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Université de Lorraine, ERUDI, Master Mondes Anglophones
UE 902 – Le multiculturalisme: perspectives civilisationnistes

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SUBJECT:

To what extent might the multicultural language policies introduced since 2001 by the British and the Scottish governments to "revitalize" the Gaelic language effectively counter its relentless decline?

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ESSAY

Before English became the main language spoken in Scotland in the 18th century, there were different languages and dialects spoken across the country: whereas Gaelic was the dominant language in the Highlands and Islands—the *Gàidhealtachd* (Fig. 1)—the Lowlands adopted the language of Scots. From the 1380s onward, the country was increasingly understood to be the union of two distinct spaces and peoples (with the clan system predominating in the *Gàidhealtachd*), the linguistic division being reinforced by a contrast between their social structures, marriage, and migration patterns[1]. And up to the 1950s, many cultural commentators stereotyped the *Gaidhealtachd* as geographically isolated, poverty stricken, disloyal, disorderly, and barbarous (University of Glasgow, 2023).

Although Scotland has appropriated some typical features of the Highlands clans' culture—such as tartans, whisky, bagpipes—as emblems of its *national* traditions since the 19th century, it was only in 2005 that the Scottish government, through the adoption of the Gaelic Language Act, officially recognized Gaelic as "an integral part of Scotland's heritage, national identity, and current cultural life," after the UK government had ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages[2] in 2001. After fighting the Gaelic culture and language for six centuries, both governments have finally adopted multicultural language policies.

After examining the decline of the Gaelic language since mediaeval times in Scotland, through its competition with Scots and shift to English, I will present recent Census' results about the number and distribution of Gaelic speakers in the country and discuss to what extent the language policies introduced by the Scottish government to "revitalize" the Gaelic language since 2005 might effectively counter its relentless decline.

From the 8th century, the Gaelic kingdom of *Dal Riata* expanded to the western and northern regions of Scotland, supplanting the kingdom of the Picts and becoming the kingdom of *Alba*. In the 11th century, all the inhabitants of *Alba* had become fully Gaelicised Scots, and when *Alba* annexed the Strathclyde and the Lothians, Gaelic reached its social, cultural, political, and geographic zenith in Scotland. The entire country was for the first time referred to in Latin as *Scotia*, and Gaelic was recognised as the *lingua Scotia*.[3] Its imprint is still manifest in many Gaelic-derived placenames throughout Scotland (Fig. 2).

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Scottish_Gaelic, and Kandler et al (2010), p. 3857.
[2] See Glossary
[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Scottish_Gaelic

As south-eastern Scotland was still part of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria, the Old English remained largely confined to this area until the 13th century[4] (Fig. 3), but after the death of King Malcolm Canmore in 1093, Norman French became dominant among the new feudal aristocracy, especially in southern Scotland, and completely displaced Gaelic at the Scottish court. The establishment of royal burghs throughout the same area attracted large numbers of foreigners speaking 'Inglis', the language of the merchant class, and by the mid-1300s, English in its Scottish form—called Scots—emerged as the official language of government and law. In 14th century Scotland, the growth in prestige of Early Scots and the complementary decline of French made Scots the prestige dialect of most of eastern Scotland[5]. Meanwhile, retreated in the *Gàidhealtachd*, the semi-independent Clan Donald Lords of the Isles issued laws, regulated the various subordinate clans, and presided over a flourishing of classical Gaelic learning and art, acting as patrons of extended family groups until the end of the 15th century (University of Glasgow, 2023).

In the era following the conclusion of the Wars of Scottish Independence, the Scottish crown pursued a policy of state-building—in which cultural, religious, and linguistic unity was of the highest value—and forced the forfeiture of all the lands held under the Lordship of the Isles in 1493, thereby eliminating the core Gaelic region of medieval Scotland as a political entity. This policy of pacification and 'civilisation' of the Highlands culminated with James VI in 1583, when the crown established the clear rule of royal writ and the suppression of all independent-minded local clan leaders. After James VI also became king of England under the "union of the crowns" (see Glossary), he successfully negotiated the Statutes of Iona with nine prominent Gaelic chiefs in 1609. One of these statutes concerns a Gaelic-to-English shift: it compelled the chiefs to send their eldest child to schools in the Lowlands, to ensure that the next generation of Highland elites would speak English fluently. Moreover, a 1616 Act of the Privy Council of Scotland declared that no heir of a Gaelic chief could inherit unless he could write, read and speak English, and another one commanded the establishment of at least one English language school in every parish in Scotland so that "the *Irish* language, which is one of the chief and principal causes of the continuance of barbarity and incivility among the inhabitants of the Isles and Highlands may be abolished and removed". By the mid-1700s, all Highland gentry were bilingual. While these policies had no effect on the Gaelic-speaking masses, they fostered the integration of the Gaelic elite into the British polity and English-speaking society (History of Scottish Gaelic, 2023).

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scots_language
[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Scottish_Gaelic

After the Acts of Union in 1707, when Scotland joined England to form the Kingdom of Great Britain—having a single Parliament of Great Britain based in London—another language shift (see Glossary) happened in the Lowlands too: after the shift of political power to England, the use of Scots was discouraged by many in authority and education, to establish standard English as the official language of the newly formed union. Leaders of the Scottish Enlightenment, such as David Hume and Adam Smith, defined themselves as Northern British rather than Scottish. Nevertheless, Scots remained the vernacular of many rural communities and of the growing urban working-class.[6]

Meanwhile, the decline of Gaelic in the Highlands and Islands was more dramatically linked to the will of the British government to crush once and for all the clans' society, especially after the Jacobite risings (see Glossary) from the 1690s to 1745. They imposed restrictive laws compromising the power of the clan chiefs and the Gaelic culture that underpinned it, such as the banning of wearing arms and clan tartans or playing bagpipes. The government also cleared the way for outsiders to acquire much of the land in the Highlands and replicate capitalist agriculture models employed in the Lowlands[7]. Drastic demographic changes—the Highland Clearances (see Glossary) which triggered the mass emigration of Highlanders to Canada, Australia, and New-Zealand—and the associated establishment of English as the language of education and advancement were associated with increasing rates of Gaelic-to-English shift (Kandler et al, 2010, p. 3857).

From the 1700s, the primary purpose of education of parochial schools in the *Gaidhealtachd* was cultural—to teach the Bible, the catechism of the Church of Scotland, and the English language. Even though many pupils came to school with no ability to communicate in English, Gaelic was forbidden in school. Gaelic-speaking pupils were not taught their own language in school until the early 19th century, first by schools operated by the Gaelic Society and later in other parochial schools. However, Gaelic Society schools had basically disappeared by the 1860s. A report of the Secretary of State in 1871 sums up the prevailing view of the period: "The Gaelic language…decidedly stands in the way of the civilization of the natives making use of it". In 1872 Scotland moved for the first time to a compulsory, state-directed and state-funded system of education covering the entire country: even then no provision was made for Gaelic[8]. Gaelic Medium Education (GME) only reappeared in the mid-1980s in Scotland.

[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scots_language
[7] https://www.britannica.com/event/Highland-Clearances
[8] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Scottish_Gaelic

Charles Withers' book, published in 1984, *Gaelic in Scotland, 1698-1981*, studies the tremendous erosion of Gaelic from the 17th to the 20th century and is used as main reference by most resources cited in this essay. The first reliable statistics on the prevalence of Gaelic in Scotland begin in the 1690s. At that time around 25-30% of the country spoke Gaelic. By the time the first Census of Scotland asked the population about its ability to speak Gaelic in 1881, that figure had dropped to 6%[9]. The erosion of the percentage of Gaelic speakers (mono- and bilingual) in Scotland from 1891 to 2001, as well as their repartition in Scotland, are illustrated in Figures 5 and 6. Results from the 2011 Census show that the total number of people recorded as being able to speak and/or read and/or understand Gaelic was 87,056. Of these, 58,000 people (1.1% of the population) aged three and over in Scotland were able to speak Gaelic. Council areas with the most Gaelic speakers (Fig. 7) were: *Eilean Siar* (Western Isles), where 52.3% of the population could speak Gaelic, Highland (5.4%) and Argyll and Bute (4.0%). These were also the areas where people most commonly spoke Gaelic at home.[10] In its *Gaelic Language Plan 2022-2027*, the Scottish government, however, presents these figures in a positive way, underlining that the decline in the number of Gaelic speakers has slowed since 2001. "This is a slight fall from 59,000 (1.2% of the population) in the 2001 Census, which compares favourably to the previous Census results which recorded an 11% drop in speakers" (p. 10).

How could they comment otherwise? Since 2001, the British and the Scottish governments have spent millions of British pounds in the recognition and revitalization of the Gaelic language: from the introduction of bi-lingual road signs in 2001 (Fig. 8 and 9), which now show Scottish towns and cities in both English and Gaelic, to the funding of BBC Alba in 2008, "a dedicated Gaelic language television channel which airs throughout the UK to increase the awareness and popularity of the language". In 2005, the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act was passed to give Gaelic greater protection and prominence as an official language of Scotland, and *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* was created to further promote the development of Gaelic throughout Scotland. "They provide support for people who want to learn more about the language, offering a vast array of options covering everything from pre-school education right through to post-graduate studies."[11] The Scottish government also published its third *Gaelic Language Plan* in 2022, and support GME through several policies and funding streams.[12] But

[9] Idem
[10] https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/census-results/at-a-glance/languages/
[11] https://www.scotland.org/about-scotland/culture/language/the-gaelic-language-past-and-present
[12] https://www.gov.scot/policies/languages/gaelic/

unlike Ireland (for Gaelic) or Wales (for Welsh), Gaelic language education is not compulsory in Scotland at the national level, probably because Scots has also been recognized as a minority language to be protected and supported by the Scottish government.[13]

How could political and academic initiatives to revitalize a vanishing language counter the economic and demographic realities in Scotland? Many of native Gaelic speakers are found in the Outer Hebrides and Skye (*Eilean Siar*), but the area lost 18% of its people since 1981, and a further drop of 14% is predicted by 2041 (Ross, 2022). Indeed, the results of the 2022 Census not only show that the areas with the biggest proportions of Gaelic speakers are those which have lost up to 5% of their total population in ten years (Fig. 10) but also those with the highest percentages of people over 65 years (Fig. 11). And this trend is even worse among the Gaelic speakers than among non-Gaelic speakers (Fig. 12). An explanation for this situation may be found in a 2023 NHS report: "Many of the younger population of the islands go away for university education, marry and have families elsewhere. It is key that we can attract as many as possible of this population back to the Islands." Another reason for the endemic drain of population is linked to the fragile economy of the Isles and the lack of job opportunities, and these weaknesses might further increase in the future, because the financing of development projects by the European Regional Development Fund has stopped since Brexit. Moreover, the general erosion of church attendance in Scotland[14] also affects Gaelic speaking communities. As religion has always represented a stronghold of the Gaelic language, especially in the Western Isles, this decline could also impede Gaelic revitalization efforts.

In her 2010 paper, McEwan-Fujita also suggests that an "etiquette of accommodation" to English speakers—a widespread social practice in Gaelic communities in Scotland since the second half of the 20th century—and the fact that Gaelic speakers have acquired a conditioned negative affect through a long history of negative Scottish media portrayal, public disrespect, and state-mandated restrictions on Gaelic usage, could also challenge the preservation and revitalization of Gaelic: she studied this sociolinguistic ideology in the Outer Hebrides, where this accommodation ethic persists even in situations where new learners attempt to speak Gaelic with native speakers, thus creating a situation at odds with revitalization efforts on behalf of new speakers, state policies, and family members reclaiming their lost mother tongue.

Finally, a recent sociolinguistic survey of Scottish Gaelic pointed out that Gaelic speaking island communities could vanish within ten years unless language policies are changed dramatically: their focus is on media, schools, the arts, but there is no social policy supporting

[13] https://www.gov.scot/publications/scots-language-policy-english/
[14] https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/census-results/at-a-glance/religion/

the remaining vernacular communities of Scotland. “The primary focus of Gaelic policy should now be on relevant initiatives to avert the loss of vernacular Gaelic.”[15]

The constant decline of the Gaelic language from the mediaeval times in Scotland seems to perfectly illustrate the notions about multiculturalism, language, and education studied in our class: its eviction at court in the 14th century, when Scots became the language of power (aristocracy) and money (merchants), then its persecution beginning with the “union of the crowns” in the 17th century and increasing when English became the official language of the United Kingdom, up to the 1980s. Even if Scotland had kept its sovereignty regarding education in the Act of Union (1707), the country only offered a mono-lingual (i.e., English), compulsory, state-funded school system from the 1870s to the mid-1980s.

The UK, and particularly Scotland, have embarked on a journey towards minority languages preservation and revitalization since the end of the 20th century, with the Scottish government recognizing in their language policy that Gaelic “remains a valuable part of Scotland's cultural identity, especially for people in the Highlands and Islands”, and the media changing their discourse into what looks like a commercial advertisement to attract foreign tourists: “Shaped by our rich history and vibrant culture, the ancient Celtic language of Gaelic is still spoken throughout Scotland. Gaelic has been part of the Scottish consciousness for centuries and is considered to be the founding language of the country.”[16]

It is better late than never, certainly, and governments’ funds allocated to revitalize Gaelic have probably helped academic research and given work to new Gaelic administrative organizations, but I cannot help wondering if these multicultural policies of language revitalization—though probably supported by good intentions—can be effective, considering the present status of Gaelic in the state education system and the social and economic problems in the Western Isles: many native Gaelic speakers must leave these vernacular communities to study or find work. Bilingual signposts on the roads may sensibilize Scottish people and tourists to Gaelic, but how about changing the negative affect of native Gaelic speakers, to embark them also as active players in this national revitalization effort? Answering these questions would certainly deserve a dedicated research work, far beyond the scope of this paper.

[15] https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-53262715 and Brooks, L. (2019).
[16] https://www.scotland.org/about-scotland/culture/language

GLOSSARY

Highland Clearances:
In its will to definitively crush the Highlands clans' society after the Battle of Culloden in 1746, the British government cleared the way for outsiders to acquire much of the land in the Highlands. The new landlords were set on replicating capitalist agriculture models employed in the Lowlands. Thousands of families were evicted, and their cottages burnt, to establish large sheep or cattle farms. The subsequent disruption of traditional life and dispossession of land, that occurred over roughly the next century, became known as the Highland Clearances. Resettled in coastal crofts (small tenant farms), the evicted tenants had no legal claim to the land on which they lived and were forced to subsist by collecting and smelting kelp, something of a boom industry at the beginning of the 19th century, or by fishing, an occupation that was foreign to them… The decline of the kelp industry, falling cattle prices, and, later, the potato famine in the Highlands, were major blows to the subsistence economy of the crofters. When the potato blight hit, about 1846, the crofters were financially devastated. Disease and starvation spread. Mass migrations of Highlanders occurred, mainly to the Scottish Lowlands (where factory work could be found), Canada, the United States, or Australia.
https://www.britannica.com/event/Highland-Clearances

Jacobite risings:
Jacobite, in British history, means a supporter of the exiled Stuart king James II (Latin: Jacobus) and his descendants after the Glorious Revolution in 1688. The political importance of the Jacobite movement extended from 1688 until at least the 1750s…During this period, five attempts at restoration were made in favour of the exiled Stuarts.
https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jacobite-British-history

Language shift is the process whereby members of a community in which more than one language is spoken abandon their original vernacular language in favour of another…The major driver of language shift is the decision to abandon a more local or less prestigious language, typically because the target of the shift is a language seen as more modern, useful or giving access to greater social mobility and economic opportunities. In the modern era, nation states, globalization and selective migration have been potent forces of language standardization and of minority language endangerment or extinction. (Kandler et al., 2010, p. 3855)

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages was adopted in 1992 to help protect Europe's languages and encourage their use. It entered into force in 1998.
https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-charter-regional-or-minority-languages/.

Union of the Crowns:
Until the early 17th century England and Scotland were two entirely independent kingdoms. This changed dramatically in 1603 on the death of Elizabeth I of England. Because the Queen had died unmarried and childless, the English crown passed to the next available heir, her cousin James VI, King of Scotland. England and Scotland now shared the same monarch under what was known as a union of the crowns.
https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/legislativescrutiny/act-of-union-1707/overview/union-of-the-crowns/

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1: Map of the *Gàidhealtachd*: The Gaelic Speaking Highlands and Islands ©Public domain (University of Glasgow, 2023, MOOC)

Fig. 2: A selection of Gaelic-derived placenames in Scotland
https://www.ainmean-aite.scot/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Alba-600-dpi-scaled.jpeg

ILLUSTRATIONS

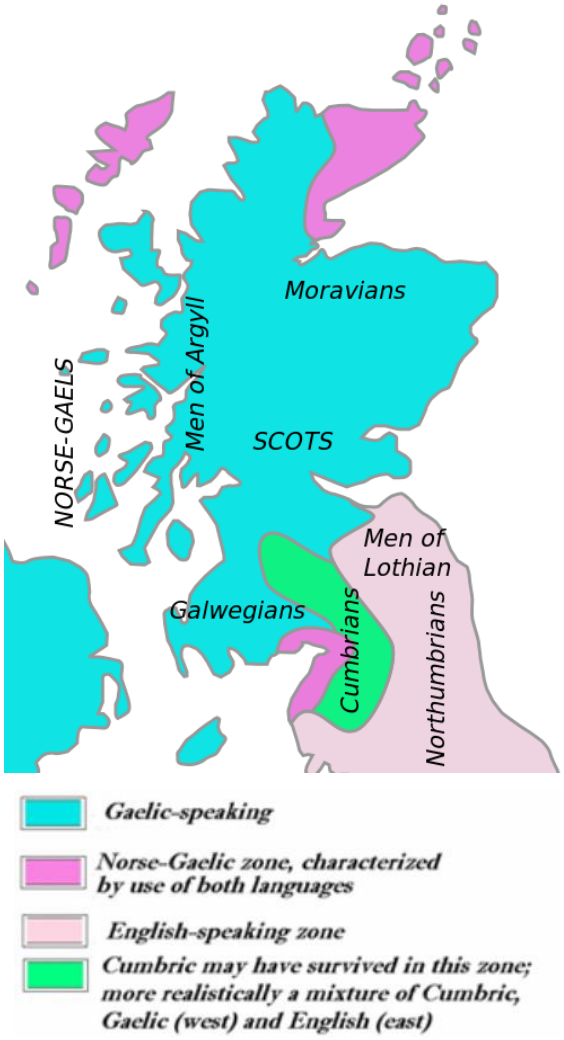


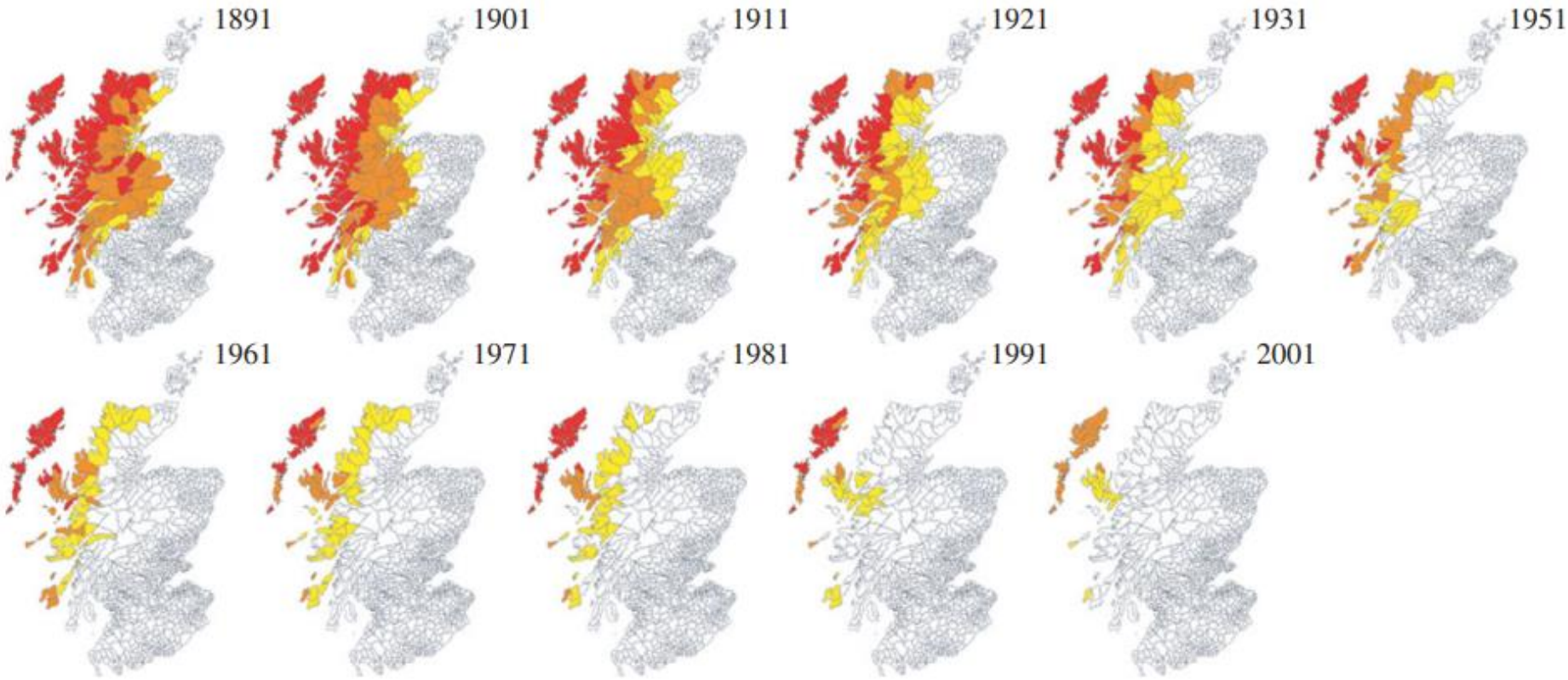
Fig. 3: Approximate ethnic divisions in Scotland, 1100

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Scottish_Gaelic#/media/File:Scots_lang-en.svg

Fig. 4: A Map of the Highland Clearances ©The Map Archive (Axiom Maps)
https://www.themaparchive.com/product/highland-clearances-1745-1881/

ILLUSTRATIONS

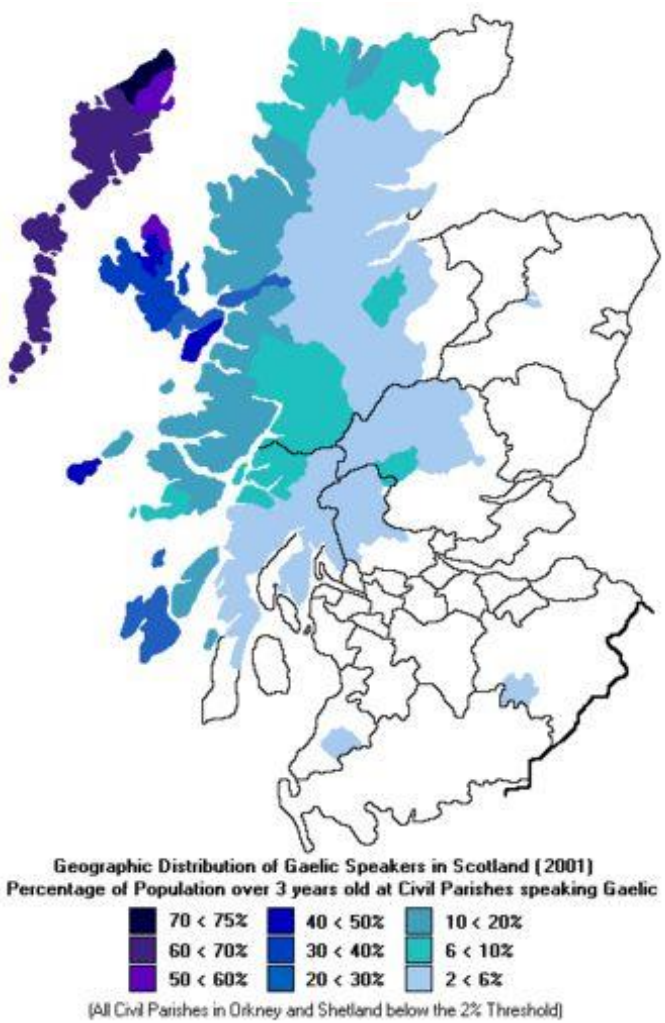
Fig. 5: Percentage of Gaelic speakers (mono- and bilingual) in Scotland from 1891-2001 (Kandler et al, 2010, p. 3856)



Red, 75–100% Gaelic speaking; orange, 50–74.9% Gaelic speaking; yellow, 25–49.9% Gaelic speaking; white, less than 25% Gaelic speaking

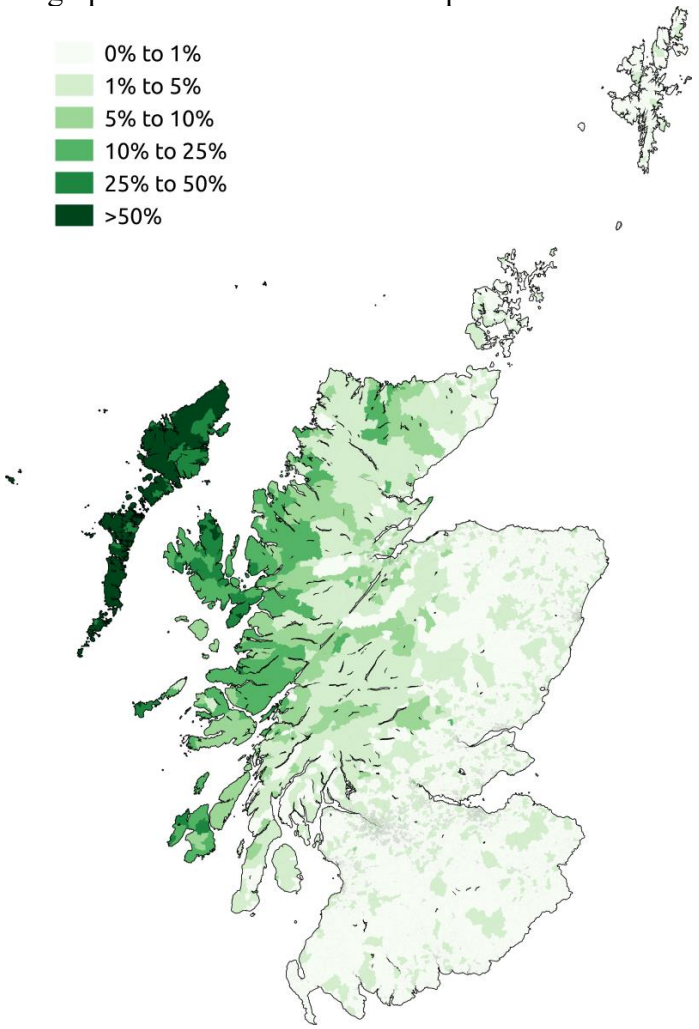
ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig.6: Geographic distribution of Gaelic speakers in Scotland (2001)



Source: https://www.pinterest.fr/pin/716072409511154629/

Fig 7: Geographic distribution of Gaelic speakers in Scotland (2011)



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G%C3%A0idhealtachd#/media/File:Scots_Gaelic_speakers_in_the_2011_census.png

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig 8: Road sign in both Gaelic and English, border between Harris and Lewis, Outer Hebrides (my photo, June 2023)

Figure 9: Tourist information board in both Gaelic and English. Arnol blackhouse, Lewis, Outer Hebrides (my photo, June 2023)

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 10: Population change, 2011-2021, council areas in Scotland

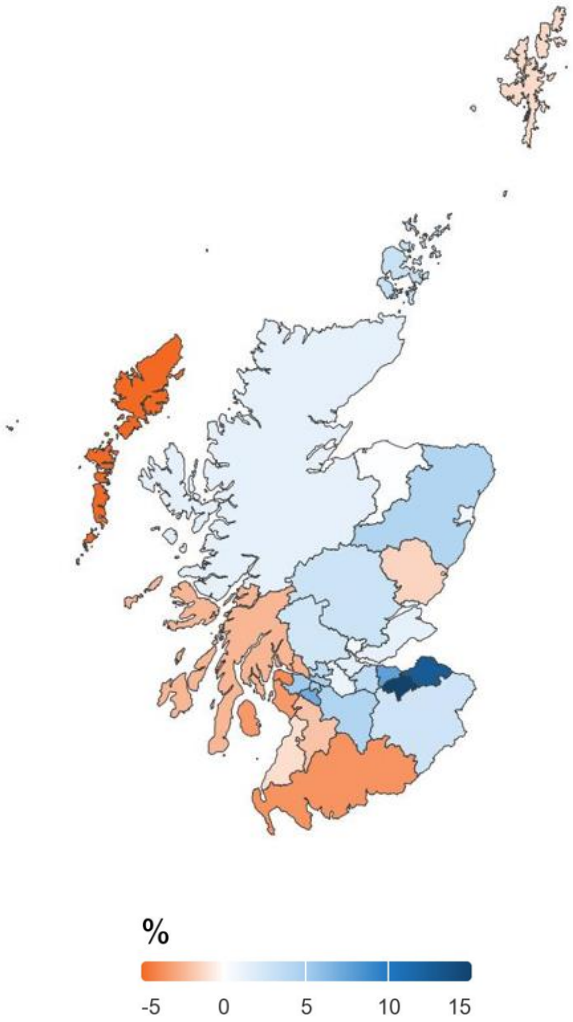
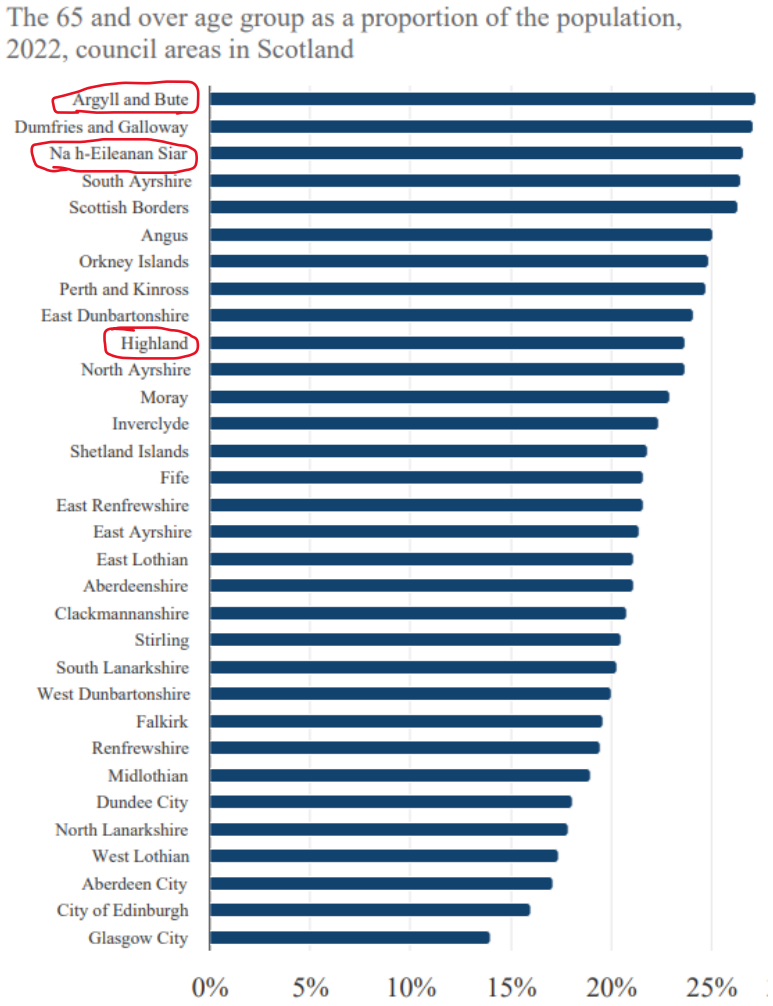
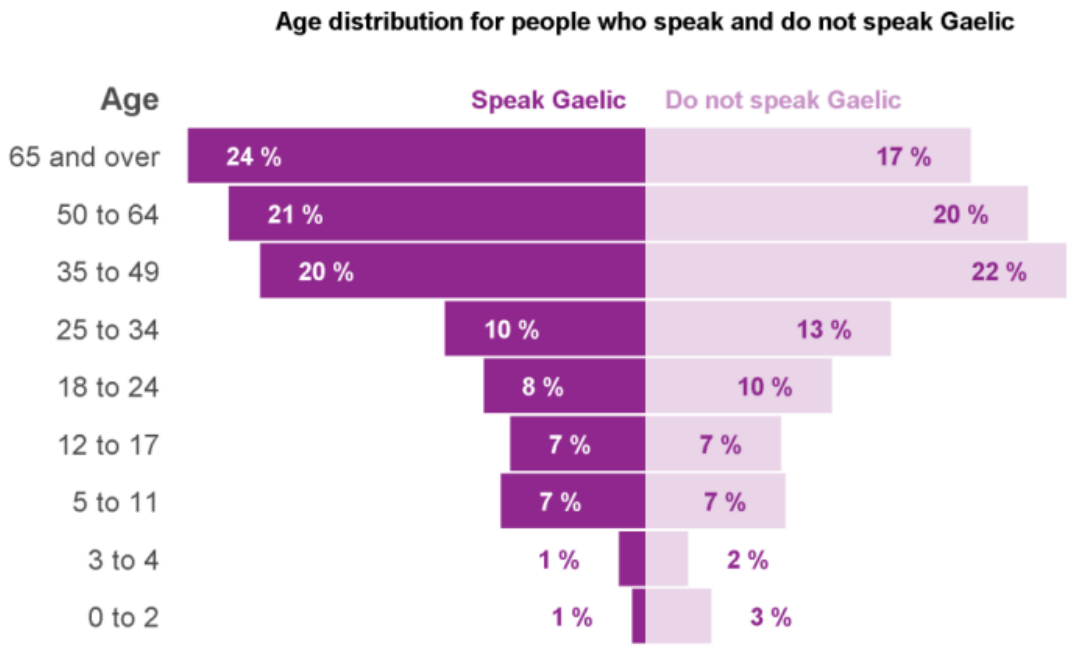


Fig. 11: The percentage in older age groups varies across council areas.



Source: https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/2022-results/scotland-s-census-2022-rounded-population-estimates/

Figure 12: Age distribution of Gaelic speakers, 2011



Source: Scottish Government (2015) *Scotland's Census 2011: Gaelic report (part 1)*, p. 13

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