'A bheil am feur gorm fhathast?': Some Problems concerning Language and Cultural Shift

SHARON MACDONALD

The difficulty of translating the first part of my title into English is the starting point for this paper. A standard word by word translation would suggest 'Is the grass blue still? or 'Is the grass still blue?.' The majority of dictionaries and vocabularies, particularly more recent ones, give 'blue' as the only translation of *gorm* (see Appendix). More comprehensive dictionaries such as Dwelly also offer 'green' and may specify that verdant grass is referred to as *gorm*. But just to note the interchangeability of terms and a few specific usages still does not properly address the problem of language and cultural classification which is the focus of the present paper.

Languages do not, of course, map neatly onto one another. What is more, languages do not simply provide a package of labels for a world already carved up into predefined concepts and objects, but rather, they classify the world in specific, culturally embedded, ways. In the traditional scheme of things, Gaelic colour classification was not equivalent with English.[1] The spectrum was divided differently from the English, and colour-terminology rested not only on the criterion of hue. An example can be taken from Edwin Ardener's work on Welsh (Fig. 1) (Ardener: 1989, ch. 1). He shows that standard Welsh terms did not match the categories designated by English terminology. *Glas* covers the blue parts of the spectrum but also parts of green and grey. In Scottish Gaelic the same is true of the term *glas* and also, though not in quite the same way, of *gorm*. The terms do not simply overlap, however, for although they may represent roughly the same part of the spectrum in terms of hue, they differ, I think, in that *gorm* indicated a depth of colour – MacBain's *Etymological Dictionary* refers to 'warmth' – and *glas* a kind of paleness and shininess. Its root shows it to be associated with the Germanic *glast*, meaning sheen, and English *glass*.[2] Not only did Gaelic traditionally not divide the spectrum in the same way, but it also seems to have incorporated other criteria than hue into those words we call 'colour terms', though as Ardener suggests this double axis of hue and a classification based on some kind of distinction between brightness and darkness is probably in fact the rule rather than the exception (1989: 11). It is not only around the blue/green shades that the differences lie; there are also mismatches around the white/yellow boundaries; the reds and brown; and the brown/blue/black.[3]

<table>
<tr><th>ENGLISH</th><th>STANDARD WELSH</th><th>MODERN COLLO QUIAL WELSH</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">green</td><td>gwyrdd</td><td rowspan="2">gwyrdd</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">glas</td></tr>
<tr><td>blue</td><td>glas</td></tr>
<tr><td>grey</td><td rowspan="2">llwyd</td><td>llwyd</td></tr>
<tr><td>brown</td><td>brown</td></tr>
<tr><td>black</td><td>du</td><td>du</td></tr>
</table>

Fig. 1. Certain colour categories (after Ardener 1989: 10).

Ardener's diagram (Fig. 1) shows that although Standard Welsh had its own culturally distinct way of mapping reality, Modern Colloquial Welsh has shifted to become synonymous with English. The same can be said to be occurring with Scottish Gaelic, though it may be at an earlier stage in the process. Recent dictionaries and learning materials are unlikely to hint at an alternative colour classification, and Gaelic learning materials and children's books rarely demur in referring to *feur* as *uaine*.[4] During my research as social anthropologist in Skye I took an interest in people's actual use of colour terms by listening for words used in practice and by asking people for the Gaelic colour terms (*dath*) of particular objects. This was not a large, full or systematic study for it was something of a side-interest to my main research.[5] Nevertheless, it seemed that there were clear generational differences, children invariably using the terms synonymously with the English, and older people, particularly the elderly, often using them in keeping with an alternative set of cultural classifications. Interestingly, however, those older people often became confused as they tried to instruct me, as a Gaelic-learner, in colour terminology. The following example is from a conversation with an elderly man I will call Archy:

Me [pointing to some shrubbery]: Dè an dath a tha sin?
Archy: Uill, 'se ... *that's green* – uaine.
Me: Agus am feur?
Archy: *Green*, seagh, uaine.
Me: Ach, tha feur gorm, nach eil?
Archy: Uill, tha, ach. *But that's blue rightly. You could say* uaine, *green*.

What is involved here is an awareness by Archy that the Gaelic terminology is not consistent with the English. However, rather than leave it at that, he 'adjusts' or 'corrects' his Gaelic to make it fit the standard English translations. His own model of translation is, it would seem, one in which referents are fixed and the labels vary only according to what language is being used. The culturally variable nature of categories is not recognised

Fig. 2. The Scottish Gaelic year (Ardener 1989: 137).

in this particular model (which we might refer to as a 'folk model').[6] Archy is not at all unusual in this: the model he uses is probably the most common way in which people think about the nature of words and their referents, and about the relationship between languages. It is after all a model fostered by dictionaries and phrase-books; and by the ways in which languages are generally taught formally. At times, even pro-Gaelic policies have shown a tendency to use this model, rather than one which pays attention to the alternative cultural classifications which Gaelic may encode.

In a second example, we can, perhaps, see some of the wider aspects of the cultural schemes that may be involved. This is again drawn from Ardener's work, though in this case he writes directly of Scottish Gaelic (1989: ch. 9). The example concerns the Gaelic calendar.[7] As Ardener shows (1989: 136-8), there is now a well accepted set of Gaelic months and seasons, equivalent with the English (Table 1). However, as with the colour categories the traditional scheme was not a neat correlation with English (Fig. 2). Rather than designating fixed, standardised units of time, the Gaelic terminology referred to times of year which might be identified by their weather or associated agricultural activities. When they occurred and how long they lasted varied, and did so according to ecological and social factors (1989: 137-9). For example, *Am Màrt* might last until well into May and even June, seeming to signify as it did 'sowing time' and generally busy times of the agricultural year. *An Damhar*, meaning 'the rutting time of deer', could likewise stretch or shift from the October which it now designates until earlier in

	Scottish	Irish
January	Am Faoilteach (Am Faoilleach)	Eanáir or Chéad mhí den bhliain
February	An Gearran	Feabhra or Mí na Féile Bríde*
March	Am Màrt	An Márta
April	An Giblean	An tAibreán
May	An Céitean or Am Maigh (1st May) Bealltuinn*	 An Bhealtaine*
June	An t-Òg-mhios	An Meitheamh
July	An t-Iuchar	Iúil
August	An Lùnasdal*	Mí na Lúnasa*
September	An t-Sultainn	Meán Fhómhair
October	An Damhar	Deireadh Fómhair
November	An t-Samhainn*	Mí na Samhna
December	An Dùbhlachd	Mí na Nollag
	* Ancient ritual dates.	
Spring	An t-Earrach	An tEarrach
Summer	An Samhradh	An Samhradh
Autumn	Am Foghar	An Fómhar
Winter	An Geamhradh	An Geimhreadh

Table 1. Official equivalences of Gaelic time terms (after Ardener 1989: 138).

September or well into December depending upon the predilections of the deer. And *an t-Iuchar*, 'the warm month,' might not come at all. The terms which have now become identified as labels for the seasons were not, in the traditional scheme, different in kind from those which have become the months, and indeed the new system has taken terms of various orders – including some which signified particular ritual dates – and translated them into a new pattern of months and seasons. As Ardener summarises (1989: 142):

> the Scottish Gaelic year consisted of overlapping categories of weather and agricultural epochs, into which three or four ancient ritual seasons intruded. The standardizations have attempted to create out of these terms twelve months and four seasons as understood in Rome, London or Edinburgh.

Ardener's own account shows lexicographers during different periods grappling with the Gaelic system and its perceived oddities, and in the process often shifting Gaelic towards what had become a common European system.

What conclusions might we draw from this? And what is their relevance to the maintenance of Gaelic? First, as a social anthropologist I recognise that languages and cultures change, and that they borrow or appropriate from other cultures. (The aim of anthropologists is not to seek out dying cultural remnants or peculiarities, or to measure heads.) This is part of a cultural dynamic which is not necessarily negative or culturally depleting. However, it is also very clear that there is an asymmetry of power involved in

the cultural shifts. It is the Gaelic categories that are moving towards the English, or perhaps the more generally European, and not vice-versa. This, again, is not unusual as Ardener points out: there is involved 'an attempt to match up a terminological system developed in specific and highly local conditions against a standard one of supposedly higher status' (Ardener 1989: 136). Gaelic is being brought into the modern world – and rightly so, it might be argued. However, the dilemma here is that Gaelic could end up as simply an alternative set of labels – or a code – for an English or perhaps more generally European or 'Western' way of seeing, rather than offering an alternative 'window' onto the world, as it has sometimes been claimed to do. We could find ourselves in a paradoxical situation where, as ever more Gaelic terms are devised to cope with the contingencies of modern life, new technologies and so forth, a distinctive Gaelic way of perceiving and experiencing the world – a distinctive Gaelic system of cultural classifications – might slip away.

This underlying and often invisible cultural slippage rests in part upon certain assumptions about the nature of language: the idea that the world is preclassified ready for a relatively uncreative labelling process and that languages are, give or take a few minor variations, all 'talking about the same things.' Dictionaries, especially those which restrict themselves to word for word translations rather than engage in the rich use of examples and discussion, build this idea into their very structure. So too, do the majority of phrase books and learning materials, television subtitles and so forth. To some extent it is unavoidable if we are to engage in translation at all. However, the problems can be mitigated with greater discussion of the difficulties of translation and the cultural differences which these might belie; and also by resisting the tendency to dig up or invent a Gaelic word for any perceived 'gap' in Gaelic. At the very least we should stop and check that the 'gap' does indeed exist at the level of Gaelic categories (i.e. that it is not an artefact of translation itself). The fact that until the recent publication of *Brìgh nam Facal* (Cox 1991) there were no dictionaries in which Gaelic words are defined by a Gaelic gloss, rather than by an English 'equivalent', is the most dramatic example of the tendency of English to present itself as an invisible but extremely influential standard in the world of Gaelic literacy.

For fluent Gaelic-speakers, their use of Gaelic is probably not for the most part significantly hampered by reference back to English categories, except of course where these have become encoded into the language (as in the use of calendrical terminology). This is why I found that in practice among older people they would refer to *feur* as *gorm* and it was only when obliged to translate or explain for a learner that *uaine* came into play. There are, of course, people who are well aware of the alternative cultural realities which may be encoded in the language, and I had some helpful and interesting discussions with Gaelic-speakers about their own uses of colour and calendrical terms. More often, however, I would find myself being referred to dictionaries or learning materials where I was told that I would find the 'correct' or 'proper' Gaelic, even if the terminology there was neither used, nor possibly even heard of by any local fluent

speakers themselves. On one occasion when I referred to *feur* as *gorm* I found myself corrected by a Gaelic-speaker who had only shortly before unselfconsciously used that colour terminology himself. In my presence there was sometimes an attempt made to 'find the Gàidhlig' for a particular English term, an enterprise often accompanied by a muttered 'there'll be a Gàidhlig on it – I don't know it myself right enough – but there'll be one'. Often this meant a resort to the dictionary from where a term which nobody else had ever heard of might be unearthed. At other times, among older speakers, it involved recalling a passage of the Bible containing the English word and then thinking back to its Gaelic equivalent. On other occasions somebody would invent a Gaelic term for me, because as a learner I was not supposed to slip English words into my Gaelic as did everybody else. For example, my use of *fòn* was seen as improper by one Gaelic-speaker, who instructed me to use the Gaelic term *guthan* (literally, 'little voice'?) instead.

In these everyday acts of translation, the written was granted authority over the oral, and knowledge produced by scholars was seen as superior to the local knowledges of ordinary people. Again, this is not, perhaps, unusual or surprising. But what it tended to mean was that people's own everyday use of Gaelic was easily seen by them as somehow second-rate or incomplete. I was constantly referred to people with *Gàidhlig mhath* ('good Gaelic'), *Gàidhlig cheart* ('proper Gaelic') and to those whose Gaelic was perceived as better than that of whoever I was talking to. Most often these superior Gaelic speakers were school teachers who could be expected to know the Gaelic terminology for things such as parrots, computers or the months. The search for Gaelic terms was undertaken in a spirit of plugging a gap or reprieving a deficiency in Gaelic. In reverse contexts, where English terms seemed not to fit or to be lacking, the tendency was to regard this as a matter of a peculiarity inherent to the Gaelic and not as a deficit of English.

I am not suggesting that we must somehow try to get back to a traditional Gaelic and seal it off against any cultural contact or borrowings. This would be both impractical and probably the best way to make it unattractive to younger speakers. To be a living language entails changing. However, we need to be aware of the directions in which change could go and of the effects that Gaelic policies (or lack of policies) might unwittingly have.

These arguments can also be extended to raise questions about the social contexts of language use, for language, of course, not only divides up the world but also is embedded in a particular social life. Its use, non-use and various registers and codes demarcate social boundaries and embody social notions about behaviour and cultural identities. Elsewhere (1997: ch.8), I have endeavoured to show how a combination of factors external and internal to the home, including local notions about the nature of children, have played a part in language maintenance and change. Among the local language codes which helped maintain the use of Gaelic within the home and local community at a time when we might have expected to see more decline (i.e. 1921-1961) was an association of Gaelic with the values of home, community and egalitarianism, and of

English with snobbishness, pushiness and the values of *air falbh* ('away'). During my fieldwork in Skye in the mid-1980s a number of people expressed a fear to me that Gaelic was becoming associated with a set of values which they felt were alien to it, or more properly associated with English. For example, a man I will call Seumas, about 40, born in the area and living with his parents, has spent time working away but now looks after his parents, works the croft and has various forms of seasonal employment. Most of the time he speaks Gaelic. But his words – which on this occasion are in English – illustrate how change in the perceived cultural associations of Gaelic-use may be viewed as somehow 'wrong' or contrary to established codes by some Gaelic speakers.

> Now it's becoming the in-thing to have the Gaelic – it's becoming posh... And now, you see, there's people like yourself learning it and coming here. And there's others from the universities and, well, people like Iain Noble in Sleat – they go all in for the Gaelic. But you see, they're extremists don't you think? It's alright for them. But for me, well, Gaelic hasn't held me back but it hasn't helped me any, and I wouldn't have got far with nothing but Gaelic.

Seumas went on to tell how in 'university circles' it was becoming 'the done thing' to try to get your child to speak some Gaelic: 'It's becoming middle-class and posh.' He also told me of a Gaelic-learner couple that he had heard about on the radio. Although they had only been learning Gaelic for about five years, he recounted, they had apparently brought up their four year old child with nothing but Gaelic. On this, he commented:

> I speak the Gaelic here with my parents and when I go up to the [Hotel bar]. I speak it not because I have to but because it is what we speak. I like the Gaelic. But if it's going to become something artificial, then, well, I won't feel like speaking it at all. I don't want Gaelic to be kept alive by making it artificial . . . For myself, I'd prefer it if it died.

We might, of course, dismiss the comments of people like Seumas as wrongheaded or misguided. Their fears concern, however, cultural shifts of the same order as those I have outlined in the case of the Gaelic colour terminology and calendar. The 'middle-class', 'posh' and 'artificial' motives for speaking Gaelic are regarded by Seumas, and others like him, as values pertaining more to 'away' than to their own community. It might seem very extreme for Seumas to say that he would even consider not speaking Gaelic if he decided that it was becoming too tainted with artificiality, but we must acknowledge that within the framework of values that he himself has articulated, such an act would not be a rejection of his local identity but – on the contrary – a clear affirmation of it.[9]

The examples given here are not intended to argue that maintaining or revitalising Gaelic is somehow a doomed process. There is much that would point in other directions. What I want to make a case for, however, is sensitivity to the social and cultural contexts in which Gaelic is actually used, and the cultural alternatives which it may encode. This means listening to local people, including those whose voices do not normally get recorded, but whose actions and decisions may be crucial to Gaelic language

maintenance. Such a sensitivity need not make language revival and Gaelic policy-making more difficult, for it will provide clearer indications of the consequences of certain actions and warnings about when it might be best to leave alone or keep a low profile. It is a line of action whose logical outcome is encouraging greater involvement by local people themselves in planning Gaelic and other cultural policymaking. It means even more detailed attention to the means and contexts in which Gaelic is taught, to the sometimes subtle or apparently surprising ways in which Gaelic-speakers may come to feel alienated from Gaelic policies; and to the kinds of decisions which may lead to the shifting of underlying cultural categories. It may, of course, be the case that Gaelic as a living language and culture will want to shrug off some of its former cultural categories and values but my argument is for an awareness of what may be going on. If the grass is no longer to be *gorm*, we should at least know why.

APPENDIX

Translations of colour terms in a selection of dictionaries and vocabularies

N.B. This is by no means a full or final list. It is taken simply from a selection of dictionaries and vocabularies in my possession and its point is mainly to show the general tendency towards ignoring variations and apparent anomalies in more recent dictionaries and learning materials. The consensus which emerges may also be due in part to the way in which dictionaries are created: they are often compiled by incorporating previous dictionaries.

GORM

Dwelly:	a. Blue, azure, blue of whatever shade. 2. Green, as grass, verdant. 3. Hot . . .. feur g., *green grass*: each g., *a dark grey horse*, aodach g., *blue cloth*; na speuran gorma, *the blue heavens*; cho g. ris a' chal, *as green as kale*; fear g. *a negro* (p. 517)
MacBain:	blue, green, Ir., E.Ir. *gorm*, blue, W. *gwrm*, dusky . . . root *gor*, warm ('warm colour') . . . (p. 202)
MacEachen:	blue colour (p. 166)
Mackechnie:	blue (p. 130)
MacKinnon:	blue (p. 292)
MacLennan:	*adj.* blue, azure; also green as grass; *feur gorm*, green grass; *each gorm*, dark grey horse . . ..(p. 188)
Owen:	blue (p. 24)

UAINE

Dwelly:	a. Green. 2. Pale, wan, pallid. 3. Livid . . . (p. 986)
MacBain:	green . . . (p. 384)
MacEachen:	green, pale, wan (p. 311)
MacKinnon:	green (p. 302)

MacLennan: *adj.* green, pallid wan; *n.m.* green, green colour . . . (p. 357)
Owen: green (p. 24)

GLAS
Dwelly: a. Grey, pale, wan, ashy, sallow. 2 Poor. 3 (DC) green, as grass, unripe corn &c. . . . cho g. ris a' chal, *as green as kail* – said of anyone looking pale (p. 500)
MacBain: grey, Ir. *glas*, green, pale . . .. Gerr. *glast*, sheen (Bez.), root *glas*, to which Ger. *Glass*, Eng. *glass*, are probably allied (p. 196)
MacEachen: grey, pale, wan: . . . *glasfheur*, green grass *Glasach* . . . a green field.
Mackechnie: grey (p. 130)
MacKinnon: grey (p. 291)
MacLennan: pale, wan, grey, green (of grass); *leana ghlas*, a green plain; *aodach glas*, grey tweed: . . . *glasfheur, glaisfheur*, green grass . . . E.Ir. *glass*, livid, green, blue, yellow . . . (p. 183)

LIATH
Dwelly: Grey, grey-coloured. 2. Grey-headed, grey-haired. 3. Mouldy. 4. Lilac [E. Perthshire] . . . (p. 588)
MacBain: gray . . . (p. 228)
MacEachen: grey (p. 187)

BLUE
Mackechnie: gorm (p. 136)
MacKinnon: gorm (p. 205)
MacLennan: gorm, liath (p. 391)
MacNeill: gorm (p. 65)
Thomson: gorm, liath (p. 15)

GREEN
MacKinnon: uaine (p. 310)
Maclennan: uaine, gorm; glas; urail, ur . . . dath uaine no gorm (p. 463)
MacNeill: uaine (p. 65)
Thomson: uaine, gorm, glas (p. 76)

GREY
Mackechnie: glas (p. 139)
MacKinnon: glas (p. 310)
MacLennan: glas, liath (p. 463)
MacNeill: glas (p. 65)
Thomson: glas, liath (p. 77)

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NOTES

1 I use the imprecise term 'traditional' here mainly because trying to give any specific dates is impossible due to the nature of the evidence. I should note, however, that within this 'traditional' system there were likely to have been variations over both time and space.

2 The term *liath* is also interesting in this regard: see Appendix. In my own research it was the term which local Gaelic-speakers seemed to find most problematic as *glas* seems to have become the generally standard term for 'grey'. *Liath* seemed to be restricted to referring to 'grey hair' by many speakers. In some places *liath* – as well as being 'grey' with reference to hair – is blue, where *gorm* is navy, or at least very dark blue.

3 These too have shown what I call 'cultural slippage.' For example it is increasingly common to hear *sùil dhubh* rather than *sùil ghorm* for 'black eye.'

4 It is evident from the dictionaries that *gorm* and *glas* can be used in reference to grass, though this may have traditionally denoted slightly different appearances. Dwelly notes in the entry under *feur* that the colour adjective used in association with it is generally *gorm*. *Uaine*, however, which is now taken as the standard for green, is not mentioned in the context of grass in any of the dictionaries and seems to be a recent usage, one which some Gaelic-speakers find odd (though this may, of course, be a dialectal matter). Children – including those fluent in Gaelic – were unequivocal in referring to grass and other plants as *uaine*, and the usage can also be found in children's books (e.g. Caimbeul c. 1971: 12). I should note, however, that there are some notable exceptions. For example, Derick Thomson's *New English-Gaelic Dictionary* (1981) gives a list of alternative terms (see Appendix), though as it gives no examples of usages this does not manage to address the issue of quite what the degree of match or difference might be. The children's Gaelic learning book *Dealbh is Facal* (Amery and MacDhòmhnaill 1987) specifies *'uaine no gorm'* alongside a picture of leaves (p. 52), and this use of illustrations without the intrusion of any English at all might provide a useful strategy of addressing some of the issues raised in this paper, though it would necessarily need to be considerably extended to have any significant impact.

5 This research is reported more fully in Macdonald 1997.

6 The notion of 'folk models' is taken from the work of Holy and Stuchlik (1981; see also Parkin 1982). As they make clear, the 'folk' under consideration could equally well be, say, academics (Holy and Stuchlik 1981: 25).

7 These are by no means exceptional examples. Others might include classifications of e.g. the following: the body, relatives, animals, plants, foodstuffs, emotions and temperaments, distances, directions. MacKinnon (1977: 24-7) gives examples, including some notes on

colour terminology and the months, of various 'folk taxonomies' which might be involved in a Gaelic 'perceptual grid'.

8 It is not only Scottish Gaelic which experiences this. I understand from Richard Cox's presentation at FASGNAG II that *Brigh nam Facal* is the only dictionary in any of the Celtic languages which does not explain its terms via the associated dominant language.

9 There is a large literature on social and cultural identities: for some discussion in relation to European ethnography see Macdonald 1993; and more specifically in relation to language see Edwards 1985. I take an anthropological perspective of emphasising 'internal' or 'subjective' constructions of identity and belonging, rather than an essentialist position which prejudges the criteria which count as 'identity' (e.g. positions which specify that language is inherently vital to a distinct identity).

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