Introduction

1 Early Days

In American descriptive linguistic practice during the first decades after World War II, it went almost without saying that any speech form being newly described would be presented as spoken by fully fluent adults whose first language it was. If this was not possible because no such speakers remained, the reader was alerted to possible shortcomings in the description (Haas 1941; cf. Evans 2001: 261). Interest in such matters as, say, the language acquisition of children or the effects of language contact was certainly not absent, but the development of distinct subfields devoted to child language, language contact, non-standard speech, pidgins and creoles, aphasic speech, language attrition, and language obsolescence was still only on the horizon. All the same, while the preeminence of fluent-speaker descriptive objectives went more or less unchallenged for several post-war decades, questions relating to the social context of language use and the effect of social context on language structure itself gradually attracted increased attention.

Like many another researcher working late in that era with a small, recessive speech form in unequal competition with an expanding majority language, I considered the chief objective of my linguistic work to be describing the speech form in question and placing it officially on the record (chapter 23). But also like other researchers working with a recessive speech form, I eventually found that the social context in which this speech form was receding gave rise to interesting questions: who were the people who still persisted in speaking the minority language under these conditions, and what was the form of the language they continued to speak like, especially among the youngest of them?

The article reprinted as chapter 21 in this collection sets out the circumstances in which I began in 1963 (and continued thereafter) to do linguistic fieldwork in eastern Sutherland, on the far northeast coast of Highland Scotland, in the three former fishing villages of Brora, Golspie, and Embo. Fisherfolk Gaelic, long sustained by the occupational and social separateness of its speakers, had been losing ground to English as the local fishing industry declined and then disappeared. The Gaelic spoken by the Gaelic-English bilinguals of the area (there were no remaining monolingual Gaelic speakers) showed marked regional characteristics common to all three villages, but it also showed notable differences village by village. This local Gaelic was unwritten, and the only previous record of it took the form of answers to a questionnaire administered
by peripatetic fieldworkers from the Gaelic division of the Linguistic Survey of Scotland in 1953 (Brora) and 1958 (Golspie and Embo). The Gaelic of this region was highly distinctive, as is often true of dialects spoken at geographic peripheries, but by the 1950s and '60s its survival was in doubt. Both its distinctiveness and its fragility made its description important to the Linguistic Survey, whose fieldworkers had sampled the small population of former fisherfolk via several speakers in Brora, but via only one speaker each in Golspie and in Embo. This constituted a very restricted sample for Embo in particular, since something close to half of the adult Embo population (more than 100 people) still spoke Gaelic five years later, when I began working there. The focus of the Survey’s questionnaire was furthermore quite narrow: “to gather information on the synchronic reflexes of the Common Gaelic phonological system” (Ó Dochartaigh 1997: 54). While it was a lengthy document and took a good deal of time to administer, it dealt extensively only with phonology. Other aspects of East Sutherland Gaelic speech remained unexplored and unrecorded as the 1960s began.

From the point of view of the Linguistic Survey, the speech varieties in use in Brora, Golspie, and Embo represented particular dialects of Gaelic, and while their loss might reduce the number of existing forms of Gaelic speech and remove valuable historical information, it did not represent a threat to the existence of the Gaelic language. Associating the word “death” with “Gaelic,” as I did in the title and subtitle of a book that appeared in 1981, may consequently have seemed provocative and extreme to the general run of Gaelic specialists. But for local Gaelic speakers, who by then constituted an isolated speech island in an area where English had been dominant for over half a century and was becoming more so with every passing year, the issue was quite different. The local Gaelic was Gaelic to them, and what they saw as threatened was one of their two languages. When they talked about the likely end of their Gaelic, they spoke of it not as a dying dialect but as a dying language, as in the local context it surely was. The terminology of death and dying was in fact already in use among local speakers (“That’s how I’m saying it’s a dying language”, said a Brora bilingual in 1972; “We thought it was dying”, said another Brora bilingual in a 1974 field interview, explaining how it was that she and her husband had not transmitted Gaelic to their children). For the most part I have adopted local bilinguals’ point of view, speaking here and elsewhere of “language” loss and “language” endangerment in the East Sutherland villages: one of two languages spoken in these villages was in sharp decline and was likely to pass out of use.

The papers collected in this volume represent most particularly the development of my own interests, of course, as I continued to work with this small,