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Scots Gaelic and Welsh language broadcasting in the cultural contexts: A comparative analysis

Fachna O'Drisceoil

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This paper will be a presentation and comparative analysis of the experiences of Welsh and Scots Gaelic broadcasting. The intention is to draw conclusions regarding broadcasting strategies in those languages and to identify the implications of those conclusions for Irish language broadcasting strategy. It was decided that a brief discussion of a wider range of lesser used languages would be superficial in nature, and of little real benefit to understanding the Irish situation. Instead, a more detailed presentation will be given of the Welsh and Scots Gaelic cases on the basis that their cultural and historical experience has most similarity to the Irish situation, especially with regard to their relationship to the English language and their historical position within the United Kingdom. The presentations will not be subjected to a tightly defined theoretical or comparative framework, (i.e. the 'minority language' model) because these methods have led to relevant features being ignored in previous research. The only conscious bias will be an attempt to identify features in the Welsh and Scottish situations which are relevant to the comparative analysis and to the Irish situation.

Welsh Language Broadcasting

In 1924, the BBC established radio stations in Cardiff and Swansea. From the beginning, some of the broadcasts were in Welsh but most of the programmes were in English, and the majority of the population of Wales could not receive the stations. From 1925 onwards the Welsh Nationalist Party, certain local authorities, Welsh MPs and numerous individuals began lobbying for improvements in Welsh language broadcasting. At that time, the West of England formed one broadcasting unit with Wales and there was mounting dissatisfaction with this situation on both sides of the border. In 1935, the BBC finally agreed to treat Wales as a separate broadcasting region and modified its transmission system to achieve this.

After the war Welsh grievances against the BBC flared up again, as there was only a twenty-minute Welsh broadcast every day, and never at peak listening hours. In 1947 Regional Advisory Councils were set up to meet the demand for greater devolution of authority over broadcasting. In 1952, the Welsh Advisory Council was superseded by a more powerful body, the Broadcasting Council for Wales.

Until 1978 radio broadcasting in Wales was tied to BBC's Radio 4 with thirty hours a week of programmes in Welsh and English as opt-outs from that service. However, in 1978 the English language Radio Wales was established followed in 1979 by Radio Cymru which began providing eighty-five hours weekly of radio programmes in Welsh.

When television broadcasting began in Wales in 1952, Wales and the West of England were again linked in one broadcasting region. In 1956 a separate television studio was set up at Cardiff which allowed a daily news bulletin to be broadcast in Welsh. However, in general, Welsh programmes could only be broadcast at lunchtime or very late at night when the transmitters were not occupied by UK network programmes. This caused great dissatisfaction amongst supporters of the Welsh language. Eventually in 1964, the BBC Wales Service was established offering twelve hours of programmes a week as opt-outs from BBC 1. This consisted of seven hours in Welsh and five hours in English.

However, Welsh-language activists were still unhappy that television was dominated by English-language programmes. This dominance was seen by them as one of the causes of the decline of the language. This view of the process is summarized by Jones:

In every Welsh home television is a voluble and attractive alien presence. The natural domain supports of the language are being cut down by the homogenising aspects of modern mass culture, a culture which by its very nature induces conformity with the norms of a mass market at the expense of the traditional and the particular (Jones, 1981:49).

From November 1968 the campaign for Welsh language television intensified when members of *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* (The Welsh Language Society) occupied for some hours the BBC newsroom in Cardiff and a radio station in Bangor. Other actions taken by protesters including climbing television masts in an attempt to disrupt the service and calling on the people of Wales to refuse to pay their broadcasting licence fees.

Gradually a consensus evolved amongst the political parties, the BBC and the various interested parties that a Welsh language channel should be established. In its 1978 Report, the Council for the Welsh Language supported the Welsh fourth channel proposal, but it also warned of the dangers of isolating the Welsh language by confining it to one single channel. It argued that:

...it would be in the best interests of the Welsh language: a) to concentrate most of the programmes in Welsh on the fourth channel, where they should have priority, especially at peak hours; b) to retain a limited amount of broadcasting in Welsh on BBC Wales and HTV Wales as a point of contact with the majority of the viewing public; c) to include in the fourth channel a proportion of the programmes in English produced in Wales by the BBC and HTV, so that the channel would serve the interests of the whole community in Wales and contribute to its unity; d) to include also some popular programmes in English from the networks, probably as repeats rather than at original broadcasting times. It is reasonable to suppose that many Welsh-speaking viewers will want to see such programmes, which may clash with programmes in Welsh at peak hours; and if some were available on the fourth channel at alternative times it would strengthen audience loyalty to the Welsh programmes (Council for the Welsh Language, 1978:57).

When the British government introduced broadcasting acts in 1980 and 1981 which allowed for the establishment of a fourth UK network, provision was made for a separate service in Wales to provide Welsh language programming. The Welsh Fourth Channel Authority was set up with a five-member body and S4C (*Sianal Pedwar Cymru* - Channel Four Wales) started broadcasting in 1982. The programmes on S4C are provided by BBC Wales, HTV Wales and independent producers.

From the beginning S4C planned to broadcast twenty to twenty-two hours of Welsh-language programmes a week, which in accordance with the 1981 Broadcasting Act had to be scheduled at peak-viewing time, between 6 p.m. and 10.30 p.m. Consequently, the English language programmes of Channel Four had to be rescheduled around those Welsh programmes.

Economically, the new service stimulated the growth of employment in the independent production sector through the making of Welsh-language programmes. In South Wales, for example, the media sector is now a greater source of employment than the coal industry. The number of independent television producers in Wales grew from 35 in 1981 to 39 in 1988 (S4C, 1988:26).

The Welsh-language production sector has also been internationally successful, particularly in the areas of drama and animation. In the first five years of S4C's existence Welsh TV programmes earned more than thirty international prizes and the number of co-productions between Welsh companies and foreign companies has increased considerably (Ibid:30-34) (S4C, 1988:30-34).

S4C adopts various strategies to maximize the audience for its Welsh language programmes. Since 1987, the S4C teletext service has offered its viewers subtitles in English on a range of these programmes. The proportion of programmes carrying subtitles has been increasing steadily each year. During 1993, 825 hrs 55 mins of the Welsh language output carried teletext subtitles, 20 hrs 55 mins more than in 1992, a percentage increase of 2.6 per cent. This brought the overall percentage of Welsh language hours carrying teletext subtitles to 48.7 per cent which compares with the 48 per cent achieved in 1992 (S4C, 1994:26) (S4C, 1994:26).

Welsh language programmes are scheduled at peak viewing times and Channel 4 programmes are rescheduled at other times. Popular English language programmes such as *Brookside* and *The Golden Girls* attract larger audiences to the station than would otherwise be the case. In 1993, the top twenty English language programmes attracted greater audiences than the top twenty Welsh language programmes (see appendix A/S4C 1994:35-37). However the most popular Welsh programmes are succeeding in attracting significant audiences. The most popular of these, the daily soap opera *Pobyl y Cwm* reached an average audience of 188,000 on a Welsh-speaking base of half a million in 1993 (see appendix A/S4C, 1994:39). According to Rhodri Williams of the independent production company Agenda, S4C's flagship programme of 1990 *Heno*, deliberately used tabloid format and content in order to widen the programme's appeal (Closs Stephens, 1990:31). Interviews were also conducted in English to bring in those families where perhaps only one parent speaks Welsh or where there might be a traditional resistance to viewing the Welsh language channel. The importance of scheduling is again emphasized:

It is also recognized by Agenda and S4C that early evening viewing is habit-forming and that, although the initial breakthrough has to be made, viewers tend to remain loyal to their favourite programme at this time of the evening. The breakthrough, of course, had to be made against the competition of soaps such as *Neighbours* and against the problem that a popular Welsh service has been placed on a minority channel (Closs Stephens, 1990:31).

The struggle for Welsh language broadcasting has always been very much based on an assertion of the rights of a 'minority' culture by Welsh language activists. The minority model has been the dominant mode of analysis by commentators of this process. The problems inherent in the construction of the Welsh language as the domain of a minority group, even within Wales, are articulated by Bevan:

...in the long term there is reason to doubt the effectiveness and perhaps the appropriateness of the expectations underlying the attempt to use broadcasting for the preservation of a minority culture. Given the existing disposition of market forces in mainstream television, it is difficult to see how any minority service can operate other than in the margins of contemporary cultural production (Bevan, 1984:115).

Bevan goes on to elaborate his thesis in the specific context of S4C. With licence revenue at saturation level and the ITV companies fiercely resisting even those contributions which they have been obliged to make up until now, any further developments will have to be funded by advertising. Furthermore, S4C faces the same challenges that all domestic broadcasters do in the form of new satellite and cable services. The station's response to this, as we have seen from the case of *Heno*, is to

produce more popular and audience-catching shows. However, within the construction of the Welsh language as the domain of a minority culture, 'it is possible to argue that the channel's subscription to 'Welshness' is in some senses being compromised.' Bevan points out that the dominant view of Wales which is enshrined in the nationalist tradition is an essentially rural construct. He argues that it is doubtful whether S4C will succeed in increasing significantly the Welsh language audience. Meanwhile, he believes that monolingual English speakers in Wales will become increasingly alienated by the imposition of the Welsh language service upon them at the expense of the popular Channel 4 service.

In the absence of a sense of cohesive cultural identity recognized by the majority it is bound to be difficult to restore the language as a living medium once a process of decline has set in. (Bevan, 1984:115).

Scots Gaelic Broadcasting

The history of Gaelic in Scotland is outlined by Thompson (1983). The language once dominated the country, and in fact, the name 'Scot' originated as the name for Gaelic speakers who crossed from Northern Ireland to Western Scotland from the fifth century onwards. However, the language began to retreat during the eleventh century and by the eighteenth century the Gaidhealtachd (a collective term for the Gaelic speaking regions) was largely restricted to the Highlands and the Western Isles. During the twentieth century, as with the Irish Gaeltacht, even this area has gradually become largely English speaking. The Gaidhealtachd is now largely restricted to island communities on Skye and the Outer Isles of Lewis, Barra, Harris, Uist and Barra, but even here English has made inroads. The number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland declined from 231,594 or 6.2 per cent of the population in 1881 to 82,620 speakers or 1.6 per cent of the population in 1981 (Thomson, 1983:57). However, speakers of the language are also distributed throughout Scotland. Glasgow now has the greatest concentration of Gaelic speakers anywhere in Scotland, and some of these are native speakers who were born there. Thus, the Gaelic community is bilingual and partially dispersed.

In recent years, Gaelic has been making a comeback with what one commentator has called 'a massive resurgence of interest in the Gaelic tongue' (MacLeod, 1993:11). Since the 1961 census, the number of speakers has stabilized and there was even an increase in 1971. Important developments for the language include the foundation of a third level Gaelic college, Sabhal Mor Ostaig on Skye in 1973, the establishment of *Comunn na Gaidhlig* in the 1980s to co-ordinate, organize and lobby for Gaelic language developments, and the foundation of *Comhairle na Sgoiltean Araich*, the Gaelic playgroup association. In 1994, Scotland had 142 Gaelic playgroups with 2,480 children, when in 1983 there were only four playgroups with 40 children (*Comunn na Gaidhlig*, 1995). Gaelic is becoming increasingly popular among non-speakers with a recent estimate that 3,000 Scots are learning the language (Cormack, 1993:106).

Until very recently, Gaelic received very little airtime and this made the problem of defining their audience more acute for Gaelic broadcasters.

The programmes seemed to be catering for an ageing community mainly interested in religion and traditional music (Cormack, 1993:107).

Cormack also notes that the broadcasters were criticized by *An Comunn Gaidhealach* (The Highland Society) for working to 'a concept of a 'blue-print Gael' interested only in singing.' The very first radio broadcast in the Gaelic language in 1923 was a short religious talk and the longest surviving Gaelic programme is *Deanaimid Adhradh*, a Sunday afternoon religious service. The situation on television was similarly unsatisfactory for supporters of Gaelic.

...Gaelic television was for the most part meagre and unimaginative (MacLeod, 1993:12). There were occasional television current affairs programmes such as the

BBC's *Bonn Comhraidh* but they were usually produced on small budgets, were shown at 'unearthly hours of the night' thus reducing their potential audience, and have been described as being of 'weary worthiness' (Macleod, 1993:12).

Gaelic radio broadcasts were reorganized in 1976 when the BBC established Radio Highland, based in Inverness. A further reorganization took place in 1979 when the Gaelic programming was increased and brought under the name, Radio nan Eilean (Radio of the Islands), with a studio in Stornoway on the Island of Lewis. Another important landmark was the BBC's beginners language television series *Can Seo* in 1979 which Mackinnon has described as 'the most popular language course ever shown on television in Scotland' (Mackinnon, 1991:150). The latest phase of expansion of radio services took place in 1985 when the BBC started using the name Radio nan Gaidheal for their Gaelic language service. The current situation recognizes the necessity of serving both national and regional audiences. Thus, every week the station broadcasts 7 hrs 45 mins of Gaelic programming to the whole of Scotland, a further 12 hrs 49 mins is confined to the Highland area and the Western Isles, and a further 11 hrs 20 mins is broadcast exclusively to Lewis and the western coastal areas.

In spite of the three tier radio service, the problem of defining the audience remained.

What is likely to satisfy Radio nan Gaidheal's core audience of elderly Islanders may be of little more than passing interest to the more outward-looking young, or to those Gaels on the mainland who, as a linguistic minority, are not likely to use Gaelic in most of their social contacts. This is a challenge which Radio nan Gaidheal had begun to address, and its success or failure may have profound repercussions for the survival of Gaelic culture (Bistrow and Bovill, 1988).

In the early 1980s the BBC began to tackle the challenge of serving a wider audience in the Gaelic language. They started broadcasting regular, short Gaelic programmes for young children and they initiated *Brag*, a youth magazine programme which Cormack describes as 'livelier and more contemporary than anything that had been seen before' (Cormack, 1993:108). In the ITV network, Scotland is geographically divided between two franchises, Grampian and Scottish Television (STV), and both companies began to increase their Gaelic output in the eighties. STV in particular, took a new approach to Gaelic programming when they started a regular prime time slot in April 1991, between 6.30 p.m. and 7.00 p.m. every evening. The slot was filled with general light entertainment programmes, along with some documentary features, all with English subtitles.

This constituted a determined effort to avoid any kind of ghettoization, either by scheduling or by programme content (Cormack, 1993:109).

However, the most dramatic recent development in Gaelic broadcasting has been insertion of a clause in the 1990 Broadcasting Act which created a £9.5m Gaelic Television fund to increase Gaelic programming output from one hundred to three hundred hours annually, beginning in 1993. The money is administered by Comhataibh Telebhisein Gaidhlig (GTC – The Gaelic Television Committee) which is appointed by the new Independent Television Commission. This development was primarily the result of lobbying which was masterminded by John Angus Mackay, the then director of *Commun na Gaidhlig*. The lobbying was based on economic rather than cultural arguments, stressing the value to the Gaidhealtachd of the investment in television, both in terms of finance and increased local self-confidence.

He used an economic and cultural argument, and was successful in persuading what was essentially a right wing government, opposed to handouts, into giving £9.5 million, an incredible amount of money to provide 200 hours a year of Gaelic programming (Macdonald, 1993:14).

In 1991, Mackay himself was appointed as the first director of Comhataibh Telebhisean Gaidhlig.

Some members of the Gaelic language lobby were unhappy with Mackay's approach and argued for an exclusive Gaelic language service. The case against the dedicated channel option is summarized by Rhoda Macdonald, the Head of Gaelic Language Programmes for STV. 'I strongly disagree with that at this moment in time, simply because we don't have a big enough mass of speakers. It would be a ghetto channel. People would opt not to watch it' (Macdonald, 1993:15).

Macdonald goes on to point out that the audience ratings for Scots Gaelic programmes regularly exceed the half million mark whereas the highest rating Welsh programmes, on S4C only attract viewing figures of 120,000 (sic). She believes that a dedicated Gaelic channel may eventually be appropriate, but only when the situation of the language is much improved. With regard to the effect of the new programming, Macdonald argues that it has generated and stimulated an interest amongst those who had a latent interest in the language. 'If you scratch at the surface of many Scots, there's a Gael or some sort of Gaelic connection underneath' (Macdonald, 1993:14).

While there are only 40,000 Gaelic speakers in STV's transmission area according to official statistics, the average audience for the three year old Wednesday evening slot mentioned earlier was 350,000 viewers (Macdonald, 1993:14). This would appear to indicate that the programming strategy is succeeding in widening the audience appeal for Gaelic programmes. Macdonald explains her company's scheduling and programming strategies.

For instance, we didn't have a local cookery programme, so we decided to make one in Gaelic. Thereby, you hit both constituencies. You satisfy your average Scot by providing a Scottish cookery programme and you also satisfy your Gaelic viewers by providing a type of programme which had never been done in Gaelic before. It was a great success. Cookery programmes are highly visual, they attract viewers. You don't have to understand Gaelic to understand what's happening. And you subtitle, that's the other big factor. Subtitling makes it accessible, We always argued that Gaelic belongs to the whole of Scotland...

We decided to make a Do-It-Yourself series and we made it in Gaelic. Many people would like to build their own house. You don't have to understand Gaelic to know somebody is banging a nail in a wall. I think the secret of our success is simple, we make Gaelic programmes that are attractive, and visually accessible (Macdonald, 1993:15).

STV also made Gaelic language series about cars and fashion:

...all of these things are identifies with the good things in life, so Gaelic becomes identified with the good things in life (Macdonald, 1993:15).

Macdonald also quotes STV research which shows that when people who wanted to learn Gaelic were asked what their prime reason was, 70 per cent answered that they wanted to understand Gaelic Television programmes.

In a similarly optimistic vein, Macleod heralds 1993 as the dawning of a new age for Gaelic broadcasting. He enthuses about the high quality of the CTG sponsored output which includes a 'competent' Gaelic news bulletin service from Grampian and 'good'

documentaries from the BBC. He also singles out some STV productions for praise: *Speaking Our Language*, a learners' series, *Aig Aistear*, a youth programme and *Machair*, a soap opera. Overall, there are some ten hours weekly of assorted documentaries, news-shows, cookery programmes, motoring fanzines and dubbed cartoons, investigative journalism and drama (Macleod, 1993).

However, there has been discontent in some quarters about the amount of time being taken up by Gaelic programmes in the schedules. Criticism has appeared in the columns of some newspaper television commentators and Cormack sees this as a sign of a potential backlash against the language by non-Gaelic speakers. In a CTG survey carried out in 1993, 26 per cent of respondents were of the opinion that there were too many Gaelic programmes on television while 56 per cent disagreed with the proposition; and 28 per cent thought that too many Gaelic programmes were shown at peak times while 53 per cent disagreed. On the other hand, the vast majority, 75 per cent of respondents believed that it is important that the Gaelic language in Scotland be kept alive through Gaelic programmes on TV, as opposed to only thirteen per cent who disagreed. However, both Cormack (1993) and Dunn (1986:55) point out the danger of unrealistic hopes being pinned on the new television services.

The struggle for support from the media is only one of the struggles of a language and culture which, although of undoubted relevance to national identity, is now the immediate concern of only two per cent of the population. The support of the media is of considerable importance in the fight for the survival of the language.

Conclusion

The approach to Welsh language broadcasting has been based firmly on the minority language model. Welsh speakers are in a relatively strong position to assert themselves as a distinctive minority group within Wales, with a base of over half a million speakers making up 18.9 per cent of the population (EC, 1986). Since its inception in 1982, S4C has built up and maintained a significant loyal audience. Its average share of the television viewing of Welsh speakers is 19.4 per cent and its average share of all Welsh viewers is 9 per cent (S4C, 1994:41). However, the main distinctive elements which have contributed to S4C's success are the careful scheduling of popular English language programmes around the Welsh programmes, the provision of sub-titles for viewers with little or no Welsh and the production of popular programme formats in Welsh and bilingually.

However, the Scottish approach to Gaelic broadcasting has been much more successful in promoting and extending the use of the lesser used language. Despite having a linguistic base which is only a fraction of its Welsh counterpart, (79,000 speakers, 2.5 per cent of the population) Scots Gaelic programmes have been achieving much higher audience figures. The top rating Gaelic programme reaches audiences in the region of 500,000 compared about 200,000 viewers for the top rating Welsh language programme. The fundamental difference is that Scots Gaelic programmes, rather than being concentrated on a specialist channel, are carefully scheduled across all the channels in regular prime time slots before and after popular English language programmes. The Scots approach does not construct the language as the property of a particular minority but as a central aspect of Scottish life. However, the revival in interest in the Gaelic language was not caused by the renaissance in Gaelic language broadcasting. Both processes fed into each other. The increased interest in Gaelic led to the extension of broadcasting services and these in turn greatly reinforced the pre-existing trend for the language to take up a more central position in Scotland's cultural life.

The comparative analysis of the Welsh and Scots Gaelic cases suggests that the foundation of a dedicated Irish language television service at the present time could be counter-productive to the long term promotion of Irish. A specialist Irish language

channel could contribute to the definition of the language as a minority interest and would be unlikely to attract audiences as high as those achieved by Irish language programmes on RTE. Viewers are not likely to switch over to an Irish language network in preference to popular programming on the other national networks and foreign channels. The Irish language television model (usually referred to as 'Teilifís na Gaeilge') will be more similar to the S4C than to the more successful (in terms of language promotion) CTG model. However, popular English language programmes from the Channel 4 schedules which are not available on any other channel in Wales are an essential feature of the relative success of S4C in attracting audiences. There are no proposals that this should be a feature of the Irish language service. On the contrary, suggestions for English language programming on the new channel have centred mainly on Oireachtas coverage and educational programming which would only further reinforce the station's minority or fringe image.

There is an argument that the existing Irish speaking community has a right to a complete television service in Irish. However, the question is one of priority. RTE is not at present achieving its full potential for broadening the Irish language viewing audience. The expenditure needed for an Irish language channel could be invested in subtitling, drama, learners' series and other methods of reaching that audience. Furthermore, the promotion of the Irish language among the wider community is ultimately a means of ensuring the viability of existing Irish speaking communities and networks by creating a favourable ideological and cultural environment in which they can flourish. The establishment of an Irish language channel may become a more viable proposition in terms of language promotion, as distinct from serving the existing Irish speaking community, at some stage in the future. However, this will only happen when the position of the language has been much strengthened.

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