

Bryn Mawr College

Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

Emeritus Papers

Bryn Mawr College Publications, Special
Collections, Digitized Books

3-2006

Using a Private-Sphere Language for a Public-Sphere Purpose: Some Hard Lessons from Making a TV Documentary in a Dying Dialect

Nancy Dorian
Bryn Mawr College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/emeritus>

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Dorian, Nancy, "Using a Private-Sphere Language for a Public-Sphere Purpose: Some Hard Lessons from Making a TV Documentary in a Dying Dialect" (2006). *Emeritus Papers*. 1.
<https://repository.brynmawr.edu/emeritus/1>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
<https://repository.brynmawr.edu/emeritus/1>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Using a Private-sphere Language for a Public-sphere Purpose: Some Hard Lessons from Making a TV Documentary in a Dying Dialect

First off I want to thank Catherine Lafarge & Suzy Spain for making the suggestion that I come down to give one of these retired-faculty research presentations. And Judith Shapiro for passing the suggestion along, and Suzy and Rick Hamilton for helping with the arrangements. It's a very real pleasure to be back in a setting where I passed a lot of very happy years and to see a lot of familiar faces.

I guess in addition I should thank BBC television's Gaelic division for putting me in the extremely uncomfortable position that's given me the topic I'm going to talk about today. I gave my talk a respectable, academic-sounding title, and a perfectly applicable one, too: I did make a TV documentary in a dying dialect, and in doing so I did have to use a private-sphere language for a public-sphere purpose. But I could also say, more simply and directly, that my real topic is the yawning gulf between the simplicity of assessing a language-related problem from the outside as a scholar studying a language, and the complexity of confronting the problem from the inside as a speaker using the language.

The background to the dilemma I found myself in last summer, when the documentary was filmed, goes back a long way. A really long way. It starts with my dissertation research in 1963-64, when in order to get funding for the work I wanted to do on Scottish Gaelic I offered to tie my fieldwork to the needs of the Gaelic Division of the Linguistic Survey of Scotland and go to whatever part of the Scottish Highlands they particularly needed someone to work in. They happened to want someone to work on the sound system -- the phonology -- of the Gaelic spoken in the extreme northeast of the mainland, by a residual population of fisherfolk and fisherfolk descendants in three villages on the east coast of Sutherland. (And in case you're wondering why a county in the extreme north of Scotland is called SUTHER-land, it's the Vikings' fault: from their point of view it was southerly, and they gave it that name during the period when they ruled there.)

So I went to coastal Sutherland, where I found about 200 people still speaking Gaelic, most of them in one particularly isolated village, the village of Embo. I kept my bargain with the Linguistic Survey of Scotland and wrote my dissertation on the sound system of East Sutherland fisherfolk Gaelic, but for a number of reasons I wasn't satisfied with my own work.

One reason was that the residual fisherfolk populations in the three villages each spoke a slightly different Gaelic, Brora and Golspie fairly similar to each other but Embo quite a bit

different from the other two. I had had to spend so much time checking and cross-checking every linguistic form I encountered, to work out exactly how the sound systems in the three villages did and didn't agree with one another, that I felt I hadn't covered even the phonological ground very well -- not nearly as well as I could have if I'd had only one village to deal with and had been able to spend all my time on that one. For another thing, phonology is just one small part of any language, and I'd had almost no time to deal with other aspects of the local speech forms. I'd already discovered that there were some unusual things about the local East Sutherland fisherfolk phonology, and it stood to reason that if I started looking at the morphology and the syntax I'd probably find some unusual things there, too. A third reason is simply that a year is too short a time to spend with any language -- you just don't know enough after a year. You haven't got the language adequately situated in its social setting, and you don't speak it well enough yourself. (That's supposing you're trying to learn to speak it: not all fieldworkers do, but I thought any fieldworker should, including me).

All of these were good reasons for going back, and added to that were the facts that the place was beautiful (apart from the weather!) and that I also really liked the people I'd worked with, the people who still spoke the local language.

So I went back, the first time at my own expense, with money I squirreled away from my dissertation fellowship. And then of course I learned even more unusual things about the local Gaelic, and it got even more interesting, and I liked the people and the place even better ,,, -- and the upshot of it all was that 16 years later I was still going back and forth, still finding deeply interesting things to look into and relishing the process of looking into them. At that point, unfortunately, my medical misfortunes began to overtake me, and I haven't been to Scotland now since 1978, which I'm very sorry to say is 28 years ago. I lost the decade of the 1980s, as far as fieldwork was concerned, tho I did carry on working with the material I already had, and I never lost touch with the people I'd worked with in Sutherland.

Finally, in the 1990s, things began to change for the better. I got a phone call from a friend in Embo village, letting me know that another friend in the village was in the hospital and suggesting that I give him a ring, and I began to realize that both telephones and tape recorders were by then pretty widespread in the village, which hadn't been true earlier, when I was working there. I was also beginning to be able to use my right hand better, even if not as well as I would have liked. So first I began an exchange of tape-recorded messages, and then I added requests for data and they added responses to those requests. And then in 1993 the husband of one of my former Bryn Mawr students showed me how to record from the

telephone and I was launched on a whole new round of "fieldwork" -- by long-distance telephone. (With the permission of the people on the other end, I hasten to say -- otherwise it's illegal.)

There weren't a lot of speakers left by then, and during the 90s the number kept on shrinking sadly down, till right at this moment there are only three people whom I can still call and speak to in Gaelic. But all together it's been more than 40 years now that I've been engaged with this particular speech form, and I have to say that it's only gotten more and more interesting as I inch toward publishing my 4th book on the dialect and make hopeful plans for a 5th one after that.

Having said this, let me say a little something now about the history of this speech form, so as to shed light on the special problems that it poses for anybody who winds up needing to speak it in front of a television camera.

The people who became the fisherfolk speakers of the villages of Brora, Golspie, and Embo were not originally native to the coastal area, and they didn't settle there voluntarily. They were evicted from their traditional holdings in the inland areas of the county at the time of the Highland "clearances" at the beginning of the 19th century, when the great landlords turned their small tenantry out to make way for sheep farms. Poor tenants didn't produce much in the way of cash income, whereas sheep farms did, and the great landlords, most of them clan chieftains, were by this time living in London in a cash economy rather than on traditional Highland estates where wealth was reckoned in acreage and in recruits for Highland regiments.

The circumstances of the Highland clearances were dire in every case and brutal in a good many. People were burned out of their homes if necessary, and most families lost all their possessions -- in addition to their fields and their cattle and whatever other domestic animals they had. The House of Sutherland, the aristocratic family that owned most of the county of Sutherland, actually had a fairly progressive plan for their tenantry. Instead of encouraging them just to emigrate, they resettled them on plots too small for agriculture at the coasts and turned them willy-nilly into fishermen. This was a reasonably good plan in theory, but it turned out to have some serious flaws: ⁽¹⁾ the inlanders didn't initially know how to fish, ⁽²⁾ there weren't any usable natural harbors on the east coast of the county; and ⁽³⁾ most crucially of all, the herring fishery on which any possibility of a decent livelihood depended proved to be unreliable. That is to say, the herring didn't cooperate with the Estate's planners.

They didn't always follow the same migratory path and consequently they didn't always turn up in the high numbers that would have been needed for a decent livelihood.

What this social experiment engineered by the aristocratic House of Sutherland meant, for the inland hill dwellers destined to be fisherfolk, was that they arrived at the coast destitute -- in effect they were impoverished refugees. They were poorer than everybody else in the region (which was going some, since none of the ordinary people of the time were remotely prosperous), and they seem to have moved immediately into the lowest niche in the local social hierarchy. Even a century and a half later, when I arrived on the scene, the fisherfolk were ranked lower in the social scheme of things than any other group except the tinkers (and the tinkers were "traveling" people who had no fixed abode).

Part of the reason for this was still a question of poverty. Fishing had never brought in a solid income, and the fisherfolk had remained the poorest of the poor. Even farm laborers were said to be better off, since they had a tiny but reliable wage and could also live off the land if they had to (snaring rabbits and raising vegetables in their own plots), whereas the fisherfolk had no land except small potato plots that they rented; and if the weather was bad for a longer stretch of time (which wasn't uncommon in the winter months) the fishermen couldn't get to sea and had no income at all.

So the evictees had arrived as a very distinct, low-status group; they were settled all clustered together in their three small sub-communities where they were isolated both by their fishing way of life and by their negative social status; and they never recovered economically from the poverty they started out with. Other people avoided them and looked down on them, and by necessity they became endogamous: that is, they married each other. And as a result, the fisherfolk in each village developed deeply convoluted kin ties. This actually had some economic benefit, since fishing is a dangerous way of making a living and it helps to have ties that can unite the whole community for mutual assistance. It didn't help them on the social front, tho, since it made them still more obviously separate from every one else and also gave non-fishers another excuse for looking down on them, believing them to be excessively interbred.

Now the important aspect of this background is the fact that languages -- anywhere, any time -- have no independent status of their own. Instead they have the status of the people who speak them. This explains why the prestige of languages can rise or fall so dramatically in a short time if the fortunes of their speakers undergo an abrupt change. If you look at Quechua, the language of the Incas, it was an imperial language, the dominant

language of a large part of the Andean region before the Spanish arrived, and the Incas had in fact succeeded in imposing it on a number of the peoples whom they conquered. Then came the Spaniards, and before very long, Quechua was an insignificant Indian language, associated with backwardness and poverty. It wasn't the language that changed, but the circumstances of its speakers. The same thing happened to Irish, which was a language of great learning at a time when the Germanic peoples, including the English, were still largely illiterate and were by comparison with the Irish very little acquainted with the learning of the Classical world. The Viking conquest, the Norman conquest, and most of all the Cromwellian conquest and the period of the Penal Laws broke the Irish, destroying the culture that had supported Irish learning. As the Irish lost their aristocracy and became a peasantry, their language was transmuted into a peasant language, too, in spite of its past glories.

Scottish Gaelic had claims to ancient learning and to literary respectability, too, at one point, as an offshoot of Irish with a subsequent literary tradition of its own, but the failure of the Jacobite risings in 1715 and 1746 did to Gaelic roughly what Cromwell did to Irish, and the tradition was broken and submerged, if not entirely lost. Within Highland Scotland, Sutherland had one misfortune greater than most of the rest of the region, and that was an aristocratic ruling house that did not derive from any historic Highland family and had no ties whatsoever to local Highland culture. The family that held most of Sutherland (and nearly all of the eastern part of it) was descended from a family who were probably Flemings and who at any rate were granted their vast holdings in Sutherland for their service to a Norman king. Whereas most of the Highlands remained in the hands of the indigenous Gaelic aristocracy -- the chiefs of the MacIntoshes, the MacKays, the MacKenzies, and so forth -- Sutherland passed as early as the 12th century by royal land-grant into the hands of a non-Gaelic family previously established in Moray. They called themselves De Moravia, Latin for "from Moray", anglicized as Murray, and the absence of any Mac- element is highly significant: they weren't Mac-anythings and had no connection with Gaelic culture or language. From the time of their first appearance in the region they brought alien, non-Gaelic culture into the area, including the English language.

The fisherfolk whom I found still speaking Gaelic in mid-20th century were a major anachronism, in fact: they were the very last group in the East Sutherland population who were still bilingual in Gaelic and English. They paid a high penalty for being linguistically anachronistic, too -- using Gaelic was considered the final brick in the social construction of their reputation for "backwardness". There were a lot of counts against them: They followed a hard-labor, low-income occupation; they lived in what amounted to ghettos; they married

among themselves; and they spoke Gaelic at home. In other words they were thoroughly out of line with local norms, and it kept them uniquely recognizable as a socially stigmatized group.

Keep in mind the fact that the culture around the fishing sub-communities had gone English already, some of it a century or two before and most of the remainder about 50 years earlier, add the fact that the fisherfolk were working-class and poor, and you have a very negative local profile for the Gaelic language. To this has to be added the fact that the local Gaelic is a dialect of the geographic periphery, and not just in the Highlands, but in any geographic area across which a language is long established and widely distributed, the peripheries will typically be home to the most differentiated dialects. So what I found in coastal East Sutherland when I arrived there was an unusual variety of Gaelic, with extremely negative prestige, spoken in a region dominated for 8 centuries by a non-Gaelic aristocratic house hostile to indigenous culture and language. Within present-day lifetimes Gaelic had occasionally and haphazardly been taught in Embo's primary school, chiefly to boys, but overall it was more studiously ignored in the schools in East Sutherland than in any other part of the Highlands that I ever visited. Furthermore, in the periods when Gaelic was taught in the Embo primary school, it was book-Gaelic that was taught, not the local dialect, and book Gaelic was radically unlike the local form of Gaelic -- no one local could have taken it as a model for their own speech. The same was true of the only other form of written Gaelic local people had any exposure to, the Gaelic of the Bible and the metrical psalms used in church services. Many of the local men had a purely passive ability to read the Bible and the metrical versions of the psalms, but church Gaelic, like book Gaelic, had no carry-over to other purposes. It didn't make people actively literate or even able to read other texts, and it certainly couldn't serve as a model for anybody's speech.

Fisherfolk from the East Sutherland villages did meet Gaelic speakers from other parts of Scotland when they traveled around the coasts during the herring season, but they socialized largely with others from their own villages, and again they generally had a lot of trouble understanding speakers of more mainstream dialects. This was especially true of the women, who were rarely even passively literate.

So what you had in East Sutherland was a group of strictly local speech forms, enclaved for some time as little puddles of Gaelic in an ocean of English and increasingly isolated since the time of the 2nd World War, when the fishing came to an end on the local scene. The local Gaelic speech forms were not written at all, ever, and were entirely unstandardized. What had kept them vigorous originally was the fact that their speakers

constituted a separate work force, earning their living by a distinctive occupation that kept them together and brought them into only commercial contact with the English speakers who lived all around them. Once the fishing died away, Gaelic began to die away, too, and that's where things were when I came on the scene. There weren't a lot of speakers left in Brora or Golspie, but Embo was a small village of about 275 people, and most of the adults were bilingual. You still heard a lot of Gaelic on the streets in the 1960s and '70s, and also in the post office and the three tiny shops. Everyone was bilingual, though, and since most people were effectively illiterate in Gaelic, without any support for that language from schooling or from books, they supplemented their Gaelic vocabulary with loanwords from English whenever they needed modern, up-to-date lexicon that the traditional local Gaelic didn't provide.

Now I should stress here that fisherfolk Gaelic was not lexically impoverished. The trouble was, that like any other strictly local speech form deeply associated with a traditional life style, the richness of the lexicon was chiefly connected with their own specialized way of life. There wasn't much connected with the sea or with boats that they didn't have a word for, and they had a lot of weather terms that reflected the importance of decisions about whether to put to sea or not. When I acquired the dialect I learned the names of more varieties of seaweed than I had ever known existed, the names for parts of a rabbit snare, and the term for an egg that emerged from the hen without an exterior shell. But, not surprisingly, there were no local words for the parts of a car or for the national health service.

Faced with a situation like this, bilingual speakers of a strictly local language that's never used in writing can either ⁽¹⁾ coin new terms for cultural items that are new to local life, or they can ⁽²⁾ borrow from the other language that all of them also speak. Of course, standardized national languages also have different profiles with regard to lexical expansion: Icelandic famously coins, English famously borrows. But for a small local language, opening the door to borrowing can risk changing the character of the language beyond recognition -- it can turn eventually into opening the floodgates, rather than just opening the door. Still, if there are no language planners, no scholars or commissioners of language designing new words for the community to use, there isn't much alternative to taking the borrowing route.

In East Sutherland, the Gaelic speakers tended to borrow freely from English when they needed a word that the local dialect couldn't supply. They also tended to be a little abashed about it. When there were speakers of other dialects present, or when they were trying to be on their best linguistic behavior in making a tape recording for me, it was sometimes clear that

they were making an effort to avoid borrowing. For example, one man, recording a story for me that had policemen as part of the story-line, used the very nice and very correct phrase 'people of the law', /-uxk^h 'n -'/, even though everybody normally said /p^h çlis/.

English monolinguals could often recognize that local Gaelic speakers were adopting English words into their Gaelic, and they sometimes made fun of them for it, saying "I could speak that Gaelic myself!" when they heard a Gaelic speaker say something like aig a' weekend 'at the weekend'. But it seemed to me that willingness to borrow from English had one very beneficial effect, so beneficial that it outweighed everything else: it kept Gaelic-English bilinguals conversing in Gaelic instead of changing languages, which they otherwise might have done if they couldn't come up with a Gaelic word. This meant that there was no subject you couldn't discuss in Gaelic. Gaelic didn't get by-passed, it got used, even if it had a lot of recognizable English loanwords in it. Since local people didn't get Gaelic in school and didn't read the language, there wasn't really any avenue by which fancy, newly coined modern terms could make their way into the local Gaelic (supposing anyone was interested in such words anyway), and the alternative to borrowing a few words from English would have been switching into English in order to discuss your driving test or the hospital procedure you were going to have. If Gaelic was going to stay in use locally, then it was going to have to stay in use with a lot of English loanwords in it.

To me as a scholar interested in preventing the loss of small, local languages, this seemed like a very easy choice -- a no-brainer, as we would say these days: Never mind the borrowings, use the language! In a paper published in 1994 under the title 'Purism and compromise in language revitalization and language revival', I took exactly that position. I wrote about the many cases in which puristic attitudes toward borrowing and simplification had damaged revitalization efforts on behalf of small and endangered languages, and I concluded that

"it may prove the wiser course to accept considerable compromise rather than make a determined stand for intactness, where threatened languages are at issue. If a language survives, after all, it has a future. If it can never again be exactly what it once was, it may yet be something more than it now is. Gifted speakers and writers may eventually appear who will coax new richness of expression from it, and tease it into forms that will be uniquely its own, even if not those of its past" (Dorian 1994:492).

And I instanced Chaucer, whose version of English would surely have shocked Old English authors like Ælfric, but whose "corrupt" English didn't prevent him from writing what now stands as a literary masterpiece.

So this was my very official position, intellectually and in print, right up to the point where the BBC film crew was about to arrive at my house in Maine. The problem of course was that at that point I stopped being a scholar with a strong concern for the future of small local languages and became a person who was about to stand in front of a TV camera and speak for all and sundry to hear. I was of course a scholar, literate and well educated, but where Scottish Gaelic was concerned I happened to be a speaker of a non-standard dialect WAY out of line with anything to be found in books or dictionaries or newspapers or heard on the radio, let alone on television. Like all my fisherfolk friends, I knew perfectly well that my form of Gaelic was looked down on, and suddenly all the loanwords I was going to need to use -- for lack of any native Gaelic terms in the fisherfolk dialect -- became very awkward: I was about to disgrace myself and my Gaelic in front of a whole lot of people.

So two days before the BBC producer was due to arrive in Maine, I found myself e-mailing him and raising concerns that were light-years from the position I had self-assuredly taken in my paper on "Purism and compromise". Here is a quote from that 11th-hour e-mail, sent by a very anxious local-dialect speaker:

... I wonder if you've reckoned with the fact that I speak an unwritten dialect without any technical terms? ... I've already told myself a thousand times in preparation for this adventure / ordeal that I need to think like, and speak like, an intelligent child, since I have only a homespun daily-life vocabulary at my disposal.... You'll need to tell me how disgraceful vs. acceptable it will be for me to follow the usual E[ast] S[utherland] G[aelic] practice of pressing English loanwords into service. The dialect has no native word for something as ordinary as 'use', for example, and I don't think I'll get far without falling back on what everybody usually said, namely iùsgadh.... (e-mail of 22Jun. 05)

My simple certainty that it was a positive thing for small local-language speakers to forget about the purism of dictionary makers, school teachers, and other language monitors and just be glad to be using the language had melted away at the prospect of being revealed to all the

world as a speaker of a limited-vocabulary, non-standard dialect that had to borrow a lot of seemingly ordinary words from English.

The awkwardness of the situation I found myself in arose from the kind of functional restriction that takes place in contracting minority languages as they come to be spoken less. Some other more favored language, typically the official language of the nation or the region, expands into most of the public spheres (government, education, the legal establishment) -- and the small minority language retreats into local village life and even eventually just into family life within the home. It becomes a private-sphere language, used with your neighbors and your kinsfolk in relatively intimate, face-to-face circumstances. In those settings, feeling free to borrow words does have a positive effect, since it makes it possible to avoid switching back and forth between whole languages and to stick instead to your own language: you can talk about more or less anything by drafting whatever loanwords might be necessary to bridge the lexical gaps you run into.

But a larger problem is created by this whole development -- because the retreat of a local language into purely private spheres of use may change the sense of what a language is for. Monolingual speakers of standardized languages don't have to think much about this question. They would probably say that languages are for communication, and since communication covers most of what we do with language, their answer would be that a language is essentially for all communicative purposes. Bilinguals who happen to speak two standardized languages well would probably say much the same, though immigrant bilinguals who speak one standardized language almost entirely at home and the other everywhere else may have more sense of a functional difference between their languages. Bilinguals who speak one standardized language and one non-standardized minority language (that is, one unwritten language) are much more likely to feel that languages are not necessarily always for the same thing at all.

Sometimes it's obvious that one of a bilingual's languages has some functions that the other doesn't have: if you've never had schooling in one of your languages, you probably won't be able to recite the multiplication tables in that one, and if you've never heard one of your languages used in a formal meeting, you probably won't have any terminology with which to second a motion, table a discussion, or raise a point of order in that language. But much more broadly than that, if you use one of your languages only with people whom you know personally, and always in a face-to-face setting, that language is likely to develop an association with intimacy and informality that makes its use with "strangers" feel inappropriate.

In the days before private telephones were widespread in the Highlands, one of my very fluent Embo friends was completely confused when she answered the phone one day and somebody at the other end started speaking Gaelic. She handed the phone off to her husband, saying to him in Gaelic, "I don't know what that fellow is saying!" She actually knew the man at the other end perfectly well, as it turned out, and since he was also from Embo he and she spoke the same form of Gaelic. What threw her off was that he wasn't in the room with her -- he was speaking a face-to-face language over the telephone, from a neighboring village. She was used to some non-face-to-face uses of Gaelic, such as church services broadcast over the radio, but they never involved her own Embo dialect, so when that dialect came at her over the telephone she was completely unprepared for it. (The man who made the phone call was one of only two Embo men of fisherfolk background that I know of who had entered a middle-class occupation and worked in an office; his use of Gaelic spanned two worlds, the village world and the office world, but that wasn't the case for other people.)

Things get tougher still if a bilingual person one of whose languages is associated with intimacy is expected to communicate not just with strangers, but about relatively abstract and formal topics in the "intimate" language. This is essentially what happened to me when it came to making the TV documentary. Instead of talking to my long-standing Embo friends about their health, or local developments like new houses going up in the village, or past village lifeways like how potatoes were stored for winter consumption, suddenly I was talking to a man I'd never previously met, whose dialect I didn't understand, and thru him to a body of listeners whom I never would meet, all of whom spoke dialects that were unintelligible to me, about large issues like what factors cause minority-language speakers to shift to another language and why childhood language acquisition is so crucial to language maintenance. These aren't things I usually talk about in East Sutherland Gaelic, to put it mildly, and neither are they things for which East Sutherland fisherfolk Gaelic makes a lot of terminology available -- which is why I had said in my e-mail to Donald MacLeod that I was going to need to talk like an intelligent child: someone who might know the answers to some of the questions that would be raised but who didn't have a large and specialized vocabulary to answer them with.

To bring home to you what this whole experience brought home to me, I'd like to give you a concrete example of the way in which my consciousness was usefully expanded by the experience of trying to eke my fisherfolk Gaelic out to deal with the demands of making a TV film. Last spring a young anthropologist named Jacqueline Messing sent me a dissertation to read on her fieldwork investigating "... Language shift and bilingual schooling" in a Mexicano-

speaking part of Mexico. (Mexicano is what used to be called Nahuatl, and Nahuatl is what used to be called Aztec, so the language in question was an indigenous Native American language.) One of the undertakings this young anthropologist had observed was a so-called "Course on the Introduction to Teaching", offered on a daily basis between one August and the following December to aspiring indigenous-language teachers between the ages of 18 and 25, most of them Nahuatl-speaking. Messing reported of the sessions she observed:

Most of this workshop was conducted in Spanish. There were symbolic uses of Mexicano during the days that I observed; I heard the group participants use Mexicano for communication only on the day that the teachers were testing the aspirantes's [indigenous] language skills (Messing 2003: 82).

When I first read this account my reaction was hyper-critical, something along the lines of "How do they expect to get their students to speak Mexicano if they don't make the effort to speak it themselves?" Messing, more sympathetic and better attuned to local realities, went on to say:

As a formal context, this event was without sufficient intimacy and solidarity between speakers to warrant more use of Mexicano (cf. Hill & Hill 1986) even if all participants were fluent speakers (Messing 2003: 82).

In other words, Messing was recognizing that the classroom was a formal setting, inherently unsuited to the use of a language normally spoken only in informal settings between people whose common ethnic and regional identities made them at least solidary with one another, and who in the case of their commonest uses of the language were intimates of one another. She was addressing that question of what a language is for, and noting quite accurately that for most of its speakers Mexicano was NOT FOR teaching. She identified this as a "disjuncture between community linguistic ideology and norms and ... the goal of bilingual education" in the local schools, and it's easy to see why this disjuncture does not augur very well for the attempt to revitalize Nahuatl by introducing it into the classroom. If the young people who still have some knowledge of Nahuatl associate it purely with intimate and solidary

home and peer-group life, they may find it odd and off-putting in school, all the more so if the version taught in school is a generic school form unlike their home dialect.

Until I faced the TV camera armed only with East Sutherland fisherfolk Gaelic, my take on this sort of situation was about as realistic as Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign against the use of drugs. I thought minority-language supporters should "Just Say Yes": if they wanted to create a future for their languages, they should just make up their minds to use their languages all the time and get busy and do it.

What I didn't reckon with is the personal difficulty of moving a private-sphere language, with all its homely, intimate aspects, into the public sphere where it seems to fit very poorly and feels inappropriate. And along with that essentially functional problem comes the additional problem that very small minority-group languages are often stigmatized, so that their speakers are braving all sorts of associations with backwardness and poverty when they speak their languages in public. And last but not least there's the problem of limited up-to-date lexicon and the need to press a lot of borrowings into service in order to stretch the hearth-and-home language into new contexts of use.

All in all, these are formidable problems, and I begin to understand not just why the aspiring Mexicano teachers held all their workshop sessions in Spanish, but even why young minority-language parents who make a decision to raise their children as first-language speakers of the ancestral language are so often learners rather than native speakers. The answer must be in part that they bring less baggage to the undertaking. They are less likely to have experienced stigmatization personally, they have bigger "modern" vocabularies because they've acquired the language at least partly from books, and they don't have the deep, hard-to-break association of the ancestral language exclusively with intimate, hearth-and-home settings.

So I can say, as a result of my recent experience, that I'm a lot wiser about the serious difficulties of maintaining or revitalizing a small, unwritten indigenous language than I was before, and I guess I have to say that I'm also a little more pessimistic about the prospects for maintenance and revitalization, precisely because I see the difficulties more vividly. Where Scottish Gaelic in particular is concerned there has been a good deal of discussion about the value of the learner, as opposed to the native speaker, in the long-run effort to turn things around for the language. There are quite a lot of learners, a small proportion of whom become truly fluent. Their good will is important for the future of Gaelic, of course, and the small number who are young enough to undertake raising their children in Gaelic are certainly a

boon. I think I would now argue strongly that learners of any age, but especially the younger ones, will be important for Gaelic, precisely because they don't carry the negative baggage that many native speakers do and have more confidence in the value of the language.

There may be a few exceptions to this generalization about the greater confidence of learners, of course, such as the odd learner who happens to have learned an obscure, peripheral, stigmatized fisherfolk dialect. In this last, highly improbable case, all I can do is urge them to stay away from TV cameras!

[Talk delivered to the emeritus faculty at Bryn Mawr College, 16 Mar. 06, by Nancy Dorian]