New spaces for minority languages:
Social spaces, virtual hubs and the changing dynamics of using Gaelic in the city of Glasgow

A Report for Bòrd na Gàidhlig

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1. Introduction

According to the 2022 census, language skills in Gaelic were reported to have increased from 1.7% in 2011 to 2.5% for people aged 3 (Scotland's census 2022)[1], with 130,161 people reported as having some level of linguistic competence in Gaelic. The language is predominantly used in the Highlands and Islands communities, where it remains a community language. In Glasgow, approximately 17,380 people have some level of linguistic competence in Gaelic (Scotland's census 2022), forming loosely connected networked communities across the city (McLeod 2020)[2]. This constitutes the highest concentration of speakers of the language outside the Western Isles. Some come from traditional Gaelic-speaking parts of the country or have family connections there. Others have learnt it through Gaelic Medium Education or as adult learners. Others still, have come to develop an interest in the language through new technologies and online platforms. In this project we were interested in finding out more about who these Gaelic speakers and learners are, where they go in the city and where they can and cannot use Gaelic.

In this pilot study, the project explored the use of Gaelic in the city of Glasgow by native speakers, new speakers, and learners. The project sought to provide new insights into where Gaelic is used, who with, when, and the challenges and opportunities in finding places to use Gaelic in the city. Combining GPS, Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR), and Map-based Recall Interviews, the project identified both permanent and pop-up Gaelic spaces across the city, as well as clusters of use.

The project sought to address the following questions:

1. How are the needs of multilingual Gaelic speakers being met in a city such as Glasgow in terms of services, cultural activities and education?

2. How do multilingual Gaelic speakers navigate the city and to what extent do they use their multilingual skills across a range of situations?

3. What is the role of social spaces in developing new networks and communities for multilingual speakers in the city?

In what follows, we will briefly outline the methodology that was used and its relevance for mapping out urban linguistic dynamics today. This allowed us to identify key spaces of Gaelic usage via GPS mapping and EAR technologies. We will also outline the main themes that emerged from the qualitative data and, finally, a set of concluding remarks, future research, and policy recommendations.

2. Methodology

The aim of this project has been to test the suitability of a methodology which aims to overlay a bilingual person's language use over a map of their movements across a city. In this study, participants, of different ages, genders, place of origin, and fluencies of Gaelic, who are bilingual in Gaelic and English were asked to use a GPS tracker and an audio recorder app as they moved around the city. Each participant was given an Android phone with a GPS tracker app to locate participants in space. An Electronic Activated Recorder (EAR) app was also included to generate audio logs of snippets of the participants' conversations.

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[1] Scotland's census (2022) Ethnic group, national identity, language and religion. Available here.
[2] McLeod, W. (2020). *Gaelic in Scotland: Policies, movements, ideologies*. Edinburgh University Press.

Over a period of seven days, 20 participants were asked to go about their daily lives, carry the phone with them with selected asleep periods for privacy purposes. The collected data via the apps was used to generate a visual representation of participants' language use relative to their daily movements and interactions with particular spaces across the city. Participants were then interviewed to discuss the visual depiction of their language use in relation to their recorded movements on a GIS programme. Participants were asked to verify the accuracy of the data and provide further contextual information about their language use.

The GPS/EAR data and the ethnographic insights gained through the map-based recall interviews were combined to get a more nuanced picture of Gaelic-speaking dynamics in the city. By innovatively combining these different methods which have not been tested in this way before, the proposed research methodology goes a step further in accurately describing linguistic behaviour as it unfolds in real time and space, overcoming some of the methodological shortcomings present in recall-based methodologies and/or more subjective self-reported accounts of people's dynamics.

3. Profile of participants and relationship with Gaelic

The majority of participants in the study were under the age of fifty (40% in the 25-34 age bracket and 30% aged between 35-44). Half the respondents were female, and the other half were male. Most participants had grown up in the metropolitan areas of Glasgow. The majority now live in Glasgow, Paisley, Kilmarnock, and Motherwell. In terms of socio-economic status, the majority (70%) had a university degree, and more than half (60%) were currently in employment. Half of the participants were married or in a civil partnership, and half were parents. Of those with children, about one quarter have children attending Gaelic Medium Education (GME). Most participants (65%) learned Gaelic as adults, while 25% learned Gaelic at home. Three-quarters of the sample described themselves as active Gaelic learners and 60% self-identified as Gaels.

In terms of Gaelic usage, about one-quarter (26%) of participants reported using Gaelic for family communication, just over half (55%) reported using it at work or at school, about one third (30%) used it with friends, and one-tenth (10%) for non-social purposes such as such as paying for shopping, asking for directions, speaking with a GP. They also reported spending about a quarter (27%) of their entertainment time and a quarter (29%) of their online communication in Gaelic.

A significant number (80%) described themselves as fluent Gaelic speakers but confidence in their spoken ability in Gaelic was less strongly reported. Half of the participants agreed they did not have sufficient opportunities to speak Gaelic in the city. The majority felt that both English and Gaelic were crucial for their work or education, and that Gaelic culture was important to them. There were mixed views about social opportunities to speak/use Gaelic in the city. Finally, most participants did not feel confident speaking Gaelic when using public services and visiting businesses in Glasgow.

Similar findings were published in a survey taken in 2021 as part of research on Gaelic communities in Glasgow and their perceptions of the language situation in the city and ideas for improvement. A summary report can be found here.

4. Key Findings

The pilot study was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved the recruitment of multilingual Gaelic–English speakers and learners from diverse age groups, social

backgrounds, fluency levels, and learning experiences. They were asked to participate in an experiment where their daily activities were tracked using a GPS tracking app and an audio recording app on their mobile phones. The locations of language use were matched with the time stamps from both the GPS and EAR data. The GPS data was then plotted using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and the audio recordings were categorized by a machine learning method to identify different languages. Following this, participants were invited for a follow-up qualitative ethnographic interview where they were presented with a visual representation of their spatial routines recorded during the experiment to elicit spatial information. The accuracy of the experimental data was discussed with the participants during the interview. These visual representations of their daily routines and language practices were used to stimulate a more spatially focused discussion about their multilingual practices and the use of a minority language like Gaelic in an urban setting. Thus, through GPS monitoring and the use of the EAR app we were able to identify key moments in the day when participants used Gaelic and where Gaelic was spoken. A visual representation of the language trajectories of one of our participants can be seen in Figure 1 below. The orange dots correspond to spaces and times in the day when Gaelic was picked up:

Figure 1

Layer 1
- Eng
- Gae
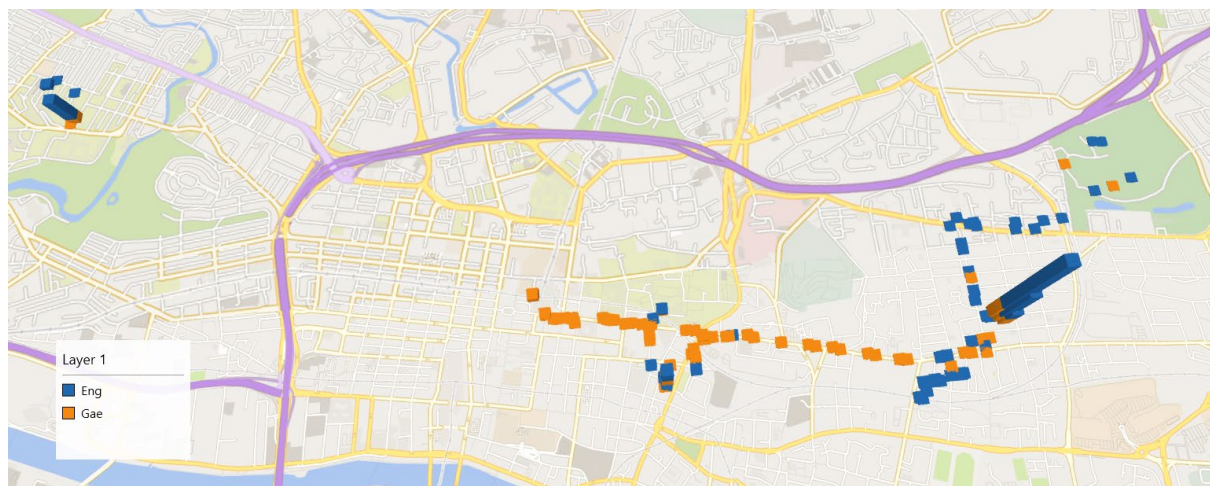
Gaelic spaces in the city

Pockets of Gaelic speakers were identified around Glasgow University, the West End, and around the sporting facility in the Southside of Glasgow on Thursday evenings, as well as a considerable number of Gaelic speakers living in the Southside, specifically around the Queen's Park area which is frequently used as a meeting point for Gaelic speakers in this experiment – particularly when they have play dates with their children.

Some key more or less permanent spaces that have been reported as connected to Gaelic include the following:

- An Lòchran - Gaelic community space in the West End of Glasgow
- Bodach's Kitchen - restaurant in the West End which is reported as Gaelic-friendly
- An Comunn Oiseanach - University society at Glasgow University promoting Gaelic
- Crookston - southwestern residential suburb of Glasgow where reportedly GME families are moving close to each other to create a Gaelic-speaking community
- Gaelach pubs – Drygate, Park Bar; Machair Bar, Islay Inn, Snaffle Bit, Doublet, Park Road, Lismore

- The Gaelic Books Council - Gaelic bookshop and organisation promoting Gaelic literature
- Glad Cafe - alternative café in the Queen's Park area – reported as Gaelic-friendly
- Positive effect of Royal National Mòd being hosted in Glasgow
- Sgoil Ghàidhlig Ghlaschu (SGG) - Glasgow Gaelic School is a primary and secondary Gaelic-medium school in the West End of Glasgow
- University Gardens - area of the University of Glasgow where the Gaelic department is based.

Another key space which though not in Glasgow was mentioned as important in the life stories and Gaelic development of several participants was the Skye-based national centre for Gaelic, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.

Besides these more permanent physical spaces, a number of pop-up spaces were also reported, such as: Dungeons and Dragons in Gaelic; football group on WhatsApp with Gaelic; Gaelaoke Gaelic Circles; initiative of walking dogs in Gaelic; knitting as a practice to create Gaelic spaces; meetings of Southside Gaels to do outdoor activities in Gaelic.

5. Themes

A considerable number of themes emerged from the data analyses. However, three key areas emerged as most prominent in the discussion and where there was most consensus amongst participants:

1) The preference for **informal spaces** (related to activities that entail spontaneity and playfulness, and also non-scheduled) over formal spaces (linked to 'high culture': literature events, history, cultural activities around Gaelic's situation, conversation circles)
2) The importance of **social media** to find out about what is happening with Gaelic in the city. WhatsApp emerges as a prominent platform to organise pop-up Gaelic spaces that generate specific pockets of Gaelic speakers in the city, e.g.: football on Thursdays in the Southside, Queen's Park gatherings
3) The need for a **multifaceted hub** to allow for informal interactions which might include a café or other activities and fun approaches to learning and using Gaelic.

The research project highlighted a set of dynamics around Gaelic usage that can be grouped into positively and negatively formulated dynamics or strategies. In relation to positive narratives, five main themes were recurrently touched upon by participants.

1) Gaelic being a component of events is reported as a reason to attend.

For some participants, the fact that the event is through the medium of Gaelic provides sufficient incentive for them to want to take part.

> MC018: For me I am there more to speak Gaelic. So … you know, the sport is great, but I could attend other … there is other five asides groups that I could take part instead where they just speak English where perhaps the quality of football would be better suited to me. But I make a deliberate choice to go to this one for the sake of speaking Gaelic.

For others, the actual activity/space/event has more weight in deciding whether it is worth their time.

> MC009: Whatever takes my fancy … yeah, em … I know there are a lot of Gaelic events that get put on and em … but unless I … unless I like the artists or want to go see that person, I don't necessarily just feel like 'ok, I am going to go because I want to speak Gaelic', it is more 'what is happening' and is that thing eh attractive to me as a gig or as a book launch or as an event really.

A number of participants talk about feeling a sense of responsibility to take part in anything related to Gaelic even if the activity/space/event is not what they would normally be interested in.

> MC001: Em, so you need to take on that responsibility and you know if I was to make a wider point, I think that too much of Gaelic promotion and Gaelic development in general, talks about services to us em … from all sorts of networks and institutions and all that kind of stuff. But not enough of it, I don't think, is centred upon personal responsibility for the language. And taking that torch yourself and … because at the end of the day that is exactly what is going to make the difference, I think.

2) Gaelic spaces are seen as necessary to facilitate speaking its use and crucial for getting people talking

Some participants expressed the need to monitor the influence of English in these spaces and that this ensures that they make the effort to speak Gaelic in these spaces. Some participants talked about the difficulty of balancing out how much Gaelic use is expected because learners who are not too fluent might feel left out. Others point to the need for Gaelic-designated spaces for fluent speakers who can truly take advantage of them. Some comments were also made about the potential of Gaelic spaces as a means of turning passive speakers and learners into active speakers.

> MC001: Obviously Gaelic spaces are essential as well because you need to provide the freedom and facilities, and just like the space, I guess, for people to practice, so to speak, their Gaelic. And you know, it is the same sort of thing as to why it was easier to speak on the phone, because it lessens the pressure and providing a space lessens the external, societal pressures from outside, em… so it is doing everything that you can so that the big steps into living more fully through Gaelic are reduced.

3) Gaelic as a catalyst to strengthen friendships

The role of Gaelic as a catalyst for strengthening friendships was a theme that was also noted by several participants. They highlighted that having spaces in which to use Gaelic helped them to expand their network of friends and also deepen some of those relationships, creating a special bond through their use of Gaelic. Specific safe spaces for Gaelic speakers were also noted as a necessary step forward, including spaces which exclude English. This argument was often rationalised by alluding to the perception that if one person does not speak Gaelic, the rest of the group would feel compelled to switch to English.

> MC009: one of the things that inspired me to speak Gaelic was meeting all the people that shared the same passion as me when I went to Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in that first year and meeting like-minded people who are passionate about the language and the culture, I think that is a really big appeal. And I have met … I have met incredible people that I would never have necessarily met if I didn't em … if I didn't speak Gaelic.

4) The importance of strong social ties to facilitate Gaelic-speaking spaces

The importance of strong social ties to facilitate Gaelic-speaking spaces was also a recurrent theme foregrounding the idea that social ties should be seen as more important to creating the right type of Gaelic-speaking environments.

> MC016: I guess as I said, they are especially important because of the people that are there, because they are basically my social circle. They feel like a safe space to kind of practice the language as well. Many of them.

In relation to more negatively formulated dynamics, we identified four main areas where more support for some Gaelic users and learners might be needed:

5) Fakeness or 'engineeredness' of designated and more formal Gaelic spaces

Participants report the fakeness or 'engineeredness' of designated and more formal Gaelic spaces and the awkwardness of having to sit in on a Gaelic circle and talk to people in such an artificial way. Participants expressed a desire for more informal encounters or incidental pop-up spaces to speak Gaelic which they saw as less prescriptive and less organised, thus allowing for more spontaneous meetups as would be the case in English.

> MC006: I suppose it feels maybe a bit more … I don't want to use the word forced … eh … is it unnatural, is it like … I don't know, it is just not really part of my everyday flow if you get me. So, it feels like I am having to more or less go out my way to do something like that just to use Gaelic. I kind of think, if I wouldn't do it in English, like attend an art class or go to a talk about Scottish history in East Kilbride or something, would I do it in Gaelic? I would have to question myself. Am I going there primarily just because it is Gaelic, or am I going there because it is actually something that I am interested in? So, I think it needs to be a kind of natural thing that matches, that actually fits in with what I would do normally it is just Gaelic is an additional benefit.

6) Lack of a Gaelic hub in Glasgow

There were references made to the lack of a Gaelic hub with different ideas on what this would look like. However, there was widespread agreement about the hub having to somehow centralise all Gaelic-related things happening in Glasgow and having informal spaces for people to hang out (several again mentioned a café as part of it).

> MC002: Somewhere where you know you can go, and I know somebody is going to be there who I can speak Gaelic to. I don't mean like a ghetto. I don't necessarily mean … I mean I think a hub is a good idea and I think if it was properly staffed … I think we spoke about it in relation to Inverness a little bit. That is a great idea. Em, ideally you would have that and you would also just have places in Glasgow run by Gaels where these people speak Gaelic or English and you have got the option to do either. And the people around you might be speaking English and having a cup of tea and a slice of cake, but you can go in and order and chat to others and you know it is likely that there will be other people who can also speak Gaelic around. I think I'd like both. […] It has got to be normal, em … you know, it has got to come to the point where you are not really thinking about it, you are just doing it naturally

7) Issues with confidence due to language prescriptivism

Participants raised issues around their own confidence in speaking Gaelic because of prescriptive ideologies around what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' Gaelic. There were several accounts from people who said they struggled to fit in to the Gaelic-speaking world because they lacked confidence to do so. Some participants talked about how more fluent speakers of Gaelic had made them feel like outsiders. They also spoke above situations where fluent Gaelic speakers switch to English as soon as they realise the other person is not fluent enough in their eyes.

> MC004: I think a lot of it comes down to personal neurosis especially if I think somebody knows who my mum is. My mum has always been a stickler for grammar, so I start having this external freak out about the genitive case or [Gaelic 4.19] or something like that. I start freaking out about things like that. I think this is something that learners have. But I know all this stuff. I also think … sometimes this isn't something that … native speakers do, I think very advanced learners sometimes have this but the way they compensate is to try and pick up on other people's things to show 'amn't I smart, amn't I great' and things like that. And I think it is only with time that I have realised 'no you are not great, you are being a prick'. Pardon my language. I can't use that.

8) Importance of a Gaelic-speaking space for learners mixed with fluent speakers and natives

Participants pointed to the importance of a Gaelic-speaking space for learners, mixed with fluent speakers and native speakers. Several participants argued that Gaelic-speaking spaces should be mixed in terms of language competency and this should be the baseline for all initiatives going forward.

> MC005: We have had this discussion of what do we do for learners. And I've always said that the most important thing we can do for learners is to ensure that there is a naturally Gaelic-speaking space for learners which mixes learners with fluent learners and native speakers, otherwise why would you learn if you can't actually use the thing you've picked up and make it a natural part of your social life.

6. Conclusions, recommendations, and next steps

This pilot study explored the use of Gaelic in the city of Glasgow by speakers of different profiles and backgrounds. It sought to provide a greater understanding of where Gaelic is used, with whom, when, and the challenges in finding places to use it in the city. Combining GPS, Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR), and Map-based Recall Interviews, it identified some key Gaelic spaces in the city. These included permanent as well as pop-up spaces and areas where clusters of use exist. The project provided important insights into a number of key areas as set out below.

The pilot study pointed to a lack of awareness amongst some participants of what activities and events are taking place in Gaelic in the city. Some participants saw the utility of a central hub as a possible solution to this. While there was not a sense of a Gaelic community in the traditional sense in Glasgow, there were frequent references to different communities of

practice. The research highlighted both positive and negative dynamics relating to use of Gaelic in the city. For many participants in our study, designated Gaelic spaces were seen as a way of facilitating increased fluency and interaction. They were also seen as a catalyst for making new friendships and strong social ties. Many participants highlighted the need for a Gaelic hub where more informal gatherings could be organised through the medium of Gaelic. Some participants spoke about their lack of confidence in speaking Gaelic, linking this to prescriptivist views they had come across from other more fluent speakers. Some participants also commented on the lack of mixed ability spaces for Gaelic where speakers of all levels of competence could interact.

The pilot study was also used to test an innovative methodological approach combining Urban Analytics and Engineering with more ethnographic approaches such as follow up map-based interviews with participants where elicitation was encouraged through the visualization of their spatial trajectories. While this pilot study helped establish a working methodology and provided insights into language dynamics not captured by more traditional approaches, a larger dataset and fieldwork collection period would be required to refine our research findings. This could be achieved by scaling up the project to include a larger sample size and by extending monitoring times using GPS and EAR technologies from 7 days to 14 days. In possible follow-up studies, other ethnographic techniques such as shadowing through accompaniment of participants over several days would also allow us to better understand their linguistic choices in different spaces and at different movements of time.

From the pilot stage of the project, we have identified the following key policy recommendations which can be taken forward:

> 1) We recommend the creation of more informal spaces for Gaelic use in the city to complement the existing range of formal language learning and cultural spaces that exist
>
> 2) We recommend better harnessing of the potential of digital media and virtual platforms to bring different Gaelic communities together. This would also help keep those interested in using and speaking Gaelic in the city up to date with events that are organised in the city.
>
> 3) We recommend further exploration of the potential of a central Gaelic hub in the city. We suggest that the development of a multifaceted Gaelic hub would allow for informal interactions to take place (such as including a café, games area, etc.) so people can connect with different Gaelic speakers in the city. This would offer a centralised space for 'all things' Gaelic in the one place.

As a result of this project, a joint journal article between researchers in sociolinguistics, urban analytics, and engineering has been published by Elsevier as part of a special issue on Research Methods in Applied Linguistics, and is available open access here[3].

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[3] O'Rourke, B., Zhao, Q., Dayán-Fernández, A., Dickson, E., Wang, R., Wang, M., Zhang, L. & Imran, M. (2024). Integrated geospatial methods for multilingual cities: Combining GPS, electronically activated recorder, and map-based ethnographic interviews. *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, 3(3), 100147.

Next Steps - App development

Based on the findings of the pilot study and in collaboration with Glasgow City Council, we tested a proof-of-concept for a map-based app to track and navigate places where Gaelic is utilised and promoted.

Drawing on key Gaelic spaces identified in the city (as set out above), the app is being developed to help Gaelic speakers and learners navigate the city and find 'breathing spaces' for Gaelic.

The aim of the project is to develop digital tools that enable the Gaelic community in Glasgow to form and grow. In particular, the app will:

1. Enable speakers to discover Gaelic-language events

2. Enable the identification of hot-spots for Gaelic speaking in the city

3. Promote the sharing and dissemination of Gaelic resources and activities within the city.

To fulfil the project aims, the objective of this project is to develop a fully functional app and test key features, including:

- Registration feature for potential users and profiles with key information
- An interactive map of Glasgow showing key Gaelic-speaking spaces and events
- A comment area for users to interact about their experiences of using Gaelic in the city
- Social fora to connect users with other Gaelic speakers in the city
- Links to online Gaelic learning resources
- Voice recognition tools which participants can use to track their use of Gaelic
- Gamification features where users can earn achievements for using Gaelic in real-life settings, to incentivise further use of the language.

The digital hub (called *Gaelic Connect*) is intended to be attractive to different communities, including:

- Gaelic speakers seeking opportunities to use their language
- Gaelic learners wanting to improve their Gaelic skills
- Non-Gaelic speaking residents who want to learn about an aspect of their heritage/culture important to many aspects of modern Scottish life (place names, influence on other languages, art/culture/poetry)
- Visitors seeking to understand a key aspect of Scottish culture.

The project will run over a period of 10 months, from June 2024 until March 2025. This phase of the project (Autumn 2024) will consist of developing and trialling the app and gathering feedback from Gaelic community members and stakeholders. The next phase (Spring 2025) will involve the incorporation of this feedback into the app, with the aim to launch it for community use at *Seachdain na Gàidhlig* (Gaelic Week) in February 2025.

A longer-term aim of this project is to adapt the app to support other social networks of sparse communities of interest, such as Gaelic speakers in Edinburgh, Welsh speakers in Cardiff, and Irish speakers in Dublin and Belfast. Further information on the digital hub development can be found here.