home and community. Evidence provided in this study regarding the efficacy of GME for realising language policy objectives should inform official understandings and policy priorities for language maintenance, both at home and abroad. In particular, the difficult task of normalising minority language use at home, to any degree that is possible in the absence of intergenerational transmission, is emphasised. The present research thus reaffirms the limited degree to which education alone can be relied upon to equip students with enduringly high levels of oracy, years after they complete their studies.



### Key to transcription conventions

|              |                                |
|--------------|--------------------------------|
| [words]      | overlapping speech             |
| (.)          | perceivable pause <1s duration |
| (2.0)        | perceivable pause >1s duration |
| (word)       | uncertain transcription        |
| (x)          | unintelligible                 |
| ((word))     | analyst's comments             |
| [...]        | material omitted               |
| wo::         | elongation                     |
| <u>word</u>  | emphatic speech                |
| word=        | latched speech, no pause       |
| <b>words</b> | codeswitch                     |

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