

# Bilingualism: Why boosting the rights of minority language speakers could help save Gaelic in Scotland

September 15 2020, by Jennifer Mattschesy

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In recent months there has been talk of a "[Gaelic crisis](#)" in Scotland, based on a [study](#) that predicts [Gaelic](#) may be disappearing across the country. I do not speak Gaelic, but I have spent five years researching bilingualism, and as a German native speaker who has lived in Scotland

for over a decade, I am intimately familiar with what it means to communicate in a second language.

When we talk about bilingualism, we often assume that people are equally fluent in both languages and use them equally often. The reality is that some bilinguals may be [more proficient in one language than the other](#) and, while some will use both languages equally often, others will [use one language more frequently than the other](#).

The question of how frequently a bilingual person uses a particular language brings us back to the decline in the number of active Gaelic speakers in Scotland. Despite the ubiquity of bilingual English-Gaelic road signs and the historic presence of the [Scots language](#), Scotland has remained mostly monolingually English. This in itself is not surprising. Just seeing a language pictured does little to help us learn it; we need to [actively use a language](#) to accomplish this and, perhaps more importantly, continue to use it.

## Social settings

The language we choose to communicate in sends a certain message. If I talk to someone in German in a room full of people who do not speak the language, I effectively exclude them from the conversation. If I choose to use a language others understand, I give them the opportunity to join in—and this is often viewed as the polite option.

But this becomes problematic if speakers of [minority languages](#) do not feel comfortable using that language in a social setting because they are concerned that they might come across as impolite or hostile. If we want to change this, we need to make room for minority languages—be it Gaelic, Scots or sign languages—to be used in social, everyday settings.

If I am not part of a conversation, there is no harm in my lack of

understanding the language. In multilingual workplaces, people often develop their own way to deal with that situation, for example, by translating parts of what is being said, or switching languages when someone new enters the conversation. (It is also a great way to learn swear words in [different languages](#)!)

## Use it or lose it

Once someone is fluent in a language, they are unlikely to completely forget how to speak it. But what often happens is that people might start to feel a little rusty after not using a language for a while. This is called "[language attrition](#)" and can affect a first or [second language](#). In other words, even if someone spoke Gaelic for the first 18 years of their life, if they then go on to use mostly English for the next 10 years, they are likely to experience some degree of language attrition.

Some will notice that they can [no longer master complex grammatical structures](#), others may find that their [vocabulary has shrunk](#) or that they [struggle](#) to pronounce words or sentences without an accent.

## The way forward

The good news for the Gaelic language is, the number of young speakers did not decline between the [2001](#) and [2011](#) censuses and these early learners are at a [lower risk](#) of being affected by language attrition.

Besides age, there are two key factors that can help to prevent this problem: [motivation and usage](#). People who are motivated to maintain language skills are more likely to do so, but they need opportunities to use the "at risk" language. In other words, if we want to avoid language attrition, we need to provide more opportunities for people to speak Gaelic after they leave school. That means at work, in [higher education](#), and as part of our healthcare and legal systems.

Countries which adopt formal guidelines that set clear expectations of when people should have the right to use a minority language—for example [Welsh in Wales](#) or [English and French in different areas of Canada](#) – generally have a higher rate of bilinguals. This implies that if we strengthen the rights of minority [language](#) speakers, it will be a first step towards increasing their number—and possibly preventing languages like Scottish Gaelic from becoming extinct.

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