

# Many voices, many communities

A study of the interaction between Gaelic and BSL in Scotland. A report by Catherine King & Rita McDade

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## Introduction

“In My Father’s Words” was produced at the Dundee Rep Theatre throughout the first half of 2014 and moved between Canadian English and Gaelic speeches and interjections that were integral to the audience’s understanding of the characters and journey of the play. The production was therefore designed with audio visual elements integrated into the set in order to allow the audience to understand the Gaelic text but rendered in a way that was both moving and central to the emotion of the piece. How to ensure access for BSL<sup>1</sup> users was a difficult proposition given that there is no such thing as Gaelic Sign Language. Is there?

This was the question that the show’s producer Claire Dow and I circled back to many times in our preliminary discussions alongside the Artistic Director Philip Howard and although I felt confident in saying there was no such thing it did occur to me that we hadn’t actually asked BSL users what experience they had had with Gaelic. Those who grew up in island communities where Gaelic predominated must surely have had some interaction

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<sup>1</sup> British Sign Language

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with Gaelic speakers given that their parents, siblings and extended family would have used the language. How was language managed in such communities? How much of the Gaelic of their childhood was retained or remembered by adult BSL users in Scotland? Was there a marked accent or dialect of BSL that comes from Gaelic speaking communities?

The creative decisions around how to translate the text provided the impetus for us to go out and talk to BSL users and, it was hoped, gather language that could be used to support that translation. It did not feel right to simply offer nothing to the BSL audience whilst others could experience the musicality and lyricism of Gaelic in some of the most moving scenes of the play. But what to offer them was a conundrum. After a great deal of thought I decided to create a text that was noticeably “foreign” but that contained island dialect vocabulary drawn from BSL users that would honour both the life of the Gaelic in the piece and the sharing of those participants in the research. In this way I hoped that the BSL audience would share the experience of English speakers in the audience: incomprehension in the face of the Gaelic and/or an emotional recognition of the text. Given that the translation would be filmed and embedded in the set, the whole tour would be accessible to BSL users so it felt important to get it as right as possible.



The research scope was defined quite clearly as non-academic research and was to be a series of conversations with BSL users from areas in Scotland where Gaelic is known to exist. These conversations would then inform my decision making in the translation process. In effect this was to be a very pragmatic response to a specific problem that I could not resolve from a self-contained interpreting/translating process. The focus of the research was to examine the proposition that BSL and Gaelic have some kind of interaction and to try to capture language that would be helpful for the translation. It was also an agreed tenet that anything we did within the BSL using Community would have an ethical base that offered a reciprocal benefit.

## Process

To this end Rita McDade was approached to join the project since she is a native BSL user, a leader in her field with a track record of ethically sound research and teaching within the Deaf community as well as someone with an impressive career in linguistics, interpreting and cultural teaching and as research. BSL users are often approached by non-native researchers to participate in projects and there is a danger of consultation fatigue as well as researcher bias particularly where the researcher is non-native, regardless of how “fluent” she appears. This bias often results from misunderstanding the cultural import or weight around certain linguistic or behavioural aspects of BSL. We wanted to ensure that this kind of bias would be managed as well as possible and that Rita would be the lead in the interactions so that any potential issues of dominant culture i.e. non-native “hearing” researcher bias could be ameliorated as far as possible.

The first performance was scheduled for June 2014 so we had a short lead in to setting up interviews with community members who could potentially offer us data. We quickly had a meeting on the 28<sup>th</sup> of May to bring together our thoughts on the project and to formally identify action points for contacting various BSL users we thought could help us. At that stage we discussed a number of potential participants we would approach as well as some clues we had that might lead us to others. It was hoped that we could make contact with these individuals and another short meeting was held on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June to continue discussing these and other potential contacts. All of our contacts were approached very quickly and we were able to set up our first meeting for the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June with an Orkney born BSL user who lived in Glasgow. The researchers are deeply indebted to the energy and generosity of Helen Farrelly, an interpreter living and working in the Highlands. She made contacts, approached local community members and essentially brokered our interaction with the individuals we really wanted to talk to. Without her assistance we may not have been able to put the research in motion as quickly as we did and we would like to formally thank her for her efforts.

## Participant interviews

Over the course of the next two weeks we were able to conduct three interviews. The first and second were one to ones and the third was with a group of three people living in the Highlands. Each one of these discussions brought something unique to the table and each one contributed to the preparation of the final translation and we are very grateful to all of the people who shared their memories and gave of their time so generously.



### Mr. T

The interview was held in the city centre of Glasgow and came about because the informant self-reported as having had some Gaelic in his family. It became clear very quickly that there was a misunderstanding and that the informant had had very little interaction with Gaelic, if any at all. It was, however, very interesting to note that Mr. T reported certain Scots words as being Gaelic e.g. neeps and tatties which raises the question of how local

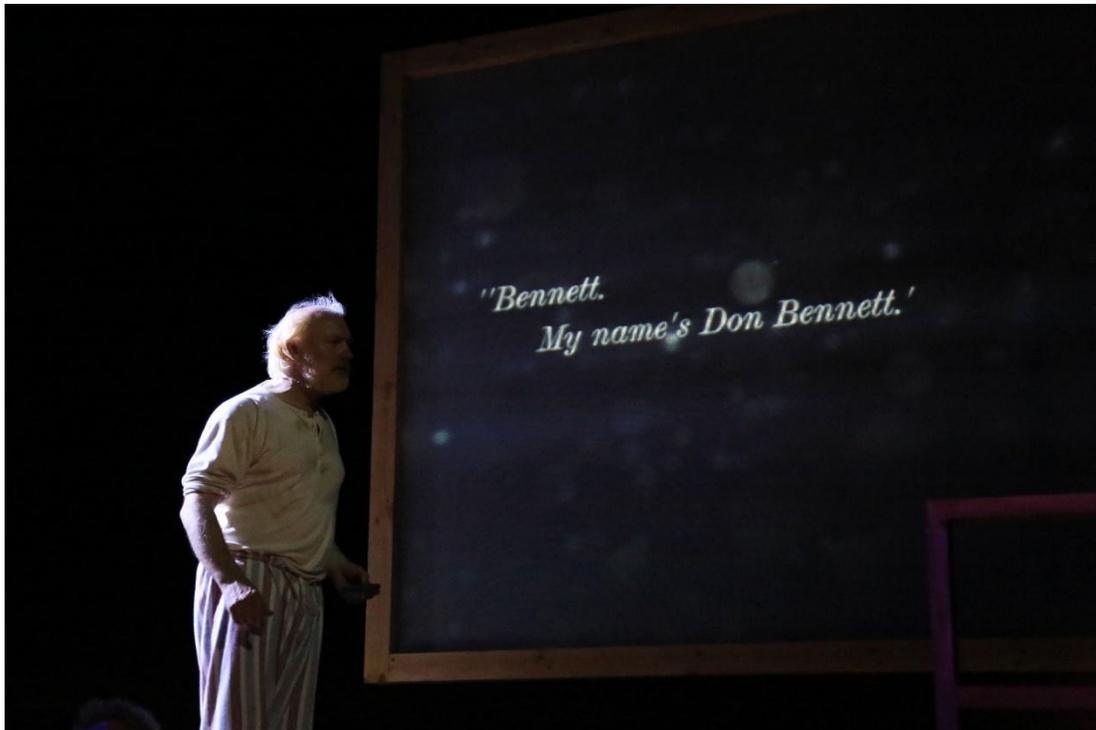
language and culture is transmitted across the divide between those accessing spoken language and those accessing signed language. A possible piece of further research could usefully examine how cultural transmission is handled in Gaelic speaking families which include a BSL user. The informant went on to describe a very lonely and disenfranchised existence on Orkney having been sent to Glasgow for boarding school at the age of about 6 years. He clearly felt that the island stopped being his home and aligned himself to his peers at the boarding school, learning BSL from them and finding a sense of shared language and community that persists for him to this day. Consequently, his use of BSL held no real trace of an island accent but was rooted in the Glasgow dialect. His description of having to leave his twin brother, who was not Deaf, to go to boarding school in Glasgow was particularly moving and left the researcher wondering how many stories are out there uncollected and untold. Whilst this interview was very interesting and raised many questions around Deaf lives in island communities, it produced little language that could be pragmatically used within the translation of the performance. It was useful as a starting point, however, and provided a marked contrast to subsequent interviews in terms of island life experience.

### **Mr. M**

Our second interview was a classic example of how research can be best done when the researcher has an in depth understanding of the behaviours and culture of the community. We were aware of a man in his 80s who lived in Lanarkshire but who had originally come from the island community of Barra. We also knew that he came from the Roman Catholic community of Barra and was active in Glasgow RC community so the only way to make contact with him was to be physically present at a religious service in sign language held weekly which he attends. We agreed that it should be Rita who made contact with him as she was known to him from the community and understood the nuances of such a complex social situation. She tracked down the church in Glasgow at about the right time that many sign language users would converge for mass and the social gathering that followed and made contact with Mr. M. It should be noted that we specifically use the term sign language users here rather than BSL users since many of the people in this community use a variety of sign language known as St Vincent's or Irish

Derived Sign. The roots of this particular community are in the preponderance of Deaf children educated at the faith based St Vincent's school for the Deaf in Glasgow where the teaching population was predominantly nuns who brought Irish Sign Language (ISL) with them from their training in the south of Ireland. The children therefore used many of the linguistic features of ISL rather than BSL and the language variant co-exists with BSL in Glasgow still.

Mr. M was very happy to be discussing his early life on Barra and had warm memories of his family and neighbours on the island. He referred to it as home and regretted not buying property there so that he could retire to at this later stage in his life. He also expressed a desire to be buried on the island so his experience of being Deaf on Barra was in stark contrast to that of Mr. T on Orkney. Throughout the conversation Mr. M made references to the Gaelic that he experienced as a child although he left the island at the age of 4 to go to school in Edinburgh. He was then moved again to St Vincent's school in Glasgow when his father realised there was a faith based school available. He told us that his family were Gaelic speakers and that children were usually expected to learn Gaelic till the age of 9 when they would then be taught English. He was not taught Gaelic but his siblings and parents were Gaelic speakers and bi-lingual. The family communicated via the ISL one handed manually coded alphabet (sometimes known as fingerspelling) which spelled out words in English. Mr. M did say though that he can still read some Gaelic signage and proceeded to write his name in Gaelic very proficiently. Given that he is in his 80s, we can surmise that the effect of Gaelic in his early life has not vanished and that his use of Sign Language co-existed with his passive understanding of written Gaelic. Mr. M told us of the life of the island community and how the religious differences between residents were simply that, differences. He told the story of the dominant faith being Roman Catholic with many parishes who banded together to help the single Protestant parish on the island raise money for their building repairs by selling sheep. He also described other families living on the island including one family of Deaf people who all used BSL and Gaelic with only one of them still surviving. Unfortunately she was not available for interview due to health problems.



## Inverness

With the help of Helen Farrelly and Rita's knowledge of the Deaf community we were able to set up a meeting with 3 people who use BSL and were born on islands: KM, KS and SG. We had initially arranged to meet only with KM but she had been so interested in the idea of the discussion that she had reached out to two others to join her and so we found three people awaiting our arrival. We met in the foyer of the Royal Highland Hotel in Inverness in the hope that it would be a neutral and comfortable place to meet rather than a room in a more institutionalised location associated with the Deaf community. I would like to note here that, despite being informed of her father's passing in the moments before this meeting took place, Rita chose to continue with the research. Her stoic professionalism and respect for the group who had given up their time to meet us was above and beyond what

any of us expected of her. I was very moved by that and am very grateful to her.

The group consisted of KS (male) who was born and raised on Lewis in Ness at the north of the island, KM (female), also born on Lewis but in Stornoway and SG (female) who came from Harris. The two participants from Lewis had left the island around the age of 4 to be placed in residential education for Deaf children in Edinburgh while the lady from Harris relocated with her family abroad at the age of 4 and a half until she was 10 when was placed in residential education for Deaf children in Glasgow.

Very soon into the discussion we began to see language emerge that would be extremely useful for the translation and this will be detailed in the later section on our findings. There were lexical items which were markedly different from vocabulary used in Glasgow but it was the manner in which the language was produced that was most interesting. Despite being at school in the central belt for many years, they all retained a certain softness of production, a highland or island accent that is softer and more measured than the accent of BSL users from the centre of Scotland.

SG, unlike KM and KS, was not the only BSL user in her family having a great aunt who was Deaf and who used both BSL and Gaelic. This great aunt passed on simple Gaelic words and phrases to SG who described happily switching between BSL with Gaelic mouth pattern and BSL with English mouth pattern depending on who she was communicating with.

As we talked, the group began to reminisce very fondly about their days in residential school but mainly about how happy they were when the time came to go back to the island for holidays. They described the ferry trip back for the summer break, with the wind in their hair, knowing the work they'd have to do on reaching the island. I mentioned to them that there had been an earlier respondent from another island who had talked about feeling bored during such extended times on the island but this group did not identify with that sentiment instead declaring that there was no time to be bored because of the amount of work that every man, woman and child had to do in order to maintain island life. There followed a highly entertaining description of peat gathering, with BSL vocabulary neither Rita nor I had seen before, complete with descriptions of how the men would lie back in the sunshine smoking their pipes while the women did the backbreaking work. KS talked about the Guga

bird and collecting the eggs from the cliffside around Ness (or Nis in the original Gaelic which KS used alternately) while all three remembered vividly the weaving work that was done on the islands. Each had a slightly different vocabulary for talking about weaving with one using a sign that indicated the pattern of the threads (the product) and the other two using hands and feet to show the treadling action of the machine (the process).

The conversation moved on to how many other BSL users there were on the islands and they all remembered various families dotted in remote parts of the Western Isles, some of whom used a combination of Gaelic as a spoken language and a sign language that incorporated Gaelic lip pattern<sup>2</sup>. They told us there had been a particular family who kept one of the daughters at home and so she never learned English but continued all her life to use Gaelic lip pattern with sign language. They remembered that she lived on Scalpay Island and there was some uncertainty as to whether or not she may still be alive. The group told us of a woman, a Social Worker named Erica MacQueen, who made it her job to find Deaf people and organise the first gathering of BSL users in Stornoway. In an era that preceded the internet, mobile phone technology or even a landline phone, this meant physically driving to every house where she knew there to be a BSL user and telling them to come to Stornoway on a particular date. This was the first “Deaf Club” on the Western Islands and KM talked of the wonder of seeing so many Deaf people in one room. In one of those odd coincidences that seem only to happen in the Highlands of Scotland, a woman at the next table who had been sneaking furtive glances at us for some time, later approached the group and said hello. There was an immediate and emotional reaction to her and we were duly introduced to none other than Erica MacQueen herself. Despite having left the islands and lived in the central belt for nearly 20 years, she happened to be in Inverness attending a function when she noticed people using BSL and recognised all three of those sitting with us. It was clear that both parties held each other in high regard still after so many years and was an emotional reunion to witness. It has stayed as my lasting memory of a positive and productive meeting.

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<sup>2</sup> Lip pattern in BSL is not always the English word silently mouthed but has a complex role to play in the language. These examples are relating to signs that could normally use the English mouthing but it is here replaced by the Gaelic vocabulary equivalent.

## Findings

Whilst the first meeting with the respondent from Orkney yielded no direct support for the performance material, it was still very interesting to have a perspective on island life. The other two discussions, between Mr. M and the three participants who met with us in Inverness were much more fruitful and contributed a great deal to the eventual translation that I was able to create. It was quickly confirmed that there was indeed no Gaelic Sign Language but we did find evidence of interaction between BSL and Gaelic and a hint that a larger piece of research could uncover much more that would be fascinating. All of the participants from Gaelic speaking backgrounds were able to name individuals and families who were known on the islands as being Gaelic and BSL users who didn't go to mainland or even local school. Some of these people were from families of many generations of BSL users and therefore had an unbroken line of heritage language being passed down to them. There were suggestions that some of these people were still alive although much older now and living in quite remote geographical locations.

From the discussions we also found that whilst Gaelic had been a feature of the home lives of the islanders, where Deaf children were concerned they were not routinely taught the language. This may seem odd given that the children would have been part of home and family life at least until they were sent to residential schooling but it is no different from much of the anecdotal evidence we hear from BSL users regarding their experience with the English language. For many families, particularly in the past, it seemed too difficult or inappropriate to attempt to teach English to Deaf children and so the children became adept at lip reading where they could, inferring cues from body language or repetitive behaviour and developed acute social skills for interacting with non-Deaf people. If there were no other BSL users in the family then language learning only really began when these children arrived in a residential school for Deaf children. The same applies here to the children raised in Gaelic speaking families except that each of them could remember something from those early days for example counting in Gaelic, the months of the year or the days of the week or how to write their name in Gaelic. Where there was another BSL user, something quite interesting happened. As mentioned previously, an older BSL using aunt was able to pass on both sign language and Gaelic to her young niece in a way that allowed her to use the two languages in parallel. It may not have been a complete or complex

understanding of Gaelic but the concept of the language, the mouth patterns associated with it were used in conjunction with BSL quite comfortably and still remembered after many years. The example she gave us was of asking for a cup of tea using the sign commonly used in BSL but with the Gaelic lip pattern rather than the English.



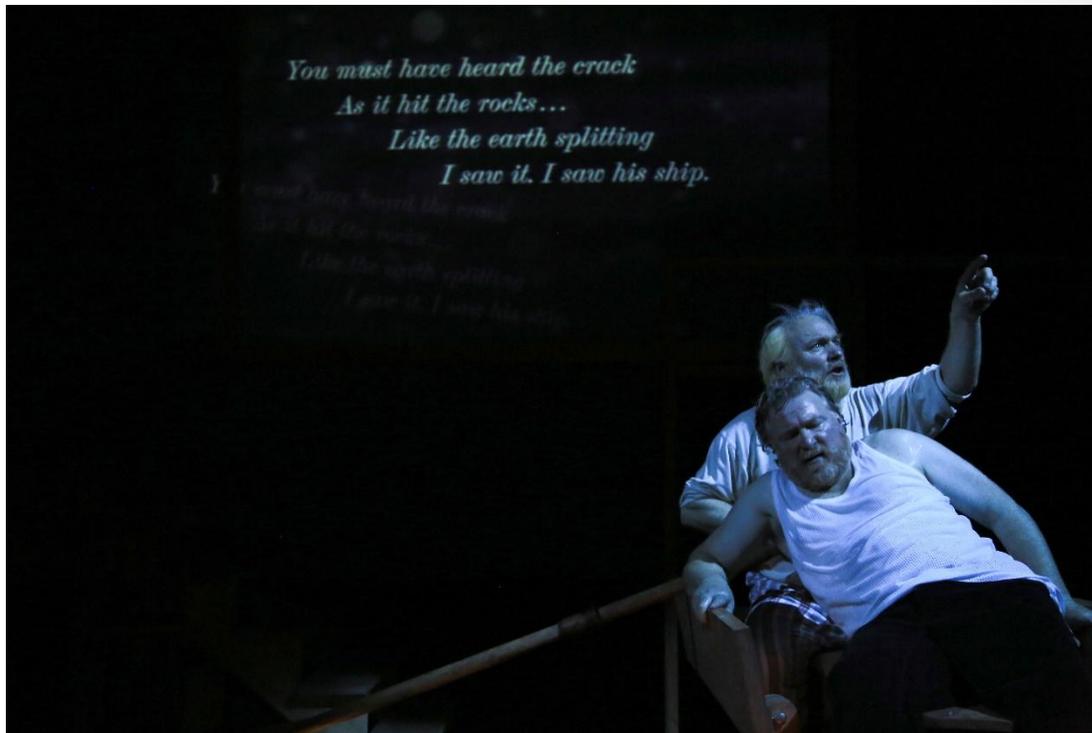
## Language gathered

We noted a number of pieces of vocabulary in our discussions that were markedly different from the way the same concept is expressed in other parts of Scotland. We cannot say that they constitute evidence of Gaelic in BSL but they are certainly evidence of dialect features specific to the Western Isles and it would be interesting to try to collect more of these before they are lost to us completely. One very simple example is how to talk about an Island. Coming from the central belt I have learned to use the sign made by the forefinger and the thumb pinching together, the palm facing to the left and the hand and lower arm moving in a small anti-clockwise circle. Those from the islands use an entirely different sign that shows the land mass of the island rather than the size with the hand held palm down, the fingers loosely crooked and the arm moving the hand in small anti-clockwise circles. Using my sign in the play would have marked me as having a Glasgow accent and changed the way the audience understood the characters. By being able to use the islander's own sign instead I was able to offer a flavour of the accent and dialect of the islands.

In terms of vocabulary we saw an island specific way of talking about Stornoway (S-T-Y as opposed to S-T-W that we had presumed), Lewis, Gaelic, the act of gathering peat and the name MacLeod. All of these were extremely useful but given that the character of the father in the play is from Lewis and he names his son Louis it was a great gift to be able to see how Lewis islanders themselves talk about their island in BSL. Whilst some of the vocabulary was not needed for the play, I felt that by having it I had almost created a sort of back story for myself as a performer, an understanding of the kind of language used on the island. For some of these, particularly the gathering of the peat, it allowed us a brief window into a way of life that was quite foreign to us as lowlanders.

Since the name McLeod was an important one for the play I had been hoping that it would come up in our discussion. It didn't, unfortunately, and we wrapped up the interviews by going for a quick lunch before catching our train home. In the last few minutes, as we were paying our bill, one of the participants began talking about some people he'd grown up with on Lewis and used a sign for the name McLeod which was different to the way I had been rehearsing it. For me, the important letters in the name were M-C-L but for him (and we checked with the other two participants as well) it was more

important to have the M-A-C-D as that was how the name was used on the islands. It was a small point but, for the play and me, it was a great gift as the final lines of the climactic scene in the second act end with the lines “Ise mise lain MacLeod” (My name is Iain MacLeod). Having this little detail meant that, when the play toured the highlands and islands, my recorded translation of it offered more authentic language use than my own Glasgow accent, an echo of island language that hopefully carried with it something of the emotion of the piece and island itself.



One final thought on the language we collected is that the accent of the islands became very apparent to us over the course of the final discussion in Inverness. All three of the participants still retained traces of a language production quality that came from the islands and, as they reminisced, the accent became more pronounced. Despite all three having left the islands for mainland residential school at a young age, returning only at the end of term for holidays each year, there was a softness in the way they produced language that echoed the lilt and skirl of an island accent. For me as someone who can hear and has an auditory memory of that accent it was at

times overwhelming to see that made concrete in the hands of our participants.

### **Conclusion and other thoughts**

Taking the time to do this piece of research meant that the translation I finally produced was based on my understanding of the language use of those who are sign language users and come from the Western Isles of Scotland. To have tackled the interpretation and the translation without these discussions would have created a BSL text that was riddled with anachronisms, geographically rooted in Glasgow and, I believe, would have held little emotional connection for audiences in the Highlands and Islands. Instead I was able to work through the Gaelic text and tie my translation to pieces of language that were shared by our participants. After much thought I decided to use Irish Sign Language as the basis for the translation of the Gaelic text in order to honour our participant from Barra whilst being mindful to remove any vocabulary that could potentially touch on the sectarian issues still associated with it. In their place I was able to use some of the language collected throughout these discussions as well as attempt to recreate the musicality of the language production and the accent of the islanders we talked with. Other lexical items and concepts were borrowed from Nordic Sign Languages in order to keep within the etymology of Gaelic. As an additional thought, feedback from the audience in Inverness has been really helpful. If doing something like this again I would work to ensure that the audience are aware a foreign text will be used as many of them simply presumed initially that they could not understand the translation through their own fault.

Although this piece of research was entirely pragmatic and focused on concrete results that would support a specific piece of work it is worth recording here that it generated a lot of interest wherever we discussed it. In particular the participants in Inverness became very eager to return to the islands and find the people they were talking about, to film as many of their community as possible and keep for posterity the language and memories of this unique culture. It was moving and exciting to see how motivated they were by this thought and we left them that day planning funding applications and the practicalities of shooting video on a ferry. In the opinion of the

researchers, it would be a profoundly beneficial exercise to the Deaf community as well as the Gaelic community in Scotland if this piece of work was supported.

Finally, the interest in our research was not only evident in Scotland but in Ireland too. On a visit to Dublin around the same time as the interviews both Rita and I discussed the research with some academics from Trinity College Dublin who were fascinated by the notion. There is a lot of interest in their country around researching and capturing the memories and language of the communities from the Gaeltacht<sup>3</sup> so it made sense to these academics to extend that to ISL users. Around the table the ISL users who were from the Gaeltacht explained that they had been sent to residential school in Dublin at similar ages to our participants so the parallels are already there. If our participants were able to remember Gaelic from their childhoods and retained a particular linguistic production style that marked their accent as being from the Islands it may well be that the same is true for the Irish Deaf Gaeltacht community. It would be a very meaningful exercise to continue to explore the myriad communities that exist inside the seemingly homogenous Deaf Community, recording and valuing all the voices therein.

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<sup>3</sup> Any of the regions in Ireland in which Irish Gaelic is the vernacular speech.

**Picture Credits- Vicktoria Begg**

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