CHAPTER 2

The Fate of Morphological Complexity in Scottish Gaelic Language Death: Evidence from East Sutherland Gaelic

1 Introduction

In recent years, increasing attention has been focused on pidgin and creole languages, in part as a kind of proving ground for both linguistic and sociolinguistic theory. Not least among the interests of recent writers have been issues of simplification and convergence as linguistic processes; witness the very substantial third section of Hymes 1971. In its preface, Hymes writes of four “moments” which a theory of pidgin and creole languages must integrate. Of these, the first two are: (1) the universal tendencies to adapt speech, and varieties of a language, by simplification in some circumstances, expansion in others; (2) the occurrence of these tendencies in situations of language contact, so as to give rise to partial confluence of linguistic traditions.

While fully acknowledging the great value of pidginization and creolization studies in the investigation of simplification (and/or elaboration) and confluence in language use, I submit that the study of language death has much to offer in these same areas of investigation, and that so far it has been much too little tapped as a source of information in these matters. This is not to say that simplification and confluence appear in language death in the same degree, at the same points – or for the same reasons – that they do, say, in pidginization. Indeed, I hope to show in this paper that they need not. But this, I think, only makes it the more important that we include the special case of language death when we venture on the topics of simplification and confluence.

It has, of course, long been recognized that dying languages characteristically show reduction of one kind or another – or, most often, of many kinds at once. Early reports tended to be quite general and to be impressionistically rendered. Thus Bloomfield 1927 characterized White-Thunder’s Menomini as “atrocious”: “His vocabulary is small; his inflections are often barbarous; he constructs sentences of a few threadbare models.” Krauss 1963–70 offers many comments on failings in the Eyak texts he collected from a last few speakers, but most of them are general rather than specific (“inappropriate here”, “distorted”, “confused towards end”, all from p. 44); and they are not systematized to show in what ways the language is suffering changes in its patterns. Miller
offers a generalization about the terminal Shoshoni language: “Younger speakers do not always have a complete control of the grammar and phonology, but the area which shows the greatest impoverishment is vocabulary.”

Quite recently, studies have begun to appear which treat simplification and confluence in dying languages with something more nearly approaching the detail and scope with which they have been treated in pidginization studies, although there is still no full-length volume comparable to Mühlhäusler 1974. Thus Dressler 1972 discusses rule loss in the phonology of a dying variety of Breton; Hill 1973 traces the loss of stylistic options in the syntax of two dying Californian languages; Dorian 1973 demonstrates grammatical change, in the direction of analogical simplicity and analytical restructuring, for a terminal Scottish Gaelic dialect; and Dorian 1976 notes the survival of grammatical gender in the same dialect, but with reduction in the number and coherence of the signals of that category, as well as increasing confluence between Gaelic and English use of gender-signaling pronouns. Dorian 1977a reports a hierarchy of morphophonemic decay in terminal East Sutherland Scottish Gaelic, related apparently to avoidance of grammatical syncretism and to the presence or absence of parallel grammatical categories in English. Hill & Hill 1977 detail the impact of Spanish lexicon on beleaguered Nahuatl in Central Mexico, in terms both of those areas of the vocabulary most affected and of the consequences of the massive lexical importation for language loyalty to Nahuatl.

In the present study, I wish to pursue the issues of simplification and confluence in language death by examining closely the fate of morphological complexity in a terminal Scottish Gaelic dialect. The structures chosen for investigation represent the extreme in morphological complexity for this dialect and for Scottish Gaelic in general. The noun plural and the gerund in Scottish Gaelic are particularly high-frequency structures, and they are formed in a rich variety of ways. This richness is essentially gratuitous. Some of the devices for the formation of plurals and gerunds are phonotactically or morphophonemically capable of operation with only certain groups of nouns or verbs; but others are potentially capable of extension to all nouns or verbs. That is, if a simplification process appeared in Gaelic and continued to its logical extreme, there is no inherent reason why it should stop short of complete uniformity in the morphological formation of all noun plurals; and

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1 The gerund is normally known as the ‘verbal noun’ in the study of Gaelic; but ‘gerund’ is adopted here for brevity, and for the sake of maximum terminological differentiation of the two structures under discussion.