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After the Vikings: Language Shift in Scotland and the Irish Sea World

Pavel Iosad

What was the sociolinguistic situation in the North Atlantic in the Viking Age and its aftermath? In the near-total absence of reliable, contemporary historical sources, enquiry into language maintenance and shift in the Northern Isles, the Hebrides, and the Irish Sea basin is a fascinating, multidisciplinary enterprise, to which Arne Kruse has made very significant contributions. In this chapter, I consider how the Western Norse vernacular of the Scandinavian settlers in much of this region was ultimately replaced by the Gaelic languages. My perspective is grounded in historical sociolinguistics: I will interrogate what interplay between the sociohistorical context and specific types of contact-induced change could be expected in this region in the medieval period, and try to match these predictions against what is known about Norse-Gaelic contact.

Britain and Ireland in the North Atlantic

Our discussion begins during the Viking Age. It is uncontroversial that the rise of 'Norse' polities was associated with both population movement and cultural diffusion, including the

introduction of North Germanic as the vernacular of a large, sometimes overwhelming proportion of the population. We cannot recap the debates around whether Viking-Age settlement was associated with a degree of continuity or resulted in a 'blank slate' situation.[1] Ultimately, we must reckon with a situation in which Western Norse was the first language of both a political and cultural elite plugged into the wider North Atlantic world and much of the local population working the land.

It is, of course, important not to erase the heterogeneity of the interactions across the region. Norse settlement in the Danelaw was different from its counterparts in Ireland, the Hebrides, the Northern Isles, or the Isle of Man. We can reconstruct differences in the number of Norse-speaking settlers, their proportion within the local population, the aim of their migration, and their social position within the resulting communities. All these factors would remain in flux across time, with the same region subject to raiding, hostile takeover, relatively peaceful settlement, and language shift to and away from Norse at different stages of the 'Viking expansion'. In particular, we need to distinguish between areas with a preponderance of Norse speakers and those that were within the Scandinavian political and cultural ambit, but where the Norse language co-existed with other vernaculars, or where significant settlement may not have lasted for too long.

The precise role of the Norse population is at the heart of the distinction between the 'inner' and the 'outer' zone of settlement in Scotland postulated by Arne Kruse and Andrew Jennings.[2] Local studies for parts of the 'inner' zone, such as Bute[3] and

1. Barrett 2003; Kruse 2005; Jennings and Kruse 2005; Macniven 2015.
2. Jennings 1996; Jennings and Kruse 2009a; 2009b.
3. Márkus 2012.

south-eastern Mull,[4] have confirmed the basic correctness of this division, even though some controversy remains about the precise status of individual localities (such as Islay).[5]

Ultimately, Norse ceased to be spoken in both the 'inner' and the 'outer' zones by the early modern period. Only in Caithness and the Northern Isles did it take longer, with Scots (and eventually English) taking over. Unfortunately, historical sources are very largely silent about the sociolinguistics of Gaelic (re)expansion. Evidence for the mechanism of language shift and relationship between the communities is mostly circumstantial. Apart from what can be recovered from political history, it comes from literary sources, archaeology, onomastics, and linguistics.

Here, I concentrate on the linguistic arguments. Language contact in the North Atlantic sphere has left an imprint on both Norse[6] and Gaelic.[7] This influence is observed in the lexicon (including the onomasticon) and the grammatical systems. In particular, Scottish Gaelic sound patterns such as preaspiration and tonal accents have often been treated as unusual and ascribed to influence from Norse.

The narrowly linguistic arguments for and against the proposition have been litigated quite extensively; I refer the reader to Iosad (in preparation) for an up-to-date overview. Here, I would like to focus on the sociohistorical context by addressing the following question: how plausible is it that the situation in the Norse-Gaelic world would give rise to contact-induced change in Gaelic?

4. Whyte 2017.
5. Macniven 2015.
6. Gammeltoft 2004; 2007; Lindqvist 2015.
7. Marstrander 1932; Borgstrøm 1974; R.W. McDonald 2015.

Mechanisms of contact-induced change

Current understanding in historical sociolinguistics[8] builds on insights that relate the outcomes of contact-induced change to an interplay of the sociohistorical context, mechanisms of language learning, and the different impacts of these factors on different areas of grammar.

The key notion here is *agency*.[9] From a cognitive perspective, the most relevant distinction is between *borrowing* (L1 agency) and *imposition* (L2 agency). In the former, the contact-induced feature comes into the target language via those users who have acquired it by mechanisms of first-language acquisition. This is the pathway engaged where the agents are multilingual. They have L1 command of both systems, but the coexistence of the two grammars also results in convergence in the usage of such speakers. Under these conditions, there are essentially no limits to *what* can and cannot be borrowed. Certain tendencies in the 'borrowability' of individual features can be identified, but in the right social conditions, almost any feature can be subject to transfer.

Conversely, in situations of L2 agency, the contact feature appears first among those who have acquired the target language via second-language acquisition mechanisms, usually as adults, and often 'incompletely' or 'imperfectly' compared to L1 users. Such contact can involve the transfer of specific kinds of structures, or a more general 'simplification' of grammatical structure that does not directly build on models in the putative 'source'. Interestingly, large-scale borrowing of general lexical items is often avoided in such situations.

8. See, for instance, Thomason and Kaufman 1988; Trudgill 2011; Matras 2020.
9. Winford 2005.

A second important dimension for the reconstruction of historical contact situations is social. For a contact-induced feature of multilinguals' language to become more widely established, they need to form a significant proportion of the relevant speech community. Leaving aside the precise definition of 'significant' (this can, but perhaps does not have to, refer to numerical preponderance), we should note that in L1 agency ('borrowing') situations, wide-ranging contact-induced change is facilitated when bilingualism is widespread within the community and persists over long periods of time. Such communities can remain multilingual for many generations, with a stable situation not characterised by asymmetries of status that drive language shift. In such communities, we can expect quite profound contact-induced change affecting all levels of structure – including, crucially for our purposes, sound patterns.

L2 agency ('imposition'), on the other hand, commonly occurs under conditions of rapid language shift, when adult learners of the target language come to constitute a large proportion of the speech community. The change propagates when a contact-influenced variety becomes the L1 of the next generation of users. Here, the ultimate outcome of contact depends strongly on the social circumstances. Sometimes, the community of 'language shifters' can maintain a distinct identity within the larger population, in which case their variety can be considered an 'ethnolect'. At other times, their language loses its ethnic connotation. However, since rapid language shift is often driven by status asymmetries, the association of this contact-influenced variety with lower-status groups can persist, which will hinder the wider spread of originally contact-induced features (or at least their attestation in higher-status written varieties). Alternatively, of course, it is also possible that, despite their contact origins, such features can enter the pool of variants within the target language community, and eventually spread to

those groups who originally lacked any ties to the users of the source language. All these scenarios are viable, and they are of interest to us because sound patterns are widely recognised as a kind of linguistic feature that is especially prone to transfer in an L2 agency context.

Grammatical change in the transition from Old Gaelic to the Classical Modern Gaelic system that became established by the end of the twelfth century is rarely ascribed to contact with Norse or any other language. Granted, the grammatical system was simplified, with a drastic decrease in the complexity of verbal morphology and a reduced system of nominal inflection. However, this trend is in evidence across all of the Gaelic-speaking world, including areas with no history of significant Viking influence, and language contact does not appear necessary to explain it. Consequently, scholars' attention has focused on the lexicon and on sound patterns. It is particularly interesting to note that at least two phonetic/phonological features linking Gaelic and Norse – preaspiration[10] and tonal accents[11] – are relatively rare cross-linguistically and appear to have an areal concentration in Northern Europe.

Having thus identified the phenomena of interest, we will now evaluate the likelihood of each conceivable contact scenario for the origin of these features in the Gaelic languages.

Norse-Gaelic contacts and sociolinguistic typology

Lexical evidence

The influence of Norse on the Gaelic lexicon is undeniable. The evidence of onomastic contacts has been extensively

10. Wagner 1964.
11. Jakobson 1931; Ternes 1980.

considered in previous work.[12] Here, I focus on the appellative lexicon: as noted earlier, lexical borrowings are often avoided in L2-agency situations, and so their presence could be diagnostic of an L1-agency mechanism.

Unfortunately, the evidence is more equivocal than it is often given credit for. Although Norse borrowings are no doubt attested in the Gaelic languages,[13] a careful consideration of the nature of these borrowings shows them to be primarily cultural vocabulary, related to the economy and natural environment of the Atlantic littoral.[14] Such vocabulary is far less diagnostic of the general situation with respect to bilingualism.

Furthermore, although the lexical geography of the *Gàidhealtachd* remains understudied,[15] it is acknowledged that northern dialects corresponding to the 'outer' zone show a greater Norse impact;[16] one well-known example is *nàbaidh* for 'neighbour' (Norse *nábúi*), which is restricted to northern dialects in contrast to *comhairsneachd* (Old Gaelic *comarsanach*), the normal word in 'inner zone' regions.[17] Thus, the lexical evidence does not support an especially strong role for Norse influence on Gaelic outwith the area of the most intensive Scandinavian settlement.

Phonetic and phonological evidence

Assume for the sake of the argument that linguistic arguments can support the proposition that Gaelic underwent phonetic and phonological influence from Norse in the post-Viking Age

12. Cf. Clancy 2011; Fellows-Jensen 2015.
13. See Marstrander 1915, and more recently, Schulze-Thulin 1996; R.W. McDonald 2021.
14. See especially R.W. McDonald 2015.
15. Ó Maolalaigh 2010.
16. Gillies 2007.
17. Ó Dochartaigh 1996.

period. Phonetic influence is consistent with both L1 and L2 agency in language contact. In the former case, it is effected via convergence in the speech of multilingual users; in the latter, it occurs initially as a kind of 'foreigner accent' during language shift before becoming established among a community of L1 users. Can either of these scenarios be sustained?

Both options are certainly *a priori* plausible. First, we could envisage Gaelicisation as rapid language shift, where phonetic influence would have come about via L2 agency and the imposition of Norse phonetic and phonological patterns as part of an 'imperfect learning' process. However, there is little evidence for any phonological patterns being introduced into Gaelic under Norse influence. Thomas Stewart[18] discusses a case of 'imposition' related to transfer of lexical items beginning with certain consonant clusters such as *sp*- and *st*-, which are overrepresented in the set of words borrowed from Norse. However, whatever the reason behind this numerical skew, such structures had been present in the Gaelic vocabulary even prior to contact with Norse, and are not diagnostic of an L2-driven scenario.[19]

More widespread in the literature is a somewhat more complex scenario relying on a combination of convergence under L1 agency and later propagation. In his influential paper,[20] Carl Marstrander envisaged a period of prolonged bilingualism in high-contact areas, leading to the formation of a Norse-influenced (*norskstemplet*) variety of Gaelic, followed by an expansion of such originally Norse features into the rest of the *Gàidhealtachd*. Carl Hj. Borgstrøm also considered this course

18. Stewart 2004.

19. I would like to thank an anonymous peer reviewer for helpful discussion on this point.

20. Marstrander 1932.

of events plausible.[21] The existence of high-contact varieties of both Norse and Gaelic in Scotland is also posited by Christer Lindqvist.[22] The existence of such a 'hybrid' community is almost assured given the widely recognised presence of individuals with links to Gaelic-speaking regions of Britain and Ireland in other North Atlantic communities, most notably Iceland.[23]

I suggest, however, that the key problem, presenting insurmountable difficulties for either scenario, is propagation. Why would an L2 variety of Gaelic formed in high-contact areas become particularly influential throughout the *Gàidhealtachd*? There are at least three possibilities.

One is sheer weight of numbers, if speakers of such a variety were to be a majority of Gaelic speakers. This is unlikely: much of the Gaelic-speaking world remained little affected by Viking settlement, especially on the mainland, or lay in the 'inner zone', where Norse political and cultural influence was combined with the maintenance of a large, primarily Gaelic-speaking population.

The second possibility is the spread of features from the outer zone driven by internal dynamics of the Gaelic-speaking world. Such a scenario, however, is difficult to motivate. We need to ask ourselves whether the high-contact variety of Gaelic would be a plausible source for innovation.

One possible scenario for such 'secondary' spread involves the formation of an ethnolect, when the contact variety remains strongly associated with a 'post-Viking' identity. This is certainly possible, but the very existence of a language shift away from Norse and cultural Gaelicisation rather suggest that this identity would not be associated with a particularly high status.

21. Borgstrøm 1974.

22. Lindqvist 2015.

23. Hermann Pálsson 1996; Gísli Sigurðsson 2000. See also, more generally, the discussion of the 'Viking diaspora' in Jesch 2015.

Alternatively, the loss of Norse political power did *not* lead to loss of status, perhaps because of a de-ethnolectalisation effect.[24] Here, we can profitably draw on the Icelandic parallel: it is clear that, by the later medieval period, individuals could bear Gaelic names or evince other links to Britain and Ireland without being strongly identified as in any way other than fully integrated into Icelandic society. Once again, although this option is not inconceivable, what evidence we have seems to speak against it.

It is no surprise that the Outer Hebrides or the north-west mainland do not figure prominently in our written sources. Nominally, they were subject to the Hiberno-Norse polities before coming into the Gaelic ambit. Economically, politically, and culturally, this world was focused around the Irish Sea and the inner seas of Scotland, including Dublin, the Isle of Man, Argyll, and Galloway.[25] We also need to remember that, although today the Gaelic 'centre of gravity' is tilted towards the areas of historically heavy Viking settlement in the north and west, Gaelic ecclesiastical, political, and cultural power – until well into the early modern era – was concentrated in Argyll and further east, including areas such as Perthshire, near to the interface with Lowland Scotland.[26] There is very little contemporaneous evidence that suggests the north and west as an important centre of innovation within the Gaelic world in the immediate 'post-Viking' era.

What, then, is the most likely scenario for the Norse to Gaelic language shift in medieval Scotland? A significant degree of bilingualism is widely agreed on,[27] possibly lasting until as late as the thirteenth century. However, we need to ask ourselves what the role of the bilingual group was within the larger speech community. We have already referred to findings

24. See especially Lindqvist 2015: 176–177.
25. R.A. McDonald 1997; 2021.
26. For discussion, see Mac Aonghuis 1990; Meek 1996.
27. Gillies 2007; Jennings and Kruse 2009b; Clancy 2011.

from the inner zone that suggest that the Norse cultural and political intrusion may not have led to long-lasting linguistic disruption. Especially instructive is the case of Man. A major centre of Norse political and cultural power, it may nevertheless have preserved some continuity alongside heavy Scandinavian settlement.[28] This surely leads us to expect a similar prolonged period of 'twilight'. Nevertheless, the evidence discussed by Michael Barnes[29] suggests that, even in this stronghold of vernacular Norse, it was on the way out if not extinct by the end of the thirteenth century. In fact, it was already under pressure in the 900s and isolated from the rest of the West Norse speech community by the mid-1000s. As a result, Norse influence on Manx, outwith the lexicon, is negligible or absent.[30]

Conclusion

Overall, we undoubtedly need to reckon with a community speaking a high-contact variety of Gaelic with some Norse-induced features. It is likely that, in some areas, a stable bilingual situation could have resulted in convergence led by L1 speakers and the formation of an ethnolectal (regional) variety, whilst in others, L2 agency would be the more important mechanism. In either case, however, this community would not be especially influential, and would, over time, gradually shift to the linguistic norms of the wider *Gàidhealtachd*. Critically, under this scenario, we cannot expect much in the way of structural influence of Norse on Gaelic, because there is no viable vector for such a transfer.

This conclusion can be supported by at least three plausible parallels from instances of language shift to English, namely in

28. Thomson 2015; Fellows-Jensen 2015; Steinforth 2015.
29. Barnes 2004.
30. Lewin 2017; *pace* Williams 1996; R.W. McDonald 2021.

Cornwall,[31] the Isle of Man,[32] and Ulster.[33] In all of these cases, gradual language shift has not resulted in extensive (if, indeed, any) contact-induced phonetic or phonological change, whilst leaving traces in areas such as the lexicon.

In view of these parallels, I conclude that historical sociolinguistics cannot support the proposition that Norse exerted phonetic and phonological influence on the Gaelic varieties of Scotland. It is certainly possible that the Norse vernacular, and maybe Norse-influenced Gaelic dialects, remained spoken in parts of the *Gàidhealtachd* until late in the medieval period. It would, nevertheless, be wise not to overstate their role in the subsequent development of the Gaelic languages.[34]

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31. Wakelin 1975.
32. Lewin 2017.
33. Maguire 2020.
34. Thanks are due to Christopher Lewin and to an anonymous peer reviewer for clarifying discussion and important literature suggestions. All errors of fact and judgement remain my own.

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