The Value of Language-Maintenance Efforts which are Unlikely to Succeed

In the fifteen years during which I was constantly visiting the East Sutherland district of the northeast Scottish mainland or living there, actively studying the dying Scottish Gaelic dialect of the region and clearly deeply engaged by its distinctive history and unique flavor, I was asked many times whether my activities or indeed anyone else’s could make any difference to the ultimate fate of the dialect. But I was never asked that question by a native of the region.

Both academics and laypeople in other parts of the world thought it theoretically possible that the ebb tide of linguistic retreat might turn or be turned. And theoretically of course such a thing is perfectly possible and has in fact happened in the case of a good many languages. The heroic, near miraculous example of Hebrew, regaining vernacular status after centuries of more or less fossilized existence, is always to the fore, and the number of other languages once threatened but now perfectly secure is sufficient to make the question reasonable enough. For a compilation of success stories, see Ellis and mac a’ Ghobhainn (1971); for examples of enclaved peoples who have survived against all odds, sometimes with their languages as part of the persisting identity, see Castile and Kushner (1981).

Nonetheless, at the risk of casting a dark shadow over a subject already rendered gloomy by the sheer number of languages known to have died or acknowledged to be in the gravest danger of doing so very shortly, I wish to deal here with some of the more knotty problems which pose severe obstacles to well-intended and even well-funded efforts to promote the survival (whether in terms of true maintenance or of revival from a barely existing population base) of threatened languages. I will deal first with the East Sutherland Gaelic case and then add examples from the Irish experience. My reason for emphasizing the negative rather than the positive in this paper is not a wish to deny the value of language-maintenance programs in general (see the closing sections of this paper in evidence), but rather an uneasy sense that maintenance programs are too easily and comfortably invoked as a solution to the decline of any speech form. The reality, as usual, is more complex and difficult.

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Marked political and/or economic change is the scenario most often suggested as favorable for a corresponding change in linguistic fortunes. Examples are not lacking. A case not only in point but also in progress is Faroese, where a new degree of relative freedom from political and economic subservience to Denmark has made possible a resurgence of Faroese linguistic activity, in schooling, journalistic and creative writing, scholarship, and popular speech (Wylie and Margolin 1981). The outlook for Faroese is vastly more positive than it was only fifty years ago, and Faroese ethnic identity has gained notably in conjunction with the progress made in establishing two forms of the language as valid “national” written and spoken norms (ibid.).

The question then arises: could not “devolution”, partial or total disengagement from a general British polity in which Scottish and particularly Highland interests are given disgracefully little attention, create a similarly positive climate for Gaelic? If the revenues from North Sea oil and whiskey export were to be kept “at home”, as Scottish Nationalists have often enough urged, could huge infusions of financial support for Gaelic make a significant difference?

Where Scottish Gaelic generally is concerned, such an outcome is not impossible, however unlikely. For East Sutherland Gaelic, the answer must be negative. The reasons are all too numerous. First, East Sutherland Gaelic is an isolated dialect, a speech island cut off from other dialects of the same language. Second, as one might expect in such circumstances, it is an unusual dialect, quite unlike demographically better represented, less widely separated dialects in the western part of the country. Third, it is an unwritten dialect, lacking any tradition for rendering it visually. Fourth, such fluent speakers as survived even in the 1960s, when I began my work there, were on the whole poorly educated and elderly, ill suited to take on leadership roles in promoting or codifying the dialect. Fifth, by reason of the deviance of the dialect and the lack of a written tradition, well-meaning outsiders would find it difficult to learn or (if speakers of other dialects) adapt to the local norms and congenial to promote a dialect so far from the more usual or better known varieties.

Any promotion of Gaelic in East Sutherland would have to mean, and would have had to mean even in the early 1960s, when the speaker population was still 200 or more, promotion of a more nearly standard form of Gaelic, somewhat in keeping with dominant western dialects such as those of Skye or Lewis or the Outer Hebridean islands south of Lewis. In sophisticated populations with a tradition of literacy and therefore usually some experience of standardization or of compromise in the general direction of standardization, such an introduction of outside norms might be welcomed, or at least tolerated, as preferable to loss of the language altogether in the local area. In unsophisticated populations lacking such tradition or experiences, a response of that kind is unlikely. This is the more true because unwritten, nonstandard minority