

Putting Gaelic in its rightful place

Sue Mackenzie looks at current thinking about Gaelic and interpretation

Gaelic is one of Scotland's national languages, along with Scots and English. The number of speakers has been declining since the 12th century – when it was most used – but today that decline is slowing and even stabilising. The 2001 Census showed that there are roughly 60,000 Gaelic speakers in Scotland. This represents only 1.2% of the population, and Gaelic is therefore classed as a minority language. But political will (through the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005) together with support from Gaelic organisations and speakers has meant that the number of speakers has actually risen in some age groups.

Where does interpretation fit into this? Using Gaelic provides access to a uniquely rich and different culture. Interpretation in Gaelic engages the Gaelic-speaking visitor and raises awareness of the language's history and importance amongst those with little or no experience of it. But there are a number of different approaches to multi-lingual interpretation, and little guidance or research to help establish what 'best practice' may be.

To many Gaelic speakers, the importance of seeing your language given equal prominence with another is hugely significant, and so bi-lingual texts can be seen as the only way forward. This can work well for other audiences as well – research in Wales suggests that 'although many visitors may have little experience of the Welsh language, few appear to experience difficulty when presented with the two languages side by side' allowing them to 'establish its [Welsh] relation to English – opportunities which are offered by juxtaposing the two languages.' 1

But some find that bi-lingual texts provide the reader with too many words to look at and can be overwhelming or distracting. And some Gaelic speakers say they naturally go to the English when faced with bi-lingual text, because they learned to read and write only in English. Not everyone experiences this however, and it will happen less frequently as Gaelic-medium education and adult learning classes teach their pupils to read and write as well as speak in Gaelic.

Interpretation, of course, is not just words on a wall. As the Gaels say 'Cha bhi cànan far nach cluinear gùth' – 'there will be no language where no voice is heard'. By using sound in the form of words, song and music, the planner can get away from the difficulty of having to reduce the amount of text in both languages (because bi-lingual texts often need more than double the amount of space). Gaelic culture is particularly rich in its song and music. For text-based bi-lingual interpretation, new technologies can also offer creative solutions. Holographic superimposed images can present both languages at the same time – you simply move your position slightly to access them both.

Whatever level of Gaelic is used one thing is certain: each language has its own perspective, and Gaelic is no exception. It has particular ways of describing, thinking and seeing, and it is rooted within its cultural context. The Gaelic used in bi-lingual interpretation must not just be a Gaelic translation of a story written in English. It should be authored initially in Gaelic and from a Gaelic point of view, giving a genuine experience for the Gaelic speaker (and for the learner and novice).

Where to use Gaelic interpretation is another issue to address. Should it only be used at places within the Gàidhealtachd – the Gaelic-speaking areas in the north and west of Scotland – or should it be more widely seen? Much of the landscape throughout Scotland is named and described through Gaelic: many people's first experience of the language is through reading maps and trying to pronounce placenames.

How we use Gaelic in interpretive work is not fixed, and will change in the future. There is now strong political support for the language and concern for its fate, but it remains a sensitive issue because of its decline and the sometimes painful history of that decline. That sensitivity may inhibit our creativity as we worry about 'doing it right'. But if we can move forward with hope we can achieve a lot. There is a real need for evaluation and research into what visitors' and residents' perceptions of and responses to Gaelic interpretation are.

We should try out different approaches with an open mind, and a willingness to experiment without the worry of failing. The time is right to 'catch the moment' and work in partnership to deliver exciting, innovative interpretation using Gaelic.

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Language exerts hidden power, like a moon on the tides.
Alcaeus, poet in Ancient Greece