



Defining a Speech Community: Language and Identity among Gaelic Speakers on the Isle of Skye, Scotland

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This paper takes an integrated sociolinguistic and ethnographic approach to examining identity and its relation to language in a language shift situation. Scottish Gaelic, one of the six Celtic languages, has long been in decline, and this study looks at language shift in progress through three-generations of a Gaelic-speaking family located on the Isle of Skye, Scotland.

This paper aims to examine some of the key questions in sociolinguistics, such as 'How is a speech community defined?' This question is especially pertinent in a language shift situation because of the variable levels of language proficiency and attitudes that may exist in one community, thereby challenging definitions of speech communities, such as Labov's (1972) conception of a speech community as a group of speakers who have the same shared value towards a language or language variety. For example, Schmidt (1991) found that speakers of an Aboriginal language called Dyirbal tended to assert themselves as Dyirbal speakers, despite lack of proficiency and language use; their conception of a speech community was based primarily on ethnic/familial affiliations rather than actual linguistic competence. This paper therefore examines how this microcosm of Gaelic speakers identifies their speech community and how this in turn shapes their language use and attitudes towards language use. It also looks at the correlation between language and identity in terms of how speakers negotiate their identity through language use and how identity plays a role in language maintenance.

References:

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