Island Voices – Guthan nan Eilean:

Hebridean language capture and curation,

2005-2023

Gordon Wells, Isle of Benbecula, Spring 2023

Island Voices/Guthan nan Eilean

Wordpress	**https://guthan.wordpress.com/about/**
YouTube	**https://www.youtube.com/IslandVoicesVideos**
Facebook	**https://www.facebook.com/GuthanVoices**
Twitter	**https://twitter.com/GuthanVoices**

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Summary

This article provides a comprehensive description of the Island Voices/Guthan nan Eilean language capture and curation project as it stood in Spring 2023. The introduction presents information on its main features and aims, the linguistic rationale focussing on the primacy of speech and the salience of bilingualism, and the Hebridean community context in which the project operates. This is followed by a detailed account of the project contents and chronology, divided into four separate sections or phases: Staff-led Production; Participatory Production; Multilingual Diversification; and Research Alignment. In conclusion, connections to further research and development projects and opportunities are sketched out, and some final reflections question a polarising juxtaposition of local versus global interests, while pointing towards responsibilities alongside the opportunities this kind of work entails.

Describing a primarily oral project through written text presents a challenge. Copious footnotes point to online samples of the materials discussed, and readers are encouraged to engage through screen as well as page in order to extract full benefit. The article is bookended by a preamble and postscript which offer written exemplification from short, transcribed extracts.

Preamble

Island Voices/Guthan nan Eilean is a community-based online audio-visual project, here presented through the medium of the printed word. For any readers previously unacquainted, some transcribed and edited curtain-raisers may help to attune them to the wide-ranging social and linguistic scope of the main production, while footnotes throughout enable direct online onscreen engagement with the materials discussed.

Trailer 1: The Craigard Day Centre, Lochmaddy, North Uist, 2006

A six-minute picture sequence, uploaded to YouTube after stitching together shots from a handheld video camera, presents images of clients, carers, and arts and crafts activities in the local Day Care Centre, and tracks a small group as they visit the nearby Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum and Art Centre. Over the pictures Donald Mackinnon offers a voiceover commentary. Here are some snatches:

> *"Seo an t-Ionad Creag Àrd ann an Loch nam Madadh, Uibhist a Tuath. Tha e air a ruith le Roinn nan Seirbheisean Sòisealta aig Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. A bharrachd air bùth-obrach, tha cidsin ann agus rùm-suidhe, far am faigh thu cupa tì agus còmhradh. Bidh grunn dhaoine a' tighinn an seo airson diofar rudan a dhèanamh. Bidh mise, Dòmhnall MacFhionghain, a' tighinn ann dà latha san t-seachdain…*
>
> *Anns an taigh-tasgaidh tha Flòraidh NicDhòmhnaill a' sealltainn nan seann chleachdaidhean tradaiseanta airson snìomh agus breabadaireachd. Tha mise a' faighinn cothrom an rud fheuchainn leam fhìn. A bharrachd air ealain, tha mi dèidheil air ceòl. Gu tric, bidh an latha a' tighinn gu crìoch leam a' cluich port no dhà air a' bhocsa, nuair a thilleas sinn gu Creag Àrd. Seo fear dhe na*

h-old favourites agam. Tha e air fear dhe na recordings tràth aig Runrig, agus 's e an t-ainm a th' air Cearcall a' Chuain."[1]

But Donald is bilingual, and so he's able to offer an alternative narration to the same picture sequence in his other language, in a second YouTube video:

> "This is the Craigard Day Centre in Lochmaddy, North Uist. It is run by the Social Services Department of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the Western Isles Council. As well as a workshop, there is a kitchen and a sitting room where you can have a cup of tea and a chat. A number of people come here to take part in different activities. I'm Donald Mackinnon, and I attend two days every week…
>
> In the museum Flora Macdonald is demonstrating spinning and weaving techniques. I get a chance to try for myself. I am keen on music, as well as art. The day often finishes with me playing a tune or two on the accordion when we get back to Craigard. This is one of my favourites. It's from one of Runrig's early recordings. It's called Cearcall a' Chuain, which means the Circle of the Sea."[2]

Trailer 2: A Gaelic Journey, Benbecula to Ranafast, 2013, reprised in Shillong, 2020

External establishing shots from around Berneray and Benbecula take in a selection of the Outer Hebrides' environmental charms – beaches, wildlife, traditional cottages – before the camera focuses in on a couple of travellers setting out from the airport to meet Irish counterparts. Again, a voiceover commentary gives this introductory picture sequence a narrative direction[3]. And again, added multilingual value is subsequently demonstrated, and not just once, but many times, as a spliced selection with Japanese fading into Italian, then English, then Welsh, then Basque, is years later re-cycled and inserted (at six minutes in) in order to make an applied linguistic point in the longer Gaelic-narrated "Two Lands Many Languages" film[4] of an Indian conference on indigenous and endangered languages at North-Eastern Hill University.

> "Winter is just turning to spring in the Outer Hebrides, off the west coast of Scotland (*Japanese*). Picturesque scenes are a reminder that these islands will host a steady stream of holidaymakers in the warmer months to come (*Italian*). But right now, a team of islanders is heading off on a trip to the Northwest coast of Ireland (*English*). In earlier times the journey would have been by sea, hopping from island to island in an unbroken string of Gaelic-speaking communities (*Welsh*). But now, Benbecula airport offers a more convenient means of travel, which will see the team arriving in the similar-sized Donegal airport just a few hours later on the same day (*Basque*)."

Trailer 3: Saoghal Thormoid, Grimsay, 2016

This time the main camera is stationary throughout, fixed unwaveringly from Monday to Friday on Norman Maclean sitting comfortably in his front room. A second camera is similarly trained

[1] https://youtu.be/IfPxG5Rc1R8
[2] https://youtu.be/e3y4kKTnk9I
[3] https://youtu.be/Unx1xpaWyVU
[4] https://youtu.be/CSVFn79rb2w

on his interviewer, but has little to contribute as Norman launches first into his *sloinneadh*, the Gaelic naming system that places you precisely in your community.

> *"Tha fhios aig a h-uile Gàidheal cò e. M' athair, 's e Niall Mòr, mac Iain Eòghainn Ruaidh à Cillmoluaig, Tiriodh. Maclean, a h-uile dàrna fear ann an Tiriodh 's e Maclean a th' orra. Ach sin mise air taobh m' athar. An gille aig Niall Mòr, mac Iain Eòghainn Ruaidh. Air taobh mo mhàthar, mo mhàthair Peigi Bheag, nighean Anna Bige. Nis 's e Anna Bheag a bha seo mo sheanmhair, 's i nighean Aonghais 'ic Iain Mhòir à Hàcleit."*[5]
>
> (Every Gael knows who he is. My father, he's Big Niall, son of Iain Eòghainn Ruaidh from Kilmaluaig, Tiree. Maclean, every second person on Tiree is a Maclean. But that's me on my father's side. Son of Big Niall, son of Iain Eòghainn Ruaidh. On my mother's side, Wee Peggy, daughter of Wee Ann. Now, my granny Wee Ann, she's the daughter of Angus, son of Big Iain from Hacklett.)

Five days later, with the conversation, songs, and stories having covered not just ancestry, but also education, community, creativity, and the Gaelic language itself, Norman signs off:

> *"So, ma tha cuideigin a-muigh an sin, ma tha cuideigin a chì am film agad mu dheireadh thall, bhithinn gu math deònach na faclan agus na fuinn a chur thuige, thoradh fhuair mise an asgaidh iad, agus duine sam bith aig a bheil ùidh asta, gheibh iadsan an asgaidh iad cuideachd."*[6]
>
> (So, if there's anyone out there, if anyone sees your film eventually, I'd be very willing to pass the words and the tunes onto them, because I got them for nothing, and anyone who's interested in them, they'll get them for nothing too.)

1. Introduction

In this section I provide a general introduction to the Hebrides-based language capture and curation project titled "Island Voices" in English, and "Guthan nan Eilean" in Gaelic. I give a short description of its features and aims first. I then discuss the academic discipline and influences that have principally shaped its development, and summarise the community context of the island locations which provide the focus for its activities.

1.1 Features and aims

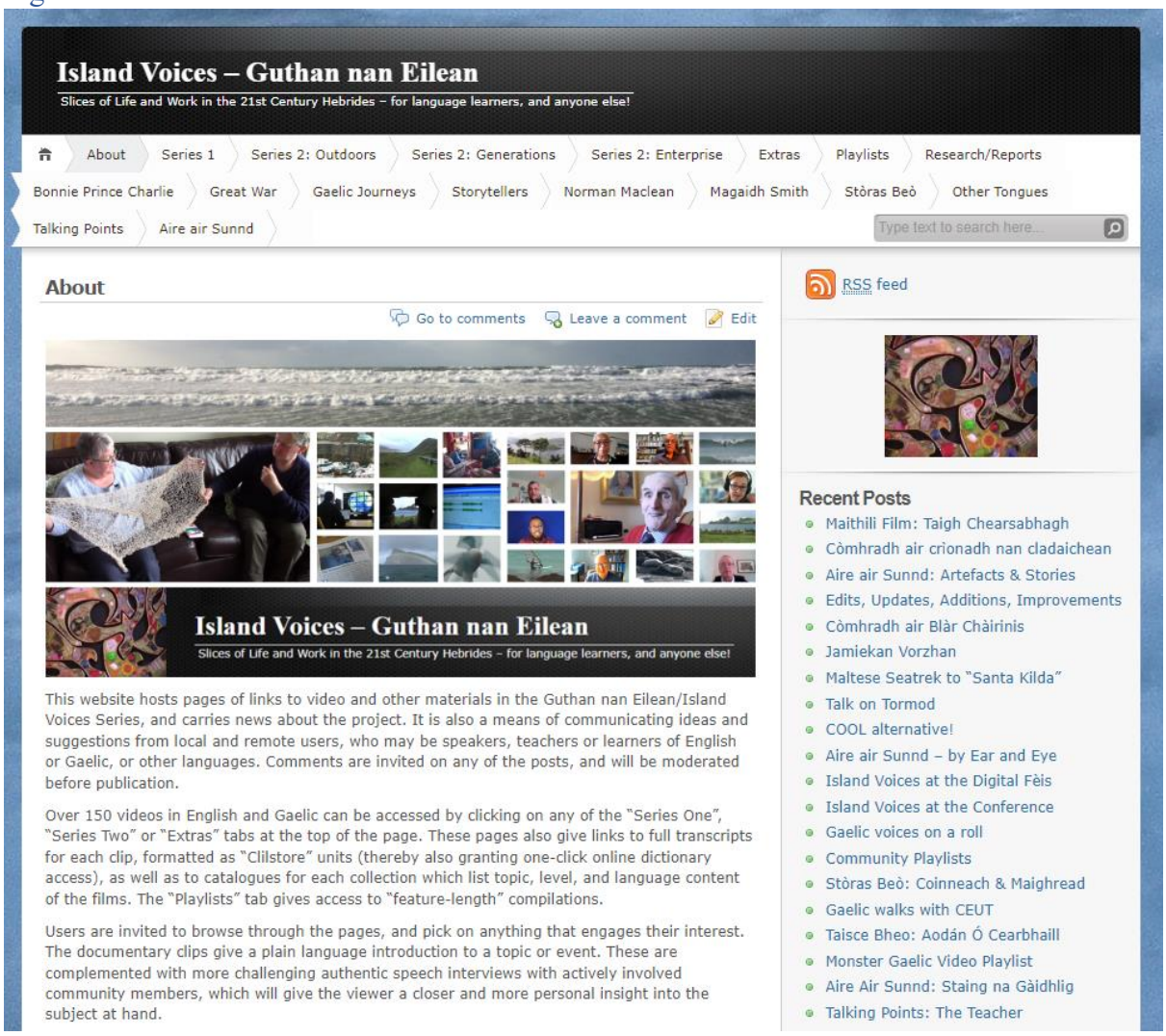
Two key features of this project are signalled in its "Island Voices" title – its Hebridean geographical focus, and the emphasis placed on recorded speech. A third defining feature – the engagement with user-friendly electronic media – enables the signature "capture and curation" of local language production on widely popular online platforms, principally dedicated corners of YouTube.com and WordPress.com. These are harnessed together to host well over 300 videos, and present them for free public viewing in a coherent manner. As the project has developed, a substantial majority has emerged of videos in Gaelic, while English videos – on a numerical par with Gaelic in the early stages – remain a significant bloc within the overall

[5] https://youtu.be/nCR2mVnDcX0
[6] https://youtu.be/IP2xWdottZM

total. Over twenty other languages are also represented, with Irish the most prominent among them. At the time of writing in Spring 2023 the project has over 6,000 online followers across its WordPress and YouTube platforms and associated social media. YouTube video hits exceed 400,000.

Figures 1 and 2 below, as consecutive screenshots from the project's "About" page[7] on the central WordPress site, give an impression of the project's online appearance.

Figure 1. "About" Screenshot 1



The strapline – "Slices of Life and Work in the 21st Century Hebrides – for language learners, and anyone else!" – identifies the project's main content and intended audience. It reflects the birth of the project in European Union Leonardo project funding (from 2005 to 2007 in the first instance), while pointing to growth and diversification as the project has developed. This has meant an evolution from an early focus on small clusters of short documentaries and interviews, to also include much longer one-to-one conversations, with room for poetry, songs, and stories, plus wider debate formats with multiple participants across international boundaries.

Support for language teaching and learning (particularly independent adult learning) remains an important part of the project, even as it has developed to welcome participation and

[7] https://guthan.wordpress.com/about/

contributions from across the islands and further afield, and particularly from those people to whom Gaelic proficiency has come as a natural function of having been raised in a Hebridean home. The latter might need no extra help in speaking the language, yet may still take pleasure in seeing their own community and speech represented, and perhaps even like to add submissions of their own. The approach puts a high premium on presenting and representing language in an appropriate and realistic social and functional context, firmly rooted in vernacular community use.

Figure 2. "About" Screenshot 2

In sum, the primacy of speech is not merely recognised, but actively asserted through this project. Potentially contentious issues around language contact and bilingualism are not simply ignored, but openly acknowledged through both exemplification and discussion.

1.2 Linguistic rationale

The European genesis of the project in an exercise in the development of language teaching and learning methods and techniques naturally drew upon the disciplines of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics from the outset, and these have remained important influences in framing

a coherent rationale and narrative for the project as it has developed. Two key project themes in particular, already mentioned above, directly reflect core linguistic concerns.

Firstly, the primacy of speech over writing has long been recognised as a fundamental insight, offered and developed by early Twentieth Century pioneers in Linguistics. Chafe & Tannen's (1987) discussion of this topic cites Bloomfield (1933), Sapir (1921), and Saussure (1966) as influential thinkers in the elaboration of the still cogent proposition that human language, excepting sign language, is primarily realised and conducted through the spoken word. In societies that have achieved close to 100% literacy rates through programmes of universal education, this basic and simple fact may easily cease to register in the wider population, and literacy may come to be judged as the mark of minimum linguistic educational achievement, while fundamental oral proficiency (upon which literacy is based) is overlooked and undervalued. In a situation (such as in the Western Isles) where the education system has historically been heavily weighted towards just one of the languages present in the community, close to 100% literacy rates may well be achieved, but only comfortably in the institutionally favoured language – in this case English, rather than Gaelic.

In a context where non-literacy is widely stigmatised, it has been my contention (Wells 2011, 2013, 2020) that educational work which encourages a positive re-evaluation of existing oral skills, irrespective of whether or not they are complemented by literacy, may well pay language awareness and confidence-building dividends. This is a challenge which Island Voices seeks to address, assisted by the relatively cheap and easy affordances of new technology in concretely recording language as it is spoken, in preference to filtering human sounds through a complex system of codified visual representations on a page or screen (writing, in other words).

Secondly, a focus on language in community use quickly and inevitably demands a sociolinguistic treatment of languages in contact, variously subsumed under the titles of "bilingualism", "diglossia", or variations on these terms reflecting differences in analysis. Jaspers (2016) gives a historical overview of how thinking has developed in the field, citing Ferguson (1959), Gumperz (1964, 1982), and Fishman (1967, 1991) among others, while offering a contemporary critique reflecting increasingly overt 21st Century concerns around social justice issues.

This critical turn in sociolinguistics has certainly underlined the need for close interrogation of key terms such as "bilingualism", particularly in the Gaelic context when it is frequently invoked by promotional bodies as a key benefit, for example, of Gaelic-medium schooling. However, the fact that bilingualism and related issues remain contested in academic debate does not relieve practitioners, such as teachers, of the immediate need to engage directly with linguistic realities "on the ground". In attempting to reflect real community life, Island Voices has embraced the recording of both Gaelic and English from the start, (and gone on to include other languages as well, albeit with more attenuated Hebridean connections, and in pursuit of a separate, though complementary, agenda).

This open acknowledgement of bilingual reality may give rise to an appearance of conflict when viewed from a teaching perspective in which "immersion" in the target language has attained a particularly high profile in the formally organised learning of Gaelic at whatever age it may be even minimally encountered. Deliberative language learning can no doubt benefit from a performative and pretended monolingualism, through the temporary exclusion of the

learner's first language for particular and defined practices and purposes. However, a permanent suspension of disbelief with respect to the full range of actual linguistic choices personally at hand and in the local environment will not deliver a complete or realistic picture of the real-life speech community in which the Gaelic learner wishes to actively participate. Insofar as Island Voices has a continuing role in assisting Gaelic acquisition by non-speakers, the open presentation of bilingualism in the community, with all the attendant issues around code-mixing and switching (Wells 2011) and other associated features, serves to alert previously monolingual learners to realities of bilingual life which may otherwise take them by surprise.

1.3 Community context

Over the period of time since the 2005-2007 inception of Island Voices, a number of studies and reports have been published on language use in the Outer Hebrides. I have made contributions myself, in Wells 2011 and 2012, centred on North and South Uist and the associated islands from Eriskay to Berneray. The first is a small-scale study with a Gaelic focus, while the second takes an Applied Linguistic interest in the overall language picture, within the context of looking at English language provision and resources for migrants and refugees, and how Island Voices can contribute on that front. In the latter I offer the following thumbnail summary, which may also hold broadly true for other communities in the Western Isles:

> "To summarise the community language environment, we have a largely bilingual host society in the Uists that is in a state of linguistic flux. There is an uneven balance between the two major languages, with high prestige English firmly established, while the traditionally stigmatised Gaelic struggles to maintain its position. A number of Eastern European languages are a recent addition to this mix, whose speakers are keen to upgrade their English language skills as a matter of priority. There is also an interest in developing Gaelic skills on the part of some English-speaking monolinguals (as well as some migrants from outside the UK), and Gaelic speakers themselves may also lack confidence in their skills in that language – particularly in relation to reading and writing, for example. English literacy is also an issue for a proportion of English speakers." (Wells 2012, 162-163)

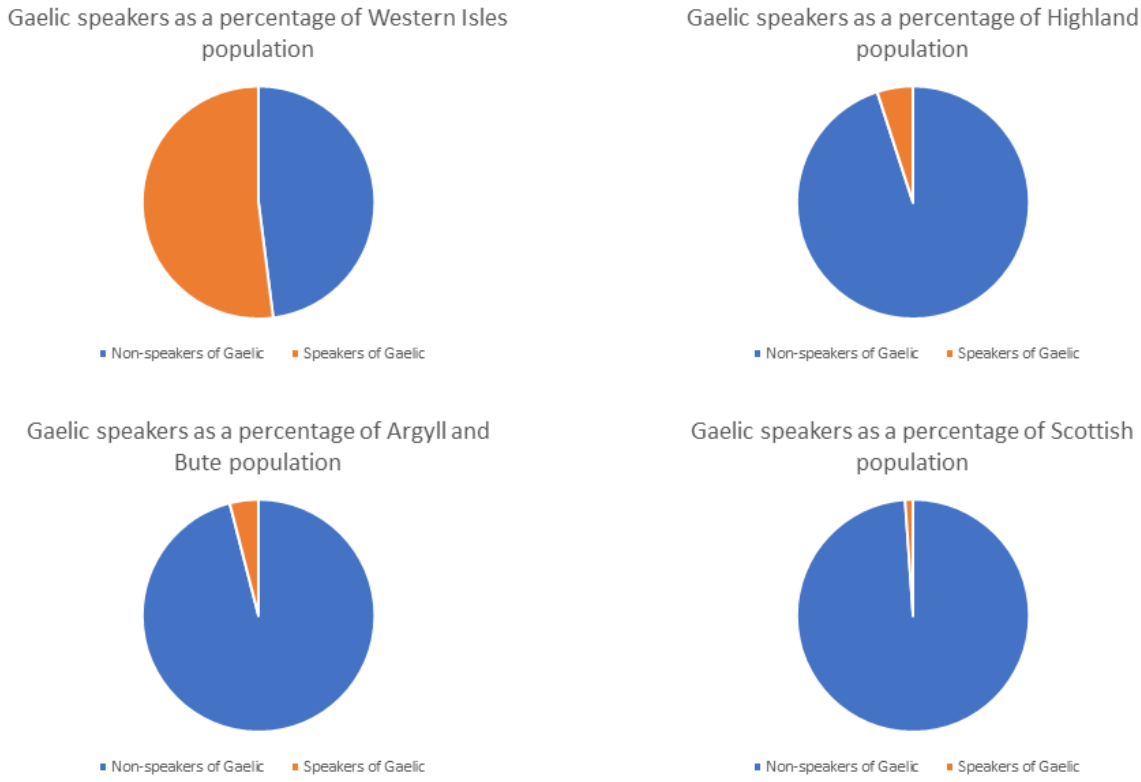
2011 was also a census year, in which questions are routinely posed about Gaelic competence in Scotland. Figure 3 below clearly demonstrates the Western Isles' exceptional position in terms of the density of Gaelic speakers within the local community, as determined by the census self-reporting mechanisms.

For Scotland as a whole, the proportion of the population aged 3 and over able to speak Gaelic was 1.1 per cent (58,000 people). The council areas with the highest proportions able to speak Gaelic were the Outer Hebrides or Western Isles (52 per cent), Highland (5 per cent) and Argyll & Bute (4 per cent). (Scotland's Census, 2011)

The census does not pursue a similarly detailed line of questioning with regard to other named community languages, so fully comparable data is not available for, for example, Polish or Russian or other languages spoken by migrants from EU states while the UK was still a member. However, Jentsch et al (2007) report that, following 2004 accession, and unlike with previous peaks in migration into the UK which tended to be evidenced mainly in urban areas, Poles and other Eastern European nationals quickly established themselves across rural areas

as well, including the Highlands and Islands. Following Brexit, their numbers may have dwindled, with the loss of even one or two families liable to be keenly felt in relatively small island communities.

Figure 3. Gaelic speakers in percentage terms in various populations



Returning to a specifically Gaelic focus, Munro et al (2011) looked in considerable detail at the Shawbost community in Lewis in a report to Bòrd na Gàidhlig that raised serious concern about ongoing intergenerational transmission in a Gaelic heartland area – an issue, it may be said, that came as small surprise to many island residents living through the experience of language shift to English before their very eyes. The degree of public concern was then intensified following publication of the "Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community" report by Ó Giollagáin et al in 2020 of the Soillse research network's comprehensive Islands Gaelic Research Project, covering all the Western Isles plus Tiree and the Staffin district in the Isle of Skye. This projected the end of Gaelic as a community language in the islands within a decade, under current circumstances.

This report and warning gained national and international attention, and generated doubt and new debate about the direction of travel of Gaelic language policy and planning in Scotland. It also provoked discussion and criticism in academic circles (Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul 2021, McLeod et al 2022, Ó Giollagáin et al 2022), reflecting to some extent the active contestation of global issues around languages in contact in the wider sociolinguistic debate referred to above, as well as disputes perhaps more particular to Gaelic. The latter relate in part to construed competition between urban mainland and rural island interests, despite the authors – a number of whom would meet "new speaker" definitional requirements (O'Rourke et al 2015) – explicitly disclaiming an "anti-learner" agenda. Without engaging directly in that debate here, it may be noted that the "Guthan nan Eilean" title is deliberate and unequivocal in profiling the

project's geographical focus on Hebridean communities as prime societal carriers of still unbroken Gaelic tradition and transmission, in full and acute awareness of the existential communicative threat now confronting them. This islands focus is not experienced as a barrier to the project's outward-looking offer of free and open access worldwide to its online output. Indeed, I perceive it as an integral part of its attraction to those with a respectful and supportive interest in the culture and the communities that continue to use this endangered language functionally and communicatively in the face of ever more daunting odds.

2. Contents and Chronology

In this section I list and describe in some detail the various types of content included in the project, in roughly chronological order of first appearance. The description is "page-led" according to how the contents are organised on the main WordPress website and blog. Tabs for the various pages can be found in rows across the top of the site, as illustrated in Figure 1 above. Moving from left to right and top to bottom, their ordering is largely but not strictly chronological.

In the following description I have divided the seventeen pages up into four different sections or phases:

1. Staff-led production
2. Participatory production
3. Multilingual diversification
4. Research alignment

While these headings give a reasonable indication of the distinct nature and orientation of each section, the progressive chronological ordering is more indicative than clear-cut, with abundant overlap between the various phases.

2.1 Section One – Staff-led Production

This section covers the beginning stages of the project, when the focus was primarily on language teaching and learning, and associated materials production and methodological concerns. The bulk of this activity relates to a five-year period between late 2005 and the end of 2010, during which the following pages were first created:

- Series One
- Series Two Outdoors
- Series Two Generations
- Series Two Enterprise
- Extras
- Playlists

What is now called "Series One"[8] was created between 2005 and 2007, before "Series Two" was even conceived of, and so advertises itself simply as "Island Voices" on the online catalogue which lists its contents. These contents consist of "Slices of Contemporary Hebridean Life and Work in 40 English and Gaelic videos presented for language learners", divided up between treatments of a range of Uist-based events, venues, topics, and organisations, namely

[8] https://guthan.wordpress.com/series-one/

Craigard Day Centre, Re-Store Recycling Project, Hebridean Food, Ceòlas Summer School, Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum and Art Centre, and Bi Beò Songwriters.

The remit at the time was to create exemplars of user-friendly language teaching support materials in both Gaelic and English across a range of post-beginner levels. Within that specification the approach was two-pronged, in order to meet an anticipated demand in an educational context for mixed level delivery. On the one hand, a string of scripted documentaries with a voice-over narration introduces local themes in relatively simple "teacher-talk" language, with due attention given to the "plain language" needs of post-beginner language learners. On the other hand, each of these short documentaries is complemented with a small number of "talking head" interviews. In these, community members with a close connection to the topic at hand, give unscripted accounts relating to their own personal involvement. As samples of "authentic speech" (Widdowson, 1998), these clips offer more advanced learners the opportunity to hear the language (whether Gaelic or English) in real-time real-life use, unfiltered by considerations of learner-friendliness.

At a later stage, transcripts of all these videos were made available online on the Clilstore dictionary access platform (Ó Dónaill, 2022), enabling viewers to watch the video and read the transcripts simultaneously, with the added enhancement of one-click linkage to an online translation dictionary for any unfamiliar words. More recently still, same language subtitles have been added to the Gaelic videos as another option, using the Closed Caption function available on YouTube.

Following the success of Series One, a more extensive Series Two was created between 2007 and 2010, following the same general format of mixing short documentary introductions with more natural, and (for learners) more challenging interviews with community members. Series One was primarily concerned with testing and developing methodological and technical issues, challenges, and opportunities, in which questions of overall cultural representation were not to the fore. However, the larger scale of Series Two (110 videos in total, again divided equally between Gaelic and English) facilitated the development of separate but complementary topical themes as well as a widening of the geographical spread beyond Uist, to encompass Lewis to Barra, and St Kilda to Skye. This gave play to the development of a more balanced representation of the area.

By the end of 2010 Series Two was complete, and divided thematically under three headings – Outdoors, Generations, and Enterprise – with catalogues created for each in similar style to Series One. The Outdoors[9] topics include Croftwork and Harvesting, Peat Cutting, Lazy Bed Construction, and Catching Razorfish in terms of traditional work practices, as well as Surfing and Windsurfing as examples of contemporary leisure activities. Within the Generations[10] theme the age range varies from primary age children through to senior citizens, in the cross-generational contexts of the Uist and Barra Children's Parliament, Crofting and Boatbuilding Skills at School, Lifelong Learning at Scotland's Gaelic College, and the community-wide Grimsay Boat Day. The final Enterprise[11] theme contains a larger number of videos than Outdoors and Generations, and is pitched at a higher level of challenge for learners, covering a spectrum of private, public, and social/voluntary sector enterprises: Seatrek to St Kilda,

[9] https://guthan.wordpress.com/series-two-outdoors/
[10] https://guthan.wordpress.com/series-two-generations/
[11] https://guthan.wordpress.com/series-two-enterprise/

Greenspace Research, Galson Estate Trust, Seallam Genealogy Centre, Tobar an Dualchais Digitisation Unit, and the Am Pàipear Community Newspaper with Writer Norman Maclean.

As with Series One, the Series Two collections consist of a mix of documentaries and interviews, and together the grand total of 150 videos constitutes the essential founding body and framework of the Island Voices project, from which all subsequent developments have flowed. The geographical locus is clearcut and unambiguous, while allowing for the mobility of living subjects. The linguistic focus is bilingual, and openly and explicitly speech-based, in line with fundamental concerns and precepts of the discipline out of which the project has grown, while judiciously accommodating written supports in both languages as appropriate, without giving them undue emphasis or privileged status.

These foundational 150 videos were all recorded and edited by project staff (myself), using a single video camera for filming and a laptop computer for editing. While not a complete novice in the field of video production, I am by no means a professional. I was fortunate to get some initial training at the start of the European project out of which Island Voices developed, but it is worth stressing that broadcast standard productions were never the goal. On the contrary, the founding (and still continuing) ethos emphasised user-friendliness in the production process, roughly at a time when the YouTube online platform first came to the fore with its new emphasis on User Generated Content, and a concomitant general relaxation of expectations for technical standards in the media-viewing experience.

The following section on Participatory Production illustrates how this widely experienced relaxation came at an opportune moment for the next stage of the project's development, but we should note here that the seeds of community involvement were already sown in this first phase.

Firstly, the Extras[12] page gives some examples of additional video work produced during this period which was not part of the Series One and Two collections, while drawing inspiration from them. Of particular note are the re-edited versions of the Craigard Day Centre documentary featuring a client's own recordings of the narration in both Gaelic and English. This foreshadows wider multilingual re-purposing of a range of Island Voices documentaries at a later stage of the project. This page also features, in the Kallin Shellfish video, an early example of the participatory ethos in video-making that came to be emphasised in subsequent Island Voices work, which also gives voice, albeit in English, to local speakers of other languages.

Secondly, the Playlists[13] page was also created in this early stage of the project as an alternative and direct means of access to the online videos on YouTube, unfiltered by the cataloguing system described above. Originally introduced as a means of providing dedicated YouTube playlists parallel to the Series One and Two WordPress pages, there have been regular subsequent additions to this page as the project has developed.

With the completion of Series One and Two, a total of 48 short documentaries had been created featuring local organisations, events, and venues, and 101 unscripted interview clips with individual community members recorded and presented, together with one song. At the end of 2010, this foundational phase of staff-led production drew to an end, and was marked with

[12] https://guthan.wordpress.com/extras/
[13] https://guthan.wordpress.com/playlists/

closing videos in both languages in the Enterprise theme in which I encouraged community members to consider further active participation in taking the project forward.

2.2 Section Two – Participatory Production

The beginning of 2011 marks the start of a second distinctive phase in the Island Voices project history. Here titled "Participatory Production" it signals a move away from staff-led media production to focus on facilitating and hosting community participation in the making and sharing of recordings. In responding to community-led initiatives, it is also characterised by a marked diversification of themes and genres in comparison with the first phase. As will be seen, this remains a key element in the Island Voices project, so no end date is given for this phase. It continues to run in parallel with later developments and innovations.

Various collaborations are included in this section, with both community groups and individual community members. At the time of writing these have resulted in the creation of the following pages:

- Bonnie Prince Charlie
- Great War
- Storytellers
- Norman Maclean (Part 2)
- Maggie Smith

The Bonnie Prince Charlie[14] page results from a collaboration with the local South Uist, Eriskay, and Benbecula community land-owner, Stòras Uibhist, as part of their drive to enhance the visitor experience for tourists, and simultaneously support and highlight local culture and oral tradition. Howmore resident Tommy Macdonald conducted a series of recordings with other local people with known interest in the story of Charles Edward Stuart's connections with Uist. This resulted in a collection of nine audio recordings, now hosted on SoundCloud, in Gaelic, English and French with both oral and more formally researched historical accounts from Alasdair MacEachen, Donald MacPhee, and Jean Didier Hache, as well as stories and song from Paul McCallum.

In similar fashion the Great War[15] page catalogues eleven audio and video recordings made by members of Comann Eachdraidh Uibhist a Tuath (North Uist Historical Society) as part of their project "An fheadhainn tha làighe sàmhach" (the ones who lie silent). This marked the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War. These recordings feature a mix of personal stories and reminiscences alongside selections of apposite poetry for recital aloud, chosen (and largely recorded) by community members themselves, for sharing on the Island Voices website as well as a dedicated blog created specifically for the project, following the Island Voices example.

While the Storytellers[16] page has a collective title, reflecting the range of sources on which it draws, its inspiration derives from a single individual, the North Uist-based "Island Voices activist" Mary Morrison (who also played a significant role in organising the Great War project). Mary has been among the most active respondents to the open invitation for

[14] https://guthan.wordpress.com/bonnie-prince-charlie/
[15] https://guthan.wordpress.com/the-great-war/
[16] https://guthan.wordpress.com/storytellers/

community members to engage proactively with the project, and this page collects nine separate video recordings of storytelling activities in Gaelic and English, from senior citizens to primary age children. Some of the stories are well-known traditional tales or oral history accounts, others are personal reminiscences, and the children's contribution is an adaptation for shared telling of a story written by a well-known children's author.

The Norman Maclean[17] page is in two parts, the second of which, "Sgeulachdan Thormoid" (Norman's stories), belongs properly in this section, while the first, "Saoghal Thormoid" (Norman's world), is treated separately below in the section on Research Alignment. Norman was a prominent and increasingly prolific contributor to Island Voices from shortly after his return to settle in Uist up until shortly before his death in 2017. He had already made notable contributions in Series Two Enterprise, Great War, and Storytellers, before contacting me in 2015 to suggest recording a series of short stories he had written up for recitation, together with an introduction in his own characteristic style. These are Mìorbhailtean ann am Barraigh, Cabhag, Hàllain, Dòmhnall Phàdruig agus Màiri Claire, Bodach nan Serviettes, and A' Bhean-Uasal NicÌomhair à Cnoc an t-Soluis air a' Bhac. Several of these have since been performed by young competitors at the Royal National Mòd.

The final page in this section is dedicated to the work of Lewis-based Gaelic activist Maggie Smith[18], and is a later addition to the site than those listed above, being created in 2019. Maggie has her own website, but was seeking wider dissemination of her recordings, so the Island Voices project was happy to help spread awareness of her work by the creation of this page. It contains links to various collections of Maggie's recordings, including stories from local tradition, Lewis dramas, and poetry podcasts.

2.3 Section Three – Multilingual Diversification

Series One of Island Voices emerged from the 2005-2007 Leonardo-funded European project "POOLS" (Producing Open Online Learning Systems), in which Gaelic College Sabhal Mòr Ostaig partnered with a number of institutions in other countries on the European mainland. After POOLS, a series of follow-up projects with continued Sabhal Mòr Ostaig involvement as a central player, several with a focus on Clilstore development, ensured continued international and multilingual engagement for the ongoing Island Voices project. Given the deeply embedded bilingualism within the home Hebridean communities of the project this was a natural cultural fit, out of which various complementary initiatives emerged, two of which developed to the point at which dedicated page creation became appropriate:

- Gaelic Journeys
- Other Tongues

The Gaelic Journeys[19] page catalogues the recording products resulting from reciprocal visits in 2013 and 2014 between Benbecula in the Western Isles and Ranafast in Donegal. These were a natural bilateral follow-up to the developing relationship between Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and Ulster University as partners in POOLS-related projects. The page follows something of a Series One and Two pattern in that it contains both documentary and interview material. However, there is only one documentary (A Gaelic Journey, Cuairt Ghàidhealach, Cuairt

[17] https://guthan.wordpress.com/sgeulachdan-thormoid/
[18] https://guthan.wordpress.com/magaidh-smith/
[19] https://guthan.wordpress.com/gaelic_journeys/

Ghaelach), this time produced in three different languages, with the rest of the twenty recordings in total being mostly unscripted samples of speech in either Irish or Scottish Gaelic, including both monologues and conversations between two or more interlocutors. Much of the subject matter revolves around comparisons between the two locations and associated customs and traditions, but also includes some scripted verse in speech or song.

Following the introduction of the Irish language, further linguistic diversification followed with the Other Tongues[20] page, first created in 2016. I set out the rationale in print in some detail in Wells 2016. It is also referenced and exemplified in film in the 2020 "Two Lands Many Languages" recording from the University of the Highlands and Islands Mediating Multilingualism[21] project with Indian partners. In summary, I suggest that Do-It-Yourself media projects of this nature in localised linguistic communities may benefit from sharing resources, by re-purposing their recordings in other languages on a mutual exchange basis. For communities accustomed to functioning in more than one language, this may seem like an unexceptional step to take at small additional cost but with the potential for ample and diverse returns. Through the Other Tongues page, in addition to English and Gaelic, the Island Voices project now hosts films about the Hebrides in over twenty different languages, including not just Celtic languages but other community languages spoken by significant numbers in the UK and further afield.

Relatively small collaborations of this kind may lead to the development of relationships out of which wider more ambitious projects may grow, for example in comparative research between different linguistic communities.

2.4 Section Four – Research Alignment

This section is placed in fourth position, not because it was the last to start, but because it has grown to occupy a relatively prominent position in the latest period of the project. This follows the strengthening of the connection first with the Soillse Gaelic research network from 2015 and then with the related Language Sciences Institute at the University of the Highlands and Islands, following its creation in late 2017.

In this period, Island Voices has effectively acted as an agent of community dissemination for a new sociolinguistic research focus on Gaelic which has turned closer attention to the vernacular communities in the Hebrides. At the same time, a parallel interest in wider international comparators for the Gaelic context has also been broadcast and serviced through the same Island Voices online channels.

These interests are currently reflected in these five pages:

- Research/Reports
- Norman Maclean (Part 1)
- Stòras Beò
- Talking Points
- Aire air Sunnd

[20] https://guthan.wordpress.com/other-tongues/
[21] https://guthan.wordpress.com/2020/02/02/scotland-of-the-east/

I first created the Research/Reports[22] page in advance of 2015 in order to provide a portal for various articles looking at the Island Voices project and context for a range of interests. These included the ongoing POOLS-related European projects and the British Council, as well as Soillse, starting from 2011. The page contains a table of report titles together with live online links enabling free and open access to the articles in question, with a range of topics covering the bilingual community environment and other Linguistic and Applied Linguistic issues. The prime reason for gathering these links together on a single page is to enable ease of access, particularly for island community members who may often find themselves the objects of linguistic or other research without necessarily being able to easily read and check the published findings.

The Norman Maclean[23] page is listed here again, as well as in the Participatory Production section above, because it consists of two parts, with the first part, "Saoghal Thormoid" (Norman's World) properly belonging under a research heading. Although listed as Part 1 on the page, Saoghal Thormoid actually followed on from Part 2, "Sgeulachdan Thormoid", and was commissioned by Soillse to pilot an empathetic approach to video ethnography, building on the established collaborative relationship between Norman and Island Voices. The page lists all five video recordings made on consecutive days in April 2016, dealing respectively with the broad topics of Ancestry, Education, Communities, Creativity, and Gaelic. It also links to the online and printable volume of transcripts of all five recordings.

The Stòras Beò[24] page relays through the Island Voices site the recordings made under the auspices of the Soillse project "Stòras Beò nan Gàidheal". The Stòras Beò nan Gàidheal project aims to collect exemplary samples of Gaelic speech from vernacular communities in Scotland and Ireland with user-friendly equipment and techniques in a format largely modelled on Saoghal Thormoid. In this approach a two-way conversation is faithfully recorded in real time between interviewer and interviewee, with minimal editing applied before posting online. The conversations are intended to be free flowing, though the interviewer does have a checklist of ethnographic topics for discussion dependent on how the discussion progresses. At the time of writing this project is ongoing, with substantially more recordings having been made in Scotland than in Ireland, owing in part to the impact of the Covid pandemic. Scottish recordings have been made with speakers from the Isles of Lewis, North Uist, Benbecula, and South Uist. A start has also been made with Irish speakers from Donegal and Galway. A second series of Scottish recordings has yet to be added to the Island Voices page in similar format to the first tranche. However, ongoing progress with both Scottish and Irish recordings is also recorded as it occurs on the project blog[25].

The Talking Points[26] page is a 2022 addition to the Island Voices site, and something of a hybrid production, incorporating elements of Saoghal Thormoid videos into recordings of online Zoom discussions between Indian, Jamaican and Scottish university partners in Mediating Multilingualism, together with speakers of a range of community languages in the UK, including Gaelic. In the discussions, three main sociolinguistic topics are tackled: Language Endangerment – Gaelic Trajectory; Language Hierarchies – English Ascendancy;

[22] https://guthan.wordpress.com/research/
[23] https://guthan.wordpress.com/sgeulachdan-thormoid/
[24] https://guthan.wordpress.com/storas-beo/
[25] https://guthan.wordpress.com/
[26] https://guthan.wordpress.com/talking-points/

and Language Contact – Bilingual Balance. Supplementing the full-length discussions, a series of key extracts and blogposts is also listed, highlighting key contributions from The Linguists, The Interpreter, The Poet, and The Teacher. An open invitation is further extended to all readers to consider taking part in the "International Island Voices MOOT", re-emphasising the importance and openness attached to interaction and engagement between community members, and academics and language activists and enthusiasts.

The latest addition is the Aire air Sunnd[27] page, which records the Island Voices contribution to a collaborative project with a wellbeing focus between three universities, led by the North Uist Historical Society. At the time of writing it remains work in progress, with one of the strands being an adaptation of the Talking Points format to a specifically local and Gaelic-medium focus, with local residents discussing Island Voices or other recordings amongst themselves. These recordings are enhanced with Clilstore transcripts as well as YouTube subtitles, with the aim of enabling access to local knowledge and opinion for a non-Gaelic audience without requiring the speakers themselves to switch to their other language.

3. Conclusion

I begin this section by highlighting the synergies that have grown out of Island Voices with other research and development projects, both within a University of the Highlands and Islands framework, and with other universities. I close it with some final reflections that question a polarising juxtaposition of local versus global interests, while pointing towards academic responsibilities alongside the opportunities this kind of work presents.

3.1 Further research and development

I have already made reference to the Clilstore online multimedia platform, with which Island Voices has been in a close symbiotic relationship since very early days, often through collaborative European projects with other partners. Ó Dónaill (2013) and Ó Donnaíle (2014) offer user and developer perspectives respectively on its iterative progress at an earlier stage in its development, but further innovation is ongoing, with new features being added in late 2021, such as the "custom dictionary" function to facilitate use with languages like Okinawan[28] or Jamaican[29] which lack good online dictionary support.

Although designed as a language learning aid, Clilstore's basic functionality in marrying online media with supporting transcripts has enabled flexible deployment in a number of other contexts as well. The completed Saoghal Thormoid collection piloted its use in support of video ethnography, and this approach has been further developed within the University of the Highlands and Islands framework in the ongoing Stòras Beò nan Gàidheal/Taisce Bheo na nGael project in Irish as well as Scottish Gaelic. Both these projects also contribute to spoken Gaelic corpus development work led by the University of Glasgow in a collaborative partnership through Soillse. This emanates from the pioneering Dlùth is Inneach project conducted for Bòrd na Gàidhlig (Ó Maolalaigh et al, 2014), which endorsed a "retro-vernacular" Gaelic model on which to base a broadly acceptable and authoritative grammatical description of the language.

[27] https://guthan.wordpress.com/aire-air-sunnd/
[28] https://guthan.wordpress.com/2021/11/01/scotlands-gaelic-college-okinawan-take/
[29] https://guthan.wordpress.com/2021/11/15/hebridean-dijitaizieshan-senta/

In another more recent example, Soillse-supported work led by the University of Edinburgh on Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) for Gaelic leant heavily on Island Voices uploads to Clilstore to supply initial training data for its prototype tool (Evans et al 2022). This is an eye-catching development, welcomed by Bòrd na Gàidhlig in its latest five-year plan (2022), for example, and by other stakeholders in broadcasting and other sectors. While it was not foreseen in the original thinking focussing on language learning, Island Voices' contribution to ASR development has emerged as a natural outcome from the founding linguistic principles on which the project is based.

On that basis of known unpredictability, one may project forward the development of further initiatives with external partners in times to come, which may well result in new page tabs being added to those discussed above. Mention has already been made of Comann Eachdraidh Uibhist a Tuath. Closer collaboration with *comainn eachdraidh* (local history societies) across the islands would also be a positive way forward to develop the Stòras Beò nan Gàidheal collection[30]. The fundamental point here is that the project has no defined point or date of content completion, though the day will surely come when no more recordings are uploaded to YouTube or posts added to WordPress. More important is that it embodies a dynamic process of boundary-crossing collaboration between multiple partners in community and academia, and in so doing perhaps provides a model for others to emulate in similar situations, including contexts of language endangerment and retrieval.

3.2 Final reflections

The roughly chronological description presented above of the project's content development path has traced a shifting emphasis over time to a predominance of Gaelic material, though not to the complete exclusion of either English or indeed a growing diversity of other languages. There have been good reasons for the change, as the project has responded positively to a range of locally expressed interests and priorities, and arguably in line with a social justice agenda that questions any perceived ideologically "neutral" stance in the analysis of language contact situations where power relations between different linguistic groupings are not equal. The ongoing nature of that debate prompts consideration of the prevailing sociolinguistic and geo-political context within which the Western Isles are placed. They are islands, but they are not isolated, and the sea is no longer the barrier it may once have been to linguistic developments and shifts. The dynamically multilingual nature of mainland Britain and the wider world has an inevitable local impact, while the Western Isles' own special linguistic make-up may also attract reciprocal interest from further afield.

It is notable, for instance, that Simpson (2021, p9) quotes an excoriating comment from Gaelic-speaking Angus Brendan MacNeil, Member of the British Parliament in Westminster for the Western Isles, on a 2019 Boris Johnson speech. Simpson analyses this speech in detail as part of his critique of a dominant monolingualist ideology in political discourse at UK level and in England, while tracing its seriously detrimental impact on the actual teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

That this ideology has a pervasive, though not uncontested, reach across both geographical and linguistic boundaries is equally demonstrated in Norman Maclean's dismissive reference to then topical debate around so-called "Muslim isolation" following the publication of the

[30] https://guthan.wordpress.com/2022/08/01/storas-beo-coinneach-maighread/

government-sponsored Casey (2016) review into opportunity and integration. This report placed a negative and deprecating emphasis on indications of low English language skills amongst women of Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage. Simpson refers to the same report in his article. While he presents an applied linguistic discourse analysis, Norman's forceful contribution just 21 minutes into the first day of recording Saoghal Thormoid is based on lived family experience, pointing out that his own grandmother never learned English after migrating to Glasgow from Uist as a young woman, having no need for it, though she lived there happily for the rest of her life.

> *… Ach, 's e cailleach smart a bh' innte. But, thuirt mo mhàthair, an uair ud ann an Glaschu, cha ruigeadh i leas Beurla a bhith aice. Bha uiread de Ghàidheil timcheall oirre, agus bhiodh i – daoine a' bruidhinn mu dheidhinn Muslim isolation is gnothaichean – cha do rinn i oidhirp sam bith Beurla ionnsachadh. Bha nighean aice a sgrìobhadh litrichean dhi – seo mo mhàthair. Chan e gur e Nobel prize-winner a bha nam mhàthair, ach, you know, bha comas sgrìobhaidh aice. Bhiodh ise a' sgrìobhadh. Bha na gillean, Tormod is Seumas is Cailean – rachadh iadsan dha na bùithtean dhi airson biadh, agus, recreation mar a chanas iad, well rachadh i a thaigh a' Bharraich air Paisley Road, chan eil fhios agam cò am Barrach a bh' ann, air neo rachadh i aig Ciorstaidh Eachainn – 's e cailleach às a' cheann a tuath, 's i seanmhair Alasdair Gillies am pìobaire, Ciorstaidh Eachainn – agus cho fad 's is aithne dhomhsa, och bha tòrr dhiubh ann an uair ud ann an Kinning Park agus Plantation…*[31]
>
> (… But she was a smart old woman. But, my mother said, at that time she didn't need English. There were so many Gaels around her, and she would – people talking about Muslim isolation and things – she made no effort to learn English. She had a daughter who would write letters for her – this is my mother. Not that my mother was a Nobel prize-winner, you know, but she could write. She would write. The boys, Tormod and Seumas and Cailean – they would go to the shops for her for food, and, recreation as they say, well she would go to the Barrach's house on Paisley Road, I don't know who the Barrach [person from Barra] was, or she would go to Ciorstaidh Eachainn – an old woman from the north end [of Uist], Alasdair Gillies the piper's granny, Ciorstaidh Eachainn – and as far as I know, och there were plenty of them at that time in Kinning Park and Plantation…)

So the sharpening Island Voices focus on Gaelic in its geographical setting as a Hebridean community language, far from being exclusionary, or unduly insular or introspective, offers the potential for fresh insights to be derived, and common interests developed, through grounded cross-linguistic comparison with other urban or mainland-based community languages within the overall polity. Such links and insights may be as apparent and important to the common man or woman as to the applied linguist, even if expressed in rather different terms.

I would hope that Island Voices recordings, in their mission to reflect real community life in real people's voices, serve to provide a local resource that answers first and foremost to

[31] https://youtu.be/nCR2mVnDcX0

Hebridean wants and needs. That there is also openness to a wider national and international audience, whether lay or academic, is an attractive additional factor offering the potential for fruitful learning or research opportunities of many different kinds. The openness of the offer properly invites respectful reciprocation from those who wish to engage from a distance. This cannot be guaranteed, of course, though it may be hoped that increased social justice sensibilities, at least in academia, would prompt due reflection on responsibilities towards the source community.

Approaching from a linguistic viewpoint, this points to recognising value in the ordinary and mundanely quotidian, as much as in the exceptional or aesthetically pleasing. Whether we're enjoying a domestic cèilidh with Norman Maclean, one-time star of stage and screen, or observing Donald MacKinnon's daily routine in the Craigard Day Care Centre, each has something of true worth to say about themselves and their community. And while few would associate the word "ordinary" with Norman's multiple talents, one ingredient in his widespread grassroots popularity was surely the "common touch" of a natural communicator at ease with his home audience. There may be a lesson here for applied and socio-linguistic professionals. In a meaningfully socially aware mission, the development and display of academic and linguistic prowess should surely show and serve a genuine community connection and purpose. Such, at least, are the principles which the Island Voices project aspires to uphold. The project trajectory, while linguistically guided, thus aims at inclusiveness in content organisation and presentation, remains open to new inputs, and has an undefined endpoint still over the horizon.

Postscript

A closing curtain-call clip from one never too shy to demonstrate the power of speech is presented below in monolingualised English writing. The final footnote will take the reader to the real oral and bilingual thing.

Trailer 4: Tighinn dhachaigh. Daliburgh, South Uist, 2010, reprised 2022

An opening 2-shot establishes an interview scene, with Am Pàipear editor, Archie Mackay, getting a story – in fact, several stories – from Norman Maclean in the first home of his own after returning to Uist. Norman is in his element in front of camera and attentive audience. There are various tales, but this one about Norman's homecoming catches the video editor's attention. The constant code-switching marks it out for special sociolinguistic attention in later international discussion, but behind the light-hearted presentation, there is a powerfully positive domestic message from a man who lived out a spectacularly turbulent life in the Gaelic public eye[32].

> … "Hello, Norman. This is John Alec from the Hebridean Housing Association."
>
> "Yes, what can I do for you?"
>
> Said he, "We've got a house for you."
>
> "Where?" said I.

[32] https://guthan.wordpress.com/2017/09/18/dileab-thormoid-dhuinn/

"Up south. The house is up in Daliburgh."

"Oh no, bother, no, I don't think so. The only Rangers supporter in South [Uist] – no, I don't fancy that. Get me, get me into Columba Place, or someplace I know."

"Oh, cosy warm houses…"

Said I, "Will it be warm in the winter?"

"Oh, yes. They'll be nice Norman. They're nice."

So, I said yes, on the spot, without even seeing the house.

… So I wouldn't want to leave this world. Like you, I'm in a place I like. And it's up to me what I do with my life. I have choices, you know. That's priceless. That's really priceless.[33]

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[33] https://youtu.be/XFGInaf_DGQ

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