

**Dual Language Contexts in Social Work Practice: The Gaelic in the  
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar region (Outer Hebrides, Scotland) and  
Spanish in the Southwestern United States**

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## **Dual Language Contexts in Social Work Practice: The Gaelic in the *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* region (Outer Hebrides, Scotland) and Spanish in the Southwestern United States**

### **Abstract**

This paper addresses the complex historical/political scenarios of Spanish speaking people in the Southwestern U.S. and of Gaelic speakers in the Outer Hebrides. It examines 1) the historical background and current status of Spanish in the Southwestern U.S. and Gaelic in the Outer Hebrides; 2) comparative issues in relation to the use of dual languages; and 3) the challenges that communication in more than one prevalent language present to social work service providers. It is based on field research in the Southwestern U.S. (primarily Arizona) and the *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* region (Outer Hebrides, Scotland). While these two areas might appear totally different, the commonalities created by English as the default but not always the primary language of clients in both settings make the comparisons intriguing.

**Key Words:** Spanish, Gaelic, Southwestern U.S., Outer Hebrides, dual languages, social services

### **Introduction**

An interest in studying professional social work language issues related to Spanish in the Southwestern states (Authors, 2006/2007; forthcoming) brought about the possibility of comparing the United States (U.S.) situation with that of the Gaelic speaking region of Outer Hebrides in Scotland. While the Outer Hebrides and Arizona might appear totally different, the commonalities created by English as the default but not always the primary the language of clients in both settings made the comparisons intriguing.

There is a great deal to be learned from the examination of factors that make up the linguistic context of an area. Anthropologists and linguists have been discussing these matters for years (*American Anthropologist*, 2003; Boas, 1940; Cameron, 2002; Corson, 2001; Gregory and Holloway, 2005; Mascia-Lees and Lees, 2003). In relation to change,

McCrum (2010) suggested, '[l]anguage often acts as a lightening conductor for anxiety about social and cultural change' (p.155). In social work, it is not just the prevalence of one language or another that creates obvious challenges, but the histories and meanings associated with those languages (Kornbeck, 2003; Author, 2008). Language histories affect current political decision-making; moreover, past affirmation or subjugation of the tongues in question determine the emotional overtones the languages have for actual people who converse in them. Social service providers are at the forefront of emotional language encounters. For example, Hall, Slembrouk and Sarangi (2006) reflected on the questions of language categories:

The study of categories to locate people and their attributes informs the structure and process of arguments in a professional setting: is the parent caring or neglecting? Is this a child protection or family support case? This leads to an analysis of what attributes are constitutive of categories and sub-categories. What range of facts are enough to enable a categorisation to be made and successfully defended? (p.26)

It has been said that mother tongue is precisely called 'mother' because it is generally the language of strong emotional connections. Currently, there is much interest in looking at the primary languages of older populations because they bear a relationship to their communication patterns in health and illness in old age. In social services, communication is the *raison d'être*, and the most essential tool of the practice. But, in spite of the prevalence of English for global affairs, there is a worldwide concern about autochthonous language recovery and maintenance. The recovery or reintroduction of native languages also adds to opportunities for the young, who are learning or practicing languages that might have been buried. For the young, speaking the native tongue may

translate into opportunities in education, the visual arts, music, entertainment or social services.

In this paper, we will briefly review the complex historical scenarios, including current demographics and migration of Spanish speaking people in the Southwestern U.S. and of Gaelic speakers in the Outer Hebrides in the last 200 years. We will examine 1) the historical background and current status of Spanish in the Southwestern U.S. and Gaelic in the Outer Hebrides; 2) comparative issues in relation to the use of dual languages; and 3) the challenges that communication in more than one prevalent language present to social work service providers.

## **Methodology**

This paper is based on field research in the *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* region (Outer Hebrides, Scotland) for a period of one month of residence and on six months of intensive electronic communication between one author, resident of the islands and the two non-resident ones. A search of the literature on Gaelic in Scotland and Spanish in the Southwestern U.S. was used to develop historical understandings. Two researchers, who had extensive experience with language issues in social services in the Southwestern U.S., joined another investigator from the social sciences research unit at Lews Castle College, a campus of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) in Stornoway. The bulk of the data was derived from approximately fifty interviews with local politicians, social workers and care providers, academics and other university staff and selected members of the public in the Isle of Lewis. The researchers also relied on single

and group interviews with other key informants residing in Edinburgh and other islands of the Outer Hebrides. Those who lived in the Outer Hebrides were identified locally because of their positions in the structure of service delivery or the cultural scene. Academics specializing in Gaelic were also interviewed. A snow ball approach and the local networks of the resident author, rendered a number of informants in the community. Some of the interviews, particularly with members of the public were carried out for the sole purpose of language inquiries while others were part of broader conversations.

### **A historical perspective on the use of Spanish in the Southwestern U.S.**

The linguistic mistreatment of Latinos in the Southwestern U.S. began with the first encounters between the English speaking settlers of the upper regions of North America and residents of the former Spanish colonies. The ‘Black Legend’<sup>1</sup> had been ingrained in many of the Anglo colonists to discredit the reputation of Spain in the New World and caused much fear when Anglo settlers encountered Spanish colonials (Fuentes, 1992) in the territories that became Mexico. ‘...Beginning with the initial contacts with Mexicans on the frontier in the nineteenth century, Anglo-Americans exhibited contempt for the mixed-race Mexicans’ (Rosales, 1996, p.xxi) and consequently for their language. This was very apparent throughout the Southwest long before extended tracts of northern Mexican territories were annexed to the U.S. Ironically, inhabitants of the northern regions of Mexico had always complained that the Spanish and Mexican governments abandoned them and, thus, had welcomed the influence of U.S. immigrants, their

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<sup>1</sup> The “Black Legend”, suggests Carlos Fuentes (1992), refers to a vision of Spain as a cruel and sanguinary power overtaking the indigenous cultures of the Americas. This vision, says Fuentes, was promoted “by the alliance of Protestantism and modernism in a centuries-old opposition to Spain and things Spanish” (p.16).

commerce and their culture. As a neighboring country, the U.S. appeared to be a less centralized and a more democratic nation. But the reality was that many of the men who pushed west were not civic minded leaders committed to a less centralized ideology but adventurers 'who viewed land, water and wild animals as commodities to be exploited rather than as resources to be distributed among neighbors and kin' (Sheridan , 1995, p.44).

In the 1840s, the U.S. philosophy of 'manifest destiny' justified many actions against the former Spanish colonies culminating with the Mexican War (1848) and the Spanish American War (1898) which annexed enormous territories inhabited by Spanish speakers. Following the war, two important documents which changed the political geography of the Southwest were executed. The first, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in 1848, annexed 525,000 squares miles of territory (the states of California, Utah, Nevada, parts of Colorado, Wyoming, parts of New Mexico and Arizona). The second, the Gadsden Purchase, completed the annexation of New Mexico and Arizona. Both treaties, in theory, safeguarded the rights of property, culture –understood to include language--- of the people affected, but the covenants were not entirely heeded (Novas, 1998). In the annexed territories, Spanish and native Indian tongues were the autochthonous languages. In spite of being for all practical purposes the autochthonous language, Spanish became a suppressed language in the Southwest. Periodically, waves of nativism in the country went as far as proposing the initial English-only laws. The patterns of language suppression were sometimes overt and sometimes covert, depending on to the economic tenor of the times. However, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and throughout the

20<sup>th</sup> Century, Spanish speakers were clearly feeling the weight of discrimination. In the Southwestern states, parents, having experienced rejection because of their faulty English, favored English for their children; the schools, believing in the acculturating value of language, demanded that only English be utilized in the classrooms, and finally, when the last territories, New Mexico and Arizona, became states in 1912, English had come to dominate the public arena. Spanish, if spoken at all, became the emotional language of the home and sometimes the church. And this continued for many decades.

Richard Rodriguez recalls,

But then, there was Spanish. Español: my family's language. Español, the language that seemed to me a private language. I'd hear a stranger on the radio and in the Mexican Catholic church across town speaking in Spanish, but I couldn't really believe that Spanish was a public language, like English. (Rodriguez, 2005, p.14)

Viewed in a worldwide context, the First World War began a cultural and linguistic revolution in Europe. As McCrum (2010) suggests, 'American intervention was decisive in the outcome of the war and in the shaping of an English-speaking world.'(p. 196). No one can argue that English developed from the language of empires –whether colonial or industrial, to the current *lingua franca*, friendly to electronic and global communication, as exemplified by its wide use in business, the U.N. and other international bodies.

### **The current status of Spanish in the United States**

In order to discuss the possible similarities and differences between the maintenance and vitality of Gaelic in Scotland and of Spanish in the Southwestern U.S., it is important to briefly review current measures to assert the English language in the U.S. In spite of efforts to the contrary, the Federal government did not establish English as the 'official

language' of the U.S. An official language would contravene Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. In 1963, John F. Kennedy said it best:

Simple justice requires that public funds, to which all taxpayers of all races [colors, and national origins] contribute, not be spent in any fashion which encourages, entrenches, subsidizes or results in racial [color or national origin] discrimination. (Kennedy, 1963 in *Strictly Spanish*, 2010).

After many contradictory proposals had come before Congress, Amendment 4073 to the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2006 stated that English was the 'common and unifying language of the U.S'. However, the situation is very ambiguous and open to interpretation. There are about 30 states in the U.S. that have 'English-only' legislation. (The disparities between Federal and State laws are apparent here.) Furthermore, there are very different versions of what is understood by the 'English-only' provisions. Some versions 'would void almost all state and federal laws that require the government to provide services in languages other than English' (ACLU, Briefing Paper No.6, no date). Other versions would extend to the private sector, including restaurant menus, while still others would simply declare English the 'official' language of the state. The implications of these measures are very different in degree but they create an atmosphere that stigmatizes and disempowers speakers of languages other than English. The ACLU suggests that measures or laws that suppress the use of other languages 'abridge the rights of individuals who are not proficient in English and ... perpetuate false stereotypes of immigrants and non-English speakers. ...[S]uch laws are contrary to the spirit of tolerance and diversity embodied in our Constitution.' (ACLU, Briefing Paper No.6, no date, p.3). This atmosphere of intolerance and linguistic suppression is felt intensely in the Southwestern U.S. For example,



Prescott, Arizona, (pop.30,000, with 2,200 Spanish speakers), tore down a 2010 Census banner strung across one of its main streets because that banner was in Spanish. Although funds for the banner were supplied by the U.S. Census Bureau as part of its campaign to count everyone in the country, documented or illegal, Prescott officials pulled down the sign because Arizona's official English law bans state and local government from doing business in any language other than English...even though Prescott receives \$12,000 from the federal government for everyone counted by the Census. (Baron, 2010)

Nevertheless, the constant flow of immigrants from Mexico, Central and South America makes Spanish difficult to eradicate outside the bureaucratic arena and the schools. In many states, such as Florida, the large number of socially and politically well-situated Spanish-speaking Cubans has rendered Spanish not a liability but an asset. But in the Southwest, language disempowerment, regardless of how limited, has enormous human and political consequences given the numbers of people such measures affect, both practically and psychologically. For example, Arizona has not only started an anti-immigrant wave that has spread throughout the nation, but officials in the State Department of Education have launched not just an English only campaign in the schools but also a campaign to eradicate 'accented English' by sanctioning teachers: 'As the academic year winds down, Creighton School Principal Rosemary Agneessens faces a wrenching decision: what to do with veteran teachers whom the state education department says don't speak English well enough.' (Jordan, 2010)

In spite of all these challenges, one can speculate that in that in U.S., there is no existential threat to Spanish, though many may feel differently:

Hispanics are the nation's largest minority ethnic group. They numbered 46.9 million, or 15.4% of the total U.S. population, in 2008, up from 35.3 million in the 2000 Census. Among all Hispanics living in this country, 62% are native born

and 38% are foreign born. Among Hispanic adults, however, just 47% are native born while 53% are foreign born (Lopez and Taylor, 2010, p. i).

Spanish cannot be said to be languishing or dying as a language of the home. According to the 2002 National Survey of Latinos, based on 25 million Spanish adults, 46% report an ability to carry on conversations in both languages; 40% report being largely Spanish speakers and 14% are largely English speakers. But, they also report that they speak mostly English in the workplace and widespread usage of Spanish at work is rare (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004, p.2).

Spanish speakers have a demographic advantage in terms of age and growth, vis-à-vis their English speaking counterparts, but, in spite of the numbers above, the historical prohibitions, the memories and feelings and the social status associated with Spanish have created a form of second class citizenship for Spanish speakers. Laws of language prohibitions though ostensibly referring to immigrants, ‘do not simply disparage the immigrants’ native languages but assault the rights of the people who speak the language’ (ACLU, Briefing Paper No.6, no date, p.9), many of whom are citizens.

In brief, in the Southwestern U.S., Spanish has been devalued culturally; it is often associated with uneducated people, and feared when encountered in the public arena. When Spanish is spoken by the poor, those who listen, whether bilingual or monolingual, criticize the particular version reverting to the ‘ideology of a ‘standard language’ [which] has been mythologized and propagated by predominantly white, upper middle class groups who classify as non-standard what is actually natural variation in language

usage' (Harrison, 2006, p. 406). Although Harrison was discussing the use of variations of English primarily in Australia, the concerns are exactly the same in relation to the Spanish spoken by working people in the Southwest. Yet, we know that language variation is a common phenomenon even within a single language (witness the variations of English within the British Isles) and that 'the notion of a unified and pure language is in fact a myth' (Harrison, 2006, p.406). Nevertheless, in spite of the many negative associations and experiences, Spanish speaking people in the U.S. do not reciprocate with either linguistic or political rejection of English speakers. There is no hint of separatism in their positions as is often the case when the language rights of specific groups are in a vulnerable position. Rather, Latino/Hispanics in the Southwestern U.S. want to be active citizens and learn English; Spanish speakers are not resisting the acquisition of at least basic, practical English and continue to add words and ways of looking at the world in the Southwest, all of which lend additional vitality to the plural culture. Anyone can see that there are no rational arguments for Spanish language prohibitions, but unfortunately, in the Southwest, the language anxiety of English speakers continues.

### **A Historical perspective on Gaelic and the people of the Outer Hebrides**

Although Gaelic was never the only language in Scotland, there is a strong awareness of the distinctiveness of Gaelic and a tacit support for the language, even by many non-Gaelic speakers, based on perceived cultural roots that extend back into the mists of time:

Child to parent, child to parent, over some fifty or sixty generations from the Scots of today would bring us back to an Irish tribe, the Féni, whose kingdom of Dalriada in Northern Ireland started to expand into the Western Highlands and Islands [of Scotland] from about 200 A.D. onwards (MacKinnon, 1974, p. ).

By the eleventh century, Gaelic was at its highest point in Scotland and was known throughout the country. It was supported by the Columban church which fostered the development of literature among the aristocracy. O Maolalaigh and MacAonghuis, (1996) suggest that late in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, the Anglicisation of the court, or what could be seen today as a shift to an English way of life, was planned and implemented:

The court itself became English and Norman-French in speech and the northern English dialect (Inglis) was fostered as the official language. The loss of status that these changes entailed for Gaelic had a profound and permanent effect... (O Maolalaigh and MacAonghuis, 1996)

Gaelic had been codified primarily in Ireland. It was common to the learned classes of Ireland and Scotland and taught to the children of the aristocracy. Until the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century, Gaelic culture and learning continued to flourish and Gaelic extended as far as Fife in the East. By 1493, ‘the threatened Edinburgh-based Scots nobility ensured the collapse of the Lordship of the Isles’ (Hennessey, 1992). However, according to Hennessey, Gaelic lasted in Scotland until the 1800’s by which time it had retreated behind the ‘Highland Line’.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries large numbers of Gaelic speakers were forced from their lands in the Highlands and Islands by their landlords. Many established Gaelic speaking communities in parts of Nova Scotia (*Alba Nuadh*) and in Cape Breton Island (*Eilean Cheap Breatainn*). In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, enforced exile gave way to voluntary emigration, and expatriate Gaelic-speaking Scots are found all over the world (Robertson and Taylor, 1993). The depopulation of the islands after W.W.II, the horrors and demise of many young people and the technological changes that ensued affected greatly not only the language but the islanders’ way of life. However, after 1970, a language revival

of sorts was beginning to take place. Emerging dual language schools, social services and Gaelic on radio and T.V. appeared on the horizon. Many of those who had left were returning; crofting, which had always been integral to island life as a traditional form of survival, appeared to be in ascendancy once again.

### **The current status of Gaelic**

The highest proportion of Gaelic speakers per head of population today is found in **Comhairle nan Eilean Siar**, which is the Gaelic name for the local authority in the Outer Hebrides, where the observations for this paper were recorded. The Scottish 2001 Census indicates that there are 58,652 Gaelic speakers or 1.2% of the population over three years old, though other sources show that Gaelic is also spoken in Cape Breton, Canada, and also by other small communities of the Scottish Diaspora.<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that Gaelic is not only spoken by older people in the islands, but a current strong revival of the language has spread it among the younger generations, due primarily to the strength of the Gaelic medium schools, publishing in Gaelic, and the national Gaelic radio and television (Lamb, 2001). Lamb (2001) suggests that the only place in Scotland where Gaelic continues to be spoken by a majority of the population is in the Western Isles (Barra, the Uists, Harris and Lewis) and also in Northern Skye and Tiree, though these islands have all small populations. In contrast to the demographic advantages of Spanish speakers in the Southwestern U.S., no one can deny that the Outer Hebrides are losing population. Nevertheless, there appears to be an increased interest in the Gaelic from

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Gaelic, refers to the dialects of Scottish Gaelic that have been spoken continuously for more than 200 years on Cape Breton Island and in isolated enclaves on the Nova Scotia mainland. To a lesser extent the language is also spoken on nearby Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Glengarry County in present-day Ontario and by emigrant Gaels living in major Canadian cities such as Toronto.' ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian\\_Gaelic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_Gaelic), retrieved May 25, 2011)

outsiders, with many individuals who are not native speakers obtaining high levels of proficiency and becoming strong advocates for language maintenance and development. This increased interest in the role of Gaelic in Scottish society has led to what has been described as a modest 'renaissance' in the awareness and subsequently the vitality of Gaelic as a modern working language (see McLeod, 2006)

As Robertson and Taylor have suggested,

While it is true that the history of the language is largely one of resistance to ethnocidal policies that sought to exclude the Gaels from the world of post-Renaissance Europe, contemporary developments in education, radio and television, and in literature generally, aim to redress the balance. (Robertson and Taylor, 1993, no page).

Again, different from the U.S. and particularly the Southwestern U.S., political events such as the advent of the Scottish Parliament in 1997, where business is also transacted in Gaelic, and the passing of the Gaelic Bill in 2005, which gives the language 'equal respect' with English, are all measures to redress imbalance. The distinction between *equal respect* and *equal validity* in the Gaelic Bill of 2005 is an important legal one. Peter Peacock, the Education Minister who has responsibility for Gaelic, stated that the bill 'gives clear recognition to the language as an official language, commanding equal respect' ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/scotland](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/scotland)). The bill, however, fell short of giving it 'equal validity', which, according to the Scottish legal interpretation, would have opened the possibility that 'the court could rule that the bill should result in the right to demand the use of the language in a wider range of circumstances than is intended.' (BBC News, MSPs rule..., April 2005, p.1)

An important example of current efforts to regain respect for the language is the new digital Gaelic channel, BBC Alba.

**BBC Alba** is a Scottish Gaelic language digital television channel which is broadcast by the BBC throughout the United Kingdom on satellite and Virgin on Demand. The channel was launched at 21:00 on Friday 19 September 2008. The name *Alba* is the Gaelic word for Scotland... The station is unique in that it is the first channel to be delivered under a BBC licence by a partnership and is also the first multi-genre channel to come entirely from Scotland with almost all of its programmes made in Scotland. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BBC\\_Alba](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BBC_Alba), retrieved April 22, 2011).

This station is on the air for up to seven hours a day. A study carried out for the channel indicated that 650,000 people watched BBC Alba per week in the first two months of broadcasting, in spite of only being available to around a third of Scots.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BBC\\_Alba](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BBC_Alba)). This high level of receptivity is, in the minds of many, a significant attempt to achieve the redress of language disparities and gain 'equal respect'. (Cormack, 2004, no pages given).

In spite of the history of language disparities that created a view of the Celtic languages as 'inferior, backward and parochial' and in spite of the fact that 'these value judgments have ...coloured attitudes to the speakers of such languages' (Dunbar, 2006, p.184) for a long time, current U.K. and E.U. policies attempt to validate majority languages without eroding or diminishing the value of the minority languages that were autochthonous to specific regions. The U.K. classified three languages as autochthonous minority languages and they are: Welsh, Gaelic and Irish. Special guarantees are now enforced for those languages:

The United Kingdom has ...been a party to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) for over fifty years and article 14 provides that the enjoyment of

the various convention rights and freedoms shall be secured without discrimination on any ground, including language. This guarantee is now enforceable in domestic law against public authorities under the Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA). (Dunbar, 2006, p.186)

There have always been forms of intergenerational language transmission on the islands, where children learned from the elders, but clearly the level of legal protection is now different. As in the case of Spanish in the Southwest, the wax and wane of Gaelic as a native language and as a cultural force has been readily observable through the centuries, with Gaelic having a much longer history of suppression or at least neglect. The reasons for comparing the situation of Spanish in the Southwestern U.S. become more intriguing as one reviews the examples of language disparagement and suppression, and while all the circumstances, particularly the demographic ones are not the same, a broad framework for contrasts and commonalities emerge.

### **Comparing the Status of Gaelic in the Outer Hebrides and Spanish in the Southwest**

Gaelic is recognized as a second official language in political life in Scotland. As stated, the Scottish Parliament passed the Gaelic Language Scotland Bill in 2005 giving the language 'equal respect' in official circles. Gaelic is used in official business in the Scottish Parliament, in local government and services where appropriate. In the Outer Hebrides, people converse in Gaelic in the home, the street, and frequently the workplace; the language is often heard around the library, the offices of public organizations, and the local sports facilities; road signs are offered in two languages (Gaelic-only in most of the rural areas) and the Regional Council conducts many of its official meetings in Gaelic, with the offer of simultaneous translation to English for individuals who require this service. Gaelic is supported by many educated and



politically active Gaelic speakers who are committed to the linguistic cause. Because outsiders who succeed in gaining command of the language are not many, those who learn to speak it well feel they have an important commodity. After a long and troubled history, Gaelic speakers in Scotland today are members of an empowered citizenry, albeit one that is numerically small and shrinking. Nobody questions their status or their ability to influence decisions ('flex their political muscles') and they do, not only in local but in Scottish parliamentary government, thus securing resources to support culture, folklore, music and of course, the language. Because Gaelic identity has never been projected as an issue of narrow nationalistic politics, Gaelic has been able to derive strength from differing areas of the Scottish political spectrum. As an integral component of Gaelic to the culture and heritage of Scotland, considerable attention has been given to the impact of current developments to support Gaelic language use (Johnstone, 1994) and to strategic planning for future developments (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2007).

This is not to say that there are no opponents to Gaelic language maintenance in the same way that there are opponents to minority language maintenance in many other European countries. Many people on the main land in Scotland, for example, look askance at investments made on behalf of Gaelic language maintenance, deeming that the numbers do not justify the expenditures. Social workers outside the islands often commented that maintaining the Gaelic was a waste of valuable resources, because in their pragmatic thinking, they conjectured that even many of the elderly, for whom services in Gaelic might be most important, also speak English. Perhaps a reason for this is a general antipathy among social workers for anything that might appear to be too localistic or

esoteric and remote, social work being essentially an urban occupation with an urban mentality. Be that as it may, even those who oppose efforts on behalf of the Gaelic do not appear to have articulated an organized opposition or to try to revive any prohibitions. On the contrary, the Scottish Parliament has officially indicated that, ‘Our aim is quite straightforward: to put in place measures that will create a sustainable future for Gaelic in Scotland’ (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2007, p5).

From a comparative perspective, Spanish speakers in the Southwest today find themselves having to defend their status in the society and thus have a more tender identity. They desire to ‘fit in’ in the English speaking world, a matter that erodes cultural and linguistic efforts. The concerns of Spanish speaking people who are poor in the Southwestern U.S. today are very basic. Their legal status and economic survival are at stake, and their energies must be directed to basic rather than linguistic needs. While there is a growing cadre of better educated and socially integrated Spanish speaking citizens, many of those who are in positions of power have suffered the consequences of language prohibitions themselves and do not always feel confident as Spanish speakers, capable of committed action in a linguistic cause. The situation regarding social workers’ beliefs about Spanish in the U.S. seems to be different and more positive than that of many Scottish social workers, at least those with whom we came in contact. When questioned, most social workers in the U.S. would agree about the enormous importance of Spanish in service provision given the nature of the population with which they work. In Scotland, with the exception of the islands, many social workers and other social service providers feel that Gaelic is of very limited use. This could be because Spanish is

viewed as a more urban and applicable or practical language in the U.S., which those who learn it might be able to use in other settings, while Gaelic is viewed by many non-Gaelic speakers as having geographic and generational limitations.

The following figure offers a synopsis of the comparative elements between Gaelic in the Outer Hebrides and Spanish in the Southwestern U.S.

**Insert Figure here**

### **Challenges of communication in more than one prevalent language in social services**

Social services in bilingual contexts always raise practice concerns. It is often assumed that as long as the recipient of services is fluent in the dominant language (English, in both contexts), whether the worker speaks the mother tongue of the recipient (Gaelic or Spanish) is not terribly important. While it is recognized that the use of the recipient's mother tongue is an effective short cut to create empathic communication, the use of the recipient's mother tongue by the social worker is often viewed as a kind of 'boutique luxury', as something which is nice to have, albeit not essential. However, practitioners in the front-line of services in bilingual areas realize that the familial language of clients holds a treasure of resonances, emotions and reminiscences that goes beyond mere instrumentality (frequently increasing in importance with the age of the client). Front line workers have always advocated for bilingual services and have insisted that providing counseling and emotional support in the mother tongue of the client is not superfluous (Pugh and Jones, 1999; Walker, 2005). But even for instrumental purposes

such as conveying directions or offering fact based information, the mother tongue can convey differences which are not always acknowledged.

Gaelic and Spanish are similar in that they constitute the glue that binds communities of memory and as such deserve to be respected and fostered. To the elderly, the native tongue offers the opportunity of reviewing life, and for children of connecting to those who came before, a central element of enculturation. It could be said that Gaelic and Spanish, respectively, concentrate at two stages of the life development cycle, life review and initial learning and attachment. But there is more than simply memory and code-switching with English that Gaelic and Spanish have in common. Context determines the prevalence of one language or another. Lamb (2001) describes such situations:

Perhaps the most reliable context for primarily Gaelic usage would be one where the conversational setting and theme are informal and non-field-specific, and where the participants are all older, native speakers, familiar with each other and in a domestic setting. As soon as one steps out of the control environment of one's house, the likelihood increases that some participants will be English-monoglots, or semi-speakers... It is not uncommon to hear conversations between a fully fluent Gaelic speaker and a so-called 'semi-speaker' (often simply an unconfident speaker), with the first speaking entirely in Gaelic and the second, following every word, but speaking only in English. (Lamb, 2001, p.14)

Except for the added presence of children in the situation described above, the same scenario applies to Spanish in the Southwest.

Translation, whether formal or informal is another important area of comparison. In case management, a huge area of social services, the efficiency of the worker is measured by her knowledge of the system and her ability to negotiate it on behalf of the client. It has been often assumed that if the client knows English, it does not matter the language in

which factual information is conveyed. Yet, translation often becomes necessary either because of comfort or because of the subtleties involved. But the nature of translation can be a problem both in Gaelic and in Spanish. Translations from English are often simplistic, inaccurate and less than satisfactory for the bilingual reader than those in English. As Lamb suggested,

...industrial and official documents found in Gaelic are often transparently tokenistic, especially when they are based upon more complete and concise English versions...organizations [issue] writing that is rife with orthographic mistakes, inconsistencies and errors... 'something based on a dense English set of sub clauses that just looks contorted in Gaelic' (Lamb, 2001, p.17).

All these observations ring very true when translation is used for the similar documents in Spanish.

The cognitive frameworks that support languages are also different and can cause complications in service delivery. For example, when a Spanish speaking client is told, e.g. that the payment for a medical treatment is 'twelve hundred dollars' instead of 'one thousand and two hundred dollars', the Spanish speaker has to decode not only the communication from English to Spanish, but also the amount from a base of hundreds to a base of thousands. In other words, the number syntax of Spanish is different from English and in the example above, one thousand and two hundred corresponds to the numerical mathematical symbol the brain of the Spanish speaker would more readily recall. Similar examples of instrumental communication regarding the use of numbers were discussed by workers in relation to Gaelic speakers. In traditional Gaelic use, for example, 'forty' is literally 'twice twenty' while in modern Gaelic useage, 'forty' is expressed as 'four tens'. There is nothing controversial about this, but like the fact that

Gaelic, like every other language, accrues new words (especially for technology), some older Gaelic speakers and some detractors of Gaelic highlight this language shift as a lack of consistency.

There is no way of knowing how perfectly bilingual clients deal with numbers in translation. A study by Argüelles, et al. found that Spanish speaking Alzheimer patients and normal elderly individuals performed worse in the single digit span subtest of the Wechsler Scale (Argüelles, et al, 2001) than English speakers. English speakers preferred single digit strings, but clusters of two were the norm in Spanish. In assessing, for instance, memory loss, these considerations have huge implications. It would be the role of social workers speaking the mother tongue to assess the type of strategy an elderly client might be using to decode numbers and remember information.

We have only touched upon a few of the many emotional and instrumental aspects of language usage in the social service context. There is a great deal of literature that describes and confirms the importance of the use of mother tongue in times of stress particularly with the elderly (Walker, 2005; Bohlmeijer, et al , 2007; Akhmeteli, 2007). However, nothing is found addressing the common concerns found in service provision among these two apparently dissimilar linguistic groups.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

We have seen how Gaelic is viewed as a medium of communications in the Outer Hebrides in contrast to how Spanish is viewed in the Southwestern U.S. We have

discussed political empowerment in relation to both languages within contexts of historical suppression.

Language maintenance efforts seem to be happening more clearly with Gaelic, probably because of the strength of the Gaelic medium schools, but also because of support from official local and national agencies. For Spanish in the Southwest, there were very few public schools supporting Spanish medium education and often not even transitional bilingual education for English learners. In Arizona, as already mentioned, the extreme of requiring teachers who instruct limited-English-proficiency students to speak not only 'correct' but 'unaccented' English, limits the pool of teachers who are native speakers of Spanish and adds to the negative perceptions of a language that is not deemed to be mainstream. Aside from the political implications of disempowerment of the Spanish speaking population that this represents, the consequences for self image, cultural self-respect and emotional authenticity are very negative. From a social service perspective, agencies know that they cannot offer services to many without the use of their primary language. Understanding and benevolence is their business but they find themselves being restricted in their mandates. Public hostility towards the Spanish language, whether brought about by immigration fears or nativist philosophies, hampers the use of Spanish in many spheres of the public domain.

Gaelic, on the other hand, may be spoken by fewer people, but as a language has been able to assert its realm in the E.U. in ways that Spanish has been unable to do in the Southwestern U.S. If there is a political and linguistic message resulting from these comparisons to be conveyed is that numbers of speakers alone cannot be used to justify

neglecting or ignoring the linguistic needs and rights of communities, as has been clearly stated in the the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) adopted in 1992 under the auspices of the Council of Europe. The Council's aim was to protect and promote historical regional and minority languages that were not official. The determination of which languages were to be included was unrelated to the number of speakers, even though the political power of the speakers, be the numbers large or small, has always been a recognizably decisive factor. In the Southwestern U.S., Spanish speakers have historically struggled for political power. Additionally, U.S. assimilationist policies and politics that use language as an index of national identity have clearly been more aggressive in recent years in the U.S. than in Scotland.



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