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Article abstract

In this article, the author considers the effects of language attitudes, a sociolinguistic concern, on musical practice. This article assumes that language and music attitudes are related as different expressions in and of a common cultural context. The author demonstrates how Scots Gaelic language attitudes in Cape Breton (where a few hundred people still speak the language) have developed, and considers the possible interplay with current attitudes towards two particular Gaelic song genres. Gaelic language learners and native/fluent speakers in Cape Breton articulated distinct and opposing attitudes towards the song genre of *puirt-a-beul* [mouth music], and these attitudes are examined in relation to those towards the Gaelic language and compared with their response to eight-line songs, a literary Gaelic song type. Detailed musical and lyric analyses of three Gaelic songs are provided to illustrate the connection between language and music attitudes. The current attitude towards Gaelic in Cape Breton is traced through the history of language policy in Scotland and Cape Breton. These sociolinguistic and musicological analyses are supplemented with ethnographic evidence.

“MUSIC IS LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE IS MUSIC”

Language Attitudes and Musical Choices in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia

Heather Sparling

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“Language is music and music is language” is a phrase attributed to the widely respected Cape Breton Gaelic tradition bearer, Joe Neil MacNeil. The interconnectedness between language and music is a trope that has run throughout my research into Gaelic songs of Cape Breton. Many of my consultants expressed similar feelings:

When the language and everything, all the connections, are gone or not understood, then the music is just going to be a fad and it’s going to lose its attraction (Cape Breton fiddler).

The language... is certainly the warp and woof of any culture, as far as I’m concerned. It’s the backbone of it. The other things derive from that (native Cape Breton Gaelic speaker and singer).

Gaelic culture is “based on a language that people speak and communicate with... and from that comes its literature which is communicated through song” (Cape Breton Gaelic learner and cultural activist).

I think that if the language dies, the songs will die. Nobody even knows what Roman folk melodies were like because it’s a dead language. If Gaelic becomes a dead language, the songs will die. [Recordings] will be museum pieces in the archives and the music library. People will move on to other things (fluent Gaelic speaker and teacher).

Clearly, the assumption that language and music are connected is not just an academic one, but one made by people within Cape Breton Gaelic culture as well. Each of these consultants said that the language is necessary for the music to survive, indicating the direct and proportional relationship between the two.

My early graduate research in ethnomusicology centred on a particular Gaelic song type, *puirt-a-beul* [mouth music].¹ *Puirt-a-beul* were once used to accompany dancing in the absence of instruments (the history and usage of *puirt-a-beul* is complex and debatable; it is discussed in further detail below). They tend to be short and upbeat with humorous or nonsensical lyrics. I was drawn to them as a dancer and as a learner of the language. They appear to be numerous, prominent and popular, so I was taken aback when one of my first consultants expressed strong disdain for them:

A lot of [Gaelic-speakers] know them. They think of them as rhymes, they think of them as funny. They'll talk about them, they'll laugh about them, but if you're at a house party, you won't have someone sing that when it comes around to their turn just because in terms of the stepping order of songs, they just don't rank for a native speaker. Maybe they know a whole bunch of them. It's just not regarded as high on the list... As they say, "it's just a tune, it's not a song." There's a real distinction between a tune and a song. The Gaelic isn't as interesting. It's just a tune. That's the way they'd describe [them]: "it's just a tune. Why would you sing a tune when you don't have to sing tunes?" It's really hard to explain. As I said to you, if you could sing a beautiful eight-line song or a tune, of course you would pick the eight-line song.

This particular consultant is an advanced, if not fluent, Gaelic speaker and has spent considerable time in Cape Breton learning Gaelic songs from native speakers. Others echoed her sentiments. When one native Cape Bretoner and fluent Gaelic-speaker heard that I was studying *puirt-a-beul*, he told me to "get some real songs!" A local Gaelic teacher warned me that I wouldn't find many people willing to speak about *puirt-a-beul*; he himself had heard one Gaelic-speaker say, "The worst thing they ever did was put words to them tunes!" And yet I heard *puirt-a-beul* everywhere: on concert stages, on recordings, on the radio, in workshops, and in the language classroom. Obviously there

1. Pronounced "poorsht-uh-BEE-uhl". *Puirt-a-beul* is the plural form and literally translates as "tunes from the mouth." *Port-a-beul* is the singular term.

were people who enjoyed them enough to teach, learn, and perform them. As I conducted interviews with a range of consultants — fiddlers, singers, dancers, Gaelic learners and native speakers — it became clear to me that the difference in attitudes is significantly attributable to linguistic rather than musical aspects of *puirt-a-beul*.

Linguistic theory is nothing new in musicology. Semiotics, for example, has long been a fruitful venue of inquiry. In the same way that linguistics analyzes the written or spoken text, musicology analyzes the musical score. Sociolinguistic theory, on the other hand, has been less apparent in musical studies and approaches. This is surprising given that sociolinguists study language in its cultural context just as ethnomusicologists consider music in *its* cultural context. Since both ethnomusicologists and sociolinguists argue that music and speech, respectively, are affected by their social circumstances, it is logical to assume that, when they occur within the same cultural context, they may be directly related to and affect one another. Songs, in which language and music are intimately linked, offer an ideal opportunity to study this connection.

Sociolinguists have already acknowledged the interplay between language and culture:

A major portion of every culture is *necessarily* linguistic (viz. prayers, laws, folklore, education and the daily rounds of constant verbal interaction...). At home, at work, in government, at prayer, in the shops and at play, language is part and parcel of the texture of human social life itself, thereby further fostering both the frequency and the intensity of the language and culture link (Fishman 1997: 3).

Fishman's list could (and should) also include song, although this notable absence demonstrates that sociolinguists have been as slow to consider the relationship between music and language as ethnomusicologists. Edwards (1985) suggests that sociolinguistics would be better served if combined with the work of neighbouring disciplines, such as music. Hoffman argues that "the investigation of [sociolinguistics] is necessarily interdisciplinary, i.e. two or more social sciences must contribute towards the elucidation of particular issues from various angles" (1991: 245).

In this paper, I consider the effects of language attitudes, a sociolinguistic concern, on musical practice. In particular, I will demonstrate how Gaelic language attitudes in Cape Breton have

developed and consider the possible interplay with current attitudes towards *puirt-a-beul* and other Gaelic song types. The current attitude towards Gaelic in Cape Breton has been shaped both by the history of the language in Scotland and Cape Breton, and by the current social and political circumstances of Gaelic in Cape Breton, all of which must be discussed before I provide a close examination of several Gaelic songs, relating them to Gaelic language attitudes.

History of Gaelic in Scotland

The majority of today's Cape Breton Gaels are descendents of Scottish immigrants, who arrived in Cape Breton in increasing numbers through the late 1700s, peaking in the 1800s. John Lorne Campbell, a respected Gaelic scholar, estimated by means of an informal census that there were 30,000 Gaelic speakers in Cape Breton in 1934 and Jonathan G. MacKinnon, editor of the Cape Breton Gaelic newspaper, *MacTalla*, estimated that there were actually 35,000 to 40,000 (Kelly 1980: 20). Today, fewer than 500 native Gaelic speakers are believed to remain on the island.

The low status of Gaelic and resultant negative attitudes have developed over centuries, arguably since the last native Gaelic-speaking king of Scotland, Michael Canmore (1059-1093). Subsequent historical events, such as the demise of the Lordship of the Isles (1545), the accession of James VI of Scotland as James I of England (1603), the Statutes of Iona (1609), the Act of Union (1707), and the Battle of Culloden (1746) all served to weaken Gaelic. Gaelic not only ceased to be the dominant language of the Highlands and Islands but also ceased to be socially acceptable: "It had come to be looked on as the language of a wild, even savage, people: the Highlanders" (Dorian 1981: 16). The major obstacle preventing the "civilizing" of the Gaels by Lowlanders and the English was believed to be their language.

The English equated the Highlanders with the Gaelic language and therefore sought to neutralize their threat by eliminating their language. Education was key:

From 1709, the year of its founding, the Society in Scotland for the Propagating of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK), operating under a crown patent, had as one of its major goals the teaching of English to those who did not speak English. Until 1766 the use of Gaelic was forbidden in the Society's schools, their goal being to "root out the Irish language," as Scots Gaelic was referred to in those days. Only in

1766 was Gaelic allowed into use but even then only so that the process of learning English could be hurried up. In the next century when the Education Act (Scotland) of 1872 extended free primary education to Scotland, it did nothing to encourage the preservation of Gaelic beyond allowing for some use of the language in the teaching of religion (Wardhaugh 1987: 88).

Increasingly, Gaels had to be bilingual. Their children were often raised to speak only English. As a result, the 1981 census indicates that there were only 79,000 Gaelic-speakers in Scotland, all of whom also spoke English (Wardhaugh 1987: 88). The number dropped to just over 58,000 twenty years later, a mere 1.16% of the total Scottish population, according to the 2001 census.

The infamous Clearances began in earnest during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, drastically reducing the Highland population through emigration and hastening the decline of Gaelic by dispersing Gaelic-speakers throughout the country and overseas — a significant number settling in Cape Breton — leaving the Gaelic-speaking areas depleted and reinforcing the need for English fluency.

Sociolinguistic Theory: Gaelic Language Attitudes in Cape Breton

In order to make a cogent argument for connecting language and music attitudes and because the issue is fundamental to Cape Breton Gaels, it is worth briefly reviewing the development of Gaelic language attitudes in Cape Breton. The relationship between language and music in Gaelic Cape Breton is reciprocal. A loss of the language means fewer people available to understand, learn, and sing Gaelic songs. Changes to musical practices affect how language is maintained, for Gaelic language classes almost always use Gaelic songs to introduce and reinforce vocabulary and grammar, as well as to place the language within its broader context.

Gaelic immigrants to Cape Breton brought their language attitudes with them and although there were no deliberate, direct efforts to eliminate Gaelic in Canada as there had been in Scotland, the language continued to be marginalized.² Gaelic decline has been well documented

2. At one time, there were numerous Gaelic-speaking communities throughout Canada, including Alberta, Ontario, Québec, Newfoundland and mainland Nova Scotia. As far as I know, there are no longer any native Gaelic speakers, other than recent immigrants from Scotland, anywhere outside Cape Breton.

in both Scotland (Dorian 1981; Wardhaugh 1987) and Cape Breton (Kelly 1980; Mertz 1982). Despite the stigma attached to Gaelic, Cape Breton Gaels believe that Gaelic language maintenance is essential for the preservation of their culture as a whole, as indicated by the consultant comments at the beginning of this essay. Twentieth century revival efforts have tempered negative attitudes and resulted in a new, more positive outlook on the Gaelic language, which is discussed later.

Sociolinguists Appel and Muysken (1987: 33) studied the relationship between a culture's economic vitality and its ability to maintain a minority language. High unemployment and a poor economy in Cape Breton (Donovan 1990: 19) have contributed to a cultural sense of low self-worth and encouraged language shift towards the dominant language. There is little sense of a Gaelic "core" given the rural nature of Gaelic Cape Breton and the dispersal of Gaels to urban centres, other provinces, and to the United-States in search of employment.³

The movement of sections of the rural population into towns and cities, linked with the improvement in transport and communication systems, contributes to the dispersal of linguistic communities and brings them into increased contact with the high-prestige language or other linguistic groups. The lack of a linguistic heartland greatly weakens the survival of a low-status language in a bilingual community, as life in modern urban societies favours monolingualism, i.e. the use of the high-status language only (Hoffmann 1991: 190).

Several sociolinguists suggest that diasporic ties with a homeland help strengthen a minority language (see Appel and Muysken 1987; Giles, Bourhis, et al. 1977). However, Cape Breton's ties with Scotland, where Gaelic has no official status either, have been minimal until relatively recently. The extent of exogamy is considerable as many Cape Breton Gaels who went in search of work elsewhere returned to Cape Breton after having married English-speaking spouses.⁴

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3. Documentation of the shift from Gaelic to English due to economic pressures and geographic dispersal is depicted in numerous songs. A good example is "An Té a Chaill a Gàidhlig" [The Woman Who Lost Her Gaelic] (Creighton and MacLeod 1964).
 4. In "mixed" linguistic marriages, "the most prestigious language generally has the best chance to survive as the language of the home, and hence as the first language of the child" (Appel and Muysken 1987: 35). In Cape Breton, "mixed" linguistic marriages tended to occur between bilingual Gaelic speakers and monoglot English speakers, encouraging the predominant use of English in the home.

Institutional support, such as mass media, religion and education, not only provides the services and resources needed to maintain a minority culture, but also indicates that a minority culture is worth sustaining (Appel and Muysken 1987; Giles, Bourhis, et al. 1977). Unfortunately, there is no Cape Breton Gaelic television programming, minimal radio programming and only very recent access to the Internet. Although the church plays a significant role in the culture and Gaelic services were once the norm, they are now a rarity.

While sociolinguists have found that the prestige of a language is significantly enhanced once it is the medium of education, Gaelic has never been the medium of education in Cape Breton. Elizabeth Mertz, whose Ph.D. dissertation focuses on metapragmatics⁵ in Cape Breton, explains:

A vital metapragmatic belief about language learning [is that]... Gaelic-speaking is an obstacle to the learning of correct English, and to the opportunity for advancement through education in general... an attitude toward Gaelic which teachers brought with them into the rural communities of Cape Breton. This was an important source for the metapragmatic theory still commonly held in Cape Breton that one cannot speak Gaelic *and* English correctly. The message of educators was already clear in the nineteenth century. Despite the fact that Gaelic could legally have been used as the classroom language, increasing contact with the school system brought Cape Bretoners the message that Gaelic was not the language of "educated people," nor of mainstream Nova Scotian society (Mertz 1982: 69).

The emphasis on English in the curriculum was exacerbated by the fact that Gaelic-speaking children were generally educated alongside English-speaking children.

Sociolinguist Nancy Dorian notes, "Minority groups are known all too often and easily to adopt majority attitudes toward themselves, even when these are hostile, in the absence of countervailing forces" (Dorian 1981: 28-29). One native Cape Breton Gaelic speaker commented, "What advantage is there to learning Gaelic now? It's no help to you, if you're out looking for a job. It holds you back, I think." His English-speaking wife did not want their children to learn Gaelic: "For the ordinary person, if you put that on your resume, 'I have Gaelic,'

5. "Pragmatics" is the study of language in use. "Metapragmatics" is the study of speech about speech, or what people say about their language use.

do you think that's going to get you a job? They're going to laugh. 'What's that?' they're going to say." Not only have negative attitudes been passed on to subsequent generations of Cape Breton Gaels, but the language itself has stopped being transmitted: "Many Gaels did not wish their children to waste time on the language. They wished them to learn English well so that they could succeed in the world" (Dunn 1991 [1953]: 146).

Cape Breton Gaelic Cultural Revival

Where once outsiders dismissed Gaels as primitive or barbaric, many now actively seek out their culture. Tourism has become a significant industry in Cape Breton. During the summer of 1998 alone, I attended Gaelic concerts, cultural festivals, workshops, musical competitions, *ceilidhs*, square dances, and bilingual church services, in addition to taking language and song lessons. The reasons for the shift in the external perception of Gaelic culture and concomitant shift towards a more positive appraisal of the Gaelic language by Cape Bretoners themselves are many and complex. However, Ian McKay argues convincingly that *antimodernism* has played an important role in the recent idealization of Gaelic culture (1994).

It is not that tourists no longer believe Gaelic culture to be primitive, but that the "primitive" nature of Gaelic culture is now an indication of life lived simply, naturally and without affectation (McKay 1994: xvi). Antimodernism is "an intensely individualistic thirst for an existence released from the iron cage of modernity into a world re-enchanted by history, nature and the mysterious" (McKay 1994: xv). It is part and parcel of Herder's Romantic conception of folk peoples and cultures: "'The Folk' came to be regarded as the epitome of simple truth, work, and virtue, the antithesis of all that was overcivilized, tired, conventional, and insincere. The Folk were closer to nature ('wild' and 'lacking social organization,' according to Herder) and could respond more spontaneously to 'natural music'" (McKay 1994: 12).

Unfortunately, although tourist interest has helped to alter notions of Gaelic as a "barbaric" language to one that is quaint and desirable, it has not really resulted in any substantial or official (i.e., government) efforts to support, maintain, or revive Gaelic culture. The antimodernist appeal of Gaelic in tourist literature has required it to be portrayed as an "ancient" language rather than as progressive and vital, suggesting

“an anti-modernist romantic fatalism” (McKay 1992: 37). Cape Bretoners are not oblivious to the possible ramifications of antimodernism: “If we are going to salvage from neglect’s ravages any semblance of a Gaelic culture here in Cape Breton what we need is education, not promotion. We don’t need any more awareness, camera crews or fiddles on brochures; we need honest-to-goodness resource and skills development” (MacEachen 1997).

However, whatever the potential dangers of antimodernism, the increased interest in Gaelic culture has resulted in its reclamation by Cape Breton Gaels. One man, whose parents were native Gaelic speakers who spoke only English to him, learned Gaelic as an adult and explained,

If you could speak Gaelic, you’re just part of — I don’t know if I can explain it. It’s like knowing any other language. But, of course, this belongs to us. It’s the language we’ve had for, I don’t know, a couple of thousand years, I suppose. So it’s just part of me. I’m just not complete without it.

But while the general attitude towards Gaelic language and culture has shifted from negative to positive, it is still heavily stereotyped and both remain at the mercy of outsiders, such as tourists and governments. Despite the encouraging attitude change, Gaelic language and culture are both still threatened, which has resulted in particular attitudes vis-à-vis the Gaelic song tradition.

Music Attitudes

As already mentioned, my research has focused on *puirt-a-beul* or “mouth music,” one of many Gaelic song genres heard in Cape Breton. My understanding of Cape Breton Gaelic culture is the result of living in Iona, a central community and stronghold of Gaelic singing, for three months in 1998, followed by briefer annual visits. I was fortunate to be invited to live with a well-respected native Gaelic speaker and singer whom I had been advised to interview by several people. He was in high demand as a singer; I attended numerous events and *cèilidhean*⁶ with him, and we spent many evenings playing Gaelic song airs on the fiddle and flute together. In addition, I interviewed more than twenty people in Cape Breton who ranged from singers to fiddlers, from learners to fluent and native speakers, from old to young, and I discussed many

6. *Cèilidh* (pl. *cèilidhean*): neighbourly visit.

of my insights and theories with my friend and his wife in order to elicit their feedback. I have described my theory to my friends and consultants in Cape Breton that language and music attitudes are related and while most people had not considered the connection before, they accepted my theory as logical and plausible.

Puirt-a-beul seemed to generate strong and varied responses from my consultants, ranging from total enjoyment to complete dislike. Other song genres, however, did not engender such heated debate. It became clear to me that attitudes towards *puirt-a-beul* corresponded to Gaelic language knowledge and fluency. Native and fluent Gaelic language speakers tended to be most dismissive of *puirt-a-beul* whereas Gaelic learners seemed to enjoy them the most. Given that musical attitudes are related to language competency, then song lyrics, as the overtly linguistic aspect of music, provide a logical starting point for assessing possible connections.

Gaelic literature consists of poetry that is almost invariably sung. Different types of poetry are found in different types of songs. Earlier, I quoted a consultant who differentiated between *puirt-a-beul* and other song genres. She argued that native Gaelic speakers consider *puirt-a-beul* as merely “tunes” rather than songs, and therefore are “not regarded as high on the list [of Gaelic songs].” She described a hierarchy of song genres based on the language contained in their lyrics: “the Gaelic isn’t as interesting [in *puirt-a-beul*].” Finally, she made an explicit comparison between two song types: “if you could sing a beautiful eight-line song or a tune, of course you would pick the eight-line song.” A detailed examination of two *puirt-a-beul* and an eight-line song will illustrate the lyric and musical differences between the two genres.

Puirt-a-beul

The origins of *puirt-a-beul* are unknown, although one popular theory is that they were created in response to the proscription of the bagpipes after the Battle of Culloden (1746).⁷ According to this theory, singing replaced the bagpipes as dance accompaniment. A similar theory suggests that *puirt-a-beul* originated in the nineteenth century when Presbyterian ministers spoke out against secular music and dance and

7. John Gibson (1998) produces evidence that the bagpipes were not, in fact, officially proscribed, although the idea remains popular and current.

encouraged parishioners to burn their fiddles (Dunn 1991 [1953]: 54; MacLeod 1996: 221; Sparling 2000: 222). However, while *puirt-a-beul* are almost invariably defined as vocal dance music in the absence of instruments, they are, in fact, rarely used for such purposes today. The reality is that there is no shortage of instrumentalists available for dance accompaniment, particularly fiddlers. *Puirt-a-beul*, when used as dance accompaniment, are most likely to be performed as an historical “re-enactment” of traditional culture, as a concert “show-stopper,” and only regularly and in its traditional sense by a very few exceptional individuals.

In addition to having been dance accompaniment, *puirt-a-beul* have also been used to transmit fiddle tunes orally (Doherty 1996: 177; Dunn 1991: 16; Garrison 1985: 185; Shaw 1992/3: 44). In fact, there are those who would argue that Cape Breton fiddling cannot be executed properly without a familiarity with the *puirt-a-beul* lyrics associated with the tunes (see Shaw 1992/3). However, it would seem that fewer current fiddlers are Gaelic-speakers and most now deny having learned any tunes from *puirt-a-beul* (Garrison 1985: 234, 235; Doherty 1996: 176; Sparling 2000: 258). This is likely due both to increased musical literacy amongst Cape Breton musicians and a decline in the number of Gaelic language speakers.

It would also seem that *puirt-a-beul* were once frequently heard in the domestic sphere. Apparently, women would sing them to accompany chores or to teach their children to dance. However, few of the native Gaelic speakers with whom I spoke remembered hearing much *puirt-a-beul* in their youths (Sparling 2000: 263).

And yet *puirt-a-beul* remain very popular in Cape Breton and are heard in a myriad of contexts: concert stages, classrooms, singing competitions, milling frolics,⁸ radio and recordings. They are sung by individuals, duos and trios, and choirs. Their continued popularity and musical flexibility can likely be attributed to their musical characteristics. With their origins in dance accompaniment, they are fast with a driving rhythm. When used as dance accompaniment, it would be essential for

8. Milling frolics are known as waulkings in Scotland. Participants shrank woven wool to make it warmer and more waterproof. They accompanied the pounding of the wool with singing. Although there is no longer any practical need to mill cloth, milling frolics are still held as social opportunities to speak and sing in Gaelic.

the singer to maintain the beat so that the dancer's steps and timing were not compromised. This is not easily accomplished, however, since *puirt-a-beul* lyrics tend to be "dense" in the sense that there are usually multiple syllables sung on each beat and that they are sung quickly. Moreover, note durations are not often longer at phrase ends, which would enable the singer to grab a breath before starting the next line. Instead, they are often eighth notes or even sixteenth notes, providing impetus into the subsequent phrase. As a result, *puirt-a-beul* are technically challenging due to the difficulty in finding time and place to breathe and because the speed at which the words must be articulated makes them tongue-twisters. Given that *puirt-a-beul* are now less likely to be used as dance accompaniment, one might expect singers to modify the tempo, drop the occasional beat to catch a breath, or otherwise modify singing techniques, and yet the traditional characteristics are upheld by singers and their audiences. Consequently, they are exciting to listen to and to see performed.

They are also quite short, usually consisting of no more than three verses and a chorus. They are therefore ideal for capturing and maintaining an audience's attention, adding variety to a programme of other Gaelic songs (most of which are performed at a much slower pace, as will be discussed shortly). Thus, they are frequently heard on the concert stage and they are almost invariably included on commercial Gaelic song recordings. For example, Ashley MacIsaac's hit, "Sleepy Maggie" (1995), includes Mary Jane Lamond singing *puirt-a-beul*, while Mary Jane released "The Stepping Song," a *port-a-beul*, as the first single from her album, *Suas e!* (1997). *Puirt-a-beul* are attractive to non-Gaelic speakers because their musical characteristics are so striking, they are not overly long, and because the lyrics are of secondary importance.

They are useful for Gaelic learners as well. First, many learners come to the language as a consequence of hearing Gaelic songs, particularly *puirt-a-beul*. Second, their brief, simple, repetitive lyrics are ideal for learners. They are relatively easy to memorize, their speed exercises enunciation, their simplicity facilitates the learning of new vocabulary and grammar, and their rhythm makes them fun to sing. Moreover, because they are generally of a humorous, satirical or even nonsensical nature, learners' mistakes add to the hilarity rather than coming across as more serious errors, as they might with other types of songs.

An examination of “Seallaibh Curraigh Eòghainn,” a popular *port-a-beul* on both sides of the Atlantic, will illustrate typical characteristics.⁹

<i>Seallaibh curraigh Eòghainn</i>	Look at Owen’s coracle
<i>‘S còig ràimh fhichead oirre,</i>	There’s twenty-five oars on her
<i>Seallaibh curraigh Eòghainn</i>	Look at Owen’s coracle
<i>‘S i seachad air a’ Rubha Bhàn.</i>	She’s passing by White Point.

<i>Bidh Eòghann, bidh Eòghann,</i>	Owen will be, Owen will be
<i>Bidh Eòghann ‘na sgiobair oirre,</i>	Owen will be the skipper of her
<i>Bidh Eòghann, bidh Eòghann,</i>	Owen will be, Owen will be
<i>‘S i seachad air a’ Rubha Bhàn.</i>	She’s passing by White Point.

“Seallaibh Curraigh Eòghainn” is a fairly typical *port-a-beul*. First, it is quite short, consisting of only one verse and the chorus. Its overall musical structure is typical of dance music, whether instrumental or sung, in that each part (or “turn”) is repeated, and then the entire piece is repeated (i.e., AABB repeated). The melodic and lyric structure of the first section (A) is *abac* while the second (B) is *dedc*, so that the final phrase of A is repeated as the final phrase of B, uniting both turns and leading from B back to the repetition of A.

With a tempo of about 176-192 beats per minute, the song moves quickly.¹⁰ At such speed, it is difficult enough to grab a breath even where there is a quarter note at a phrase end, but there are few such places. Note that the majority of phrase endings involve shorter note values, making it almost impossible to snatch a breath without either losing the beat or omitting some of the words. Other quarter notes cannot be shortened in order to breathe because to do so would be to split words inappropriately.

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9. For a traditional field recording, consult *Music of the Western Isles* (Scottish Tradition Series vol. 2, Greentrax, 1992). For Cape Breton recordings in a popular idiom, consult Mary Jane Lamond’s *Làn Dùil* (Turtlemusik 1999) and The Barra MacNeils’ *The Question* (Polydor 1995). A sample from Lamond’s version can be found online at <http://www.maryjanelamond.com/audio/audio.html>. For Scottish recordings in the pop idiom, consult Mairi MacInnes’s *This Feeling Inside* (Greentrax 1995), Tannas’s *Suilean Dubh* (Lochshore 1999), and Talitha MacKenzie’s *Sólas* (Shanachie 1994).
10. The tempo of the field recording on *Music of the Western Isles* is about quarter note = 176, whereas Mary Jane Lamond’s version is about a quarter note = 192.

Oh 's Seallaibh curraigh Eoghainn 's coig raimh_ fhichead oirre,
 Seallaibh curraigh Eoghainn 'Si seachad air a' Rubha Bhan. (Bìdh)Eoghainn bìdh
 Eoghainn, bìdh Eoghainn 'na sgiobar oirre bìdh Eoghainn, bìdh Eoghainn, 'Si
 seachad air a' Rubha Bhan (Bìdh)

Musical transcription 1: “Seallaibh Curragh Eòghainn,”
 as on *Music from the Western Isles*

The lyrics are humorous in that they depict a coracle, or small, round boat, with twenty-five oars, a ridiculous number given the boat’s size. The combination of the repetition and clear-cut grammar makes the lyrics straightforward compared to the sophisticated techniques used in other, more literary songs, discussed below. Such humorous texts were often composed by laypeople — as opposed to a professional poet — who wished to tease a neighbour or make fun of a local event, which helps to explain the lyric simplicity. At the risk of providing an ethnocentric comparison, it might be helpful to consider the differences between English limericks and other forms of poetry when seeking to understand the difference between *puirt-a-beul* and other Gaelic song types.

Another example of *puirt-a-beul*, this time incorporating vocables, is “I bhì à da:”¹¹

I bhì à dà (Vocables)
U à idil à
I bhì à dà
Adar idir ù an

11. Recordings include Mouth Music’s *Mouth Music* (Rykodisc, 1993) and Anna Murray’s *Trì Nithean* (Lochshore, 1999). It is also published in the popular songbook, *Tog Fonn! Gaelic Songs and Dance Tunes*, volume 1 (Taigh na Teud, 1994). Note that only the first verse is sung on both recordings, but *Tog Fonn* includes two additional verses.

Cìamar a ruighleas mo nighean
 Dìthis anns a rathad oirre?
 Cìamar a ruighleas mo nighean
 'S ceathrar air an ùrlar?

[How will my daughter dance a reel
 With a couple in the road in front of her?
 How will my daughter dance a reel
 With a foursome on the floor?]

Musical transcription 2: “I Bhi A Da,” as on *Mouth Music*

This *port-a-beul* consists of a verse and chorus of vocables. Vocables are prevalent in many types of Gaelic songs and are invariably fixed, rather than improvised, as opposed to the widely held misconception that “mouth music” is something akin to scat singing and made up of improvised vocables alone (as with “diddling,” “jigging,” or “lilting”). The commonly held fallacy that mouth music is made up entirely of vocables may, however, arise from repetition and alliteration, which can have the net effect of vocables, rather than distinguishable words, particularly when sung up to tempo. It is this distinction between *puirt-a-beul* and other types of mouth music that makes *puirt-a-beul* so important and relevant to the theory of connected language and music attitudes. Their lyrics identify them as songs rather than simply or only as vocalized music.

Many consultants mentioned that native Gaelic speakers enjoy discussing songs as much as they enjoy singing them. Thus, at a *cèilidh*, native speakers will discuss the origins of a song, the composer, any associated story or narrative, the meaning of individual words (particularly if archaic), and the grammar employed:

Now, every song my mother knew, she knew why it was composed, and everything. There was a history behind the songs. Well, that was

better than the song in a way because she would tell you first why the song was composed, and then she would sing the song, you know, to compare with the history, you see (Allan MacArthur, consultant, in Bennett 1989: 146).

Whereas *puirt-a-beul* appear to be considered appropriate for other contexts, such as concerts, recordings, and classrooms, *puirt-a-beul* do not appear to be sung frequently at Cape Breton *cèilidhean* because their origins, composers, and referents are rarely known. Because *puirt-a-beul* lyrics tend to be parochial and composed by laypeople, they tend not to be remembered outside of their local context. *Puirt-a-beul* lyrics are rarely as interesting to discuss as those of other song types due to their repetition, basic grammar and vocabulary, and the fact that vocables are non-lexical and not bound by grammatical rules.

The single verse here refers to the act of dancing, which is, not surprisingly, a common *puirt-a-beul* theme. Although the overall structure is once again AABB, this time the A section is *abac* and the B section is *dede'*. The verse, while intelligible, is repetitive and does not employ any poetic techniques, such as metaphor, although an “r” alliteration is relatively prevalent. Rather than unfolding a story or description over several verses, the lyrics simply describe a situation. The lyrics are far less interesting in-and-of-themselves than the manner in which they embody the tune and rhythm.

Eight-Line Song

The consultant who argued that *puirt-a-beul* just aren't sung compared them to an eight-line song. An analysis of such a song reveals significant differences from *puirt-a-beul*. I have chosen to examine “Mo Mhaili Bheag Òg” for several reasons. As with “Seallaibh Curraigh Eòghainn” and “I bhì à da,” it originates from Scotland. However, it is also relatively well-known in Cape Breton as it can be found in Helen Creighton and C.I.N. MacLeod's popular book, *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*, and was recently recorded by Mary Jane Lamond (*Làn Dùil*, 1999).¹² Lamond sings four verses, and *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia* records an additional two. The first verse is as follows:

12. An excerpt can be heard on the same website as “Seallaibh Curraigh Eòghainn”: <http://www.maryjanelamond.com/audio/audio.html>.

Nach truagh leat mi 's mi'm prìosan,
 Mo Mhaili bheag òg!
 Do chàirdean a' cur binn orm,
 Mo chuid de'n t-saoghal thu;
 A bhean na mala mine,
 'S nam pògan mar na fìogais,
 Is tu nach fhàgadh shìos mi,
 Le mì-run do bheòil.

[Do you not pity me in prison
 My little, young Molly!
 Your friends are judging me,
 You, my whole world.
 O woman of the smooth eyebrows,
 And of kisses like figs,
 You would not degrade me
 With malice from your mouth.]

Nach truagh leat mi 's mi prìosan Mo Mhaili bheag òg Do chàirdean a' cur binn
 orm mo chuid dhe'n t-saoghal thu a bhean na mala mi - ne 's nam pògan mar na
 fìogais - Is tu nach fhagadh shìos mi Le mì-run do bheòil.

Musical transcription 3: “Mo Mhaili Bheag Og,” as on *Lan Duil*

Eight-line songs are unusual in that they do not have a chorus, whereas almost every other Gaelic song type and structure does. The lack of chorus apparently elevates a song’s status, largely because it indicates that the song must be listened to. Choruses invite musical participation, providing opportunities for everyone to join the soloist. Without a chorus, the audience must pay attention to the lyric content. Sung to a much slower tempo than *puirt-a-beul* (this song could be sung approximately 60 beats per minute), every word can be understood and the singer is judged partially for his or her ability to deliver the text clearly. The combination of minimal lyric repetition and numerous verses creates a dense text.

The lyric structure is sophisticated, having been carefully crafted in terms of metre, rhyme, and alliteration. In this case, the verses are constructed of lines of five and seven syllables:

7 syllables
 5 syllables
 7 syllables
 5 syllables
 7 syllables
 7 syllables
 7 syllables
 5 syllables

Moreover, each 7-syllable line ends with a disyllable with emphasis on the penultimate syllable while the 5-syllable lines conclude with accented monosyllables. Such a structure is considerably more sophisticated than that used in, for example, “Seallaibh Curraigh Eòghainn,” which simply alternates six and eight syllable lines (except the second line, which actually only has seven syllables). *Puirt-a-beul* structure is easy to construct given the extensive use of repetition and brevity of the text.

This song begins by revealing that the speaker is in prison and discloses that the prisoner’s relationship with his sweetheart is not widely approved of. Over the next several verses, listeners learn that the speaker was with his sweetheart, Molly, one Sunday when pursued by a number of people. In the confusion, he apparently accidentally struck and killed her. He composed the song while awaiting execution. However, it is difficult to tell whether Molly was abducted against her will or whether she eloped with the speaker. The accompanying story clarifies the situation:

The Gaelic words of this song were composed in Scotland about the time of the Revolution by a young Highland Scottish officer who eloped with the daughter of a landed proprietor. The latter, having found out about his daughter’s disappearance, assembled his men and pursued the fugitive lovers with great speed. After many miles of pursuit, the couple were overtaken in a lonely glen... The Highland officer put up a heroic fight against his pursuers. His sword was a very heavy one, loaded with what is called a “steel apple,” and on one occasion, when warding off his attackers and preparing to give a deadly sword-stroke, the point of the weapon accidentally struck the landed proprietor’s daughter, and she was killed instantly. The officer was thrust into gaol and executed (Creighton and MacLeod 1964: 264).

Any singer of “Mo Mhaili Bheag Òg” would share this story with his or her audience at a *cèilidh*, in addition to providing details regarding the source of the song. Discussion might be extended if friends volunteered a different verse or corrected a few words.

In Gaelic poetry, rhyme is based on stressed vowel sounds, rather than on the whole word (in English, “participation” and “anticipation” rhyme, but in Gaelic, it would be appropriate to rhyme “participation” with “acorn”). In “Mo Mhaili Bheag Òg,” either the penultimate syllable of every seven-syllable line in a verse rhymes, or the first two seven-syllable lines rhyme along with the last three. For example, in the verse noted above, “priosan,” “binn,” “mine,” “fìogais,” and “shìos” all have a rhyming long “ee” sound. In addition, “òg,” the final syllable of the first five-syllable line, rhymes with “bheòil,” the final syllable of the last five-syllable line. There are several examples of alliteration, such as “mala mìne” [eyebrows smooth], but the most startling is that occurring between “priosan” [prison] and “pògan” [kisses], which stands out not only because the “p” sound is so prominent, but because they are the only “p” words in the entire song.

The sophisticated lyrics are matched by the music. A whole verse can be said to take eight bars, where each line is given a bar. However, in terms of phrase structure, the melody sounds as though it is broken down into units of two bars, two bars, one bar, one bar, two bars. Although each line of text, regardless of the number of syllables, gets a bar of music, the bars are grouped into different phrase lengths, mirroring the asymmetrical alternation between long and short lines in the text.

Puirt-a-beul performance is measured by breath capacity and control, along with clear enunciation. Although clear enunciation is always essential in Gaelic singing, it is not nearly so difficult in “Mo Mhaili Bheag Òg” since the tempo is so much slower. Instead, the latter’s performance would be judged on the singer’s individual style and his or her ability to draw attention to significant words through subtle rubato and ornamentation (traditional Gaelic singing does not generally use vibrato, dynamics, or dramatic, emotional performances). Comparing the musical transcriptions will illustrate the more ornamented melody of “Mo Mhaili Bheag Òg” compared to the more rhythmic, straightforward melodies of the *puirt-a-beul*.

Music Attitudes

Music and language are intertwined in many complex ways. Language is a fundamental element of song, and song is used pedagogically in the language classroom. Both are part of the identity constructed and projected by Cape Breton Gaels and used to identify them by non-Gaels. Thus, the attitudes held regarding the Gaelic language inevitably play a role in the attitudes surrounding song genres.

As attitudes towards the Gaelic language have shifted, Cape Breton Gaels have taken increasing pride in their song tradition. Over the past several decades, there have been increasing efforts to promote Gaelic songs, whether through the Gaelic Choir of Sydney, song workshops at the Gaelic College in St. Ann's, or at the Christmas Island *Féis* [festival]. Cape Bretoners are gratified by the fact that long, sophisticated songs have survived in Cape Breton when they have ceased to be heard in Scotland. In addition, Cape Bretoners take pleasure in the compositions of local *bards* [poets] who have created songs equal in quality to those produced in Scotland. *Puirt-a-beul* lyrics hardly represent the beauty and sophistication inherent in other song texts, and yet they appear to be the most popular with non-Gaels.

Cape Breton Gaels live as both Anglo-Canadians and as Scottish-Gaelic descendants. As students of high school English, they learn skills necessary to analyze the metre, rhyme, and metaphor used in canonic English poetry. This has had two effects. First, Gaels evaluate their own poetic tradition in the terms of another, that of mainstream Anglo-Canada. They are unlikely to weigh musical considerations when evaluating a Gaelic poem because such a consideration has been irrelevant to the assessment of English poetry. When textual analysis is the primary basis on which a song is assessed, "Mo Mhaili Bheag Òg" will inevitably be judged as superior to "Seallaibh Curraigh Eòghainn." Second, Gaels are concerned with how their culture is perceived by others. They know that Anglo-Canadians and Americans who encounter Gaelic poetry for the first time will likely judge it using the same tools with which they judge a Browning sonnet or Shakespearian soliloquy. Given their popularity and accessibility, outsiders might be tempted to judge Gaelic literature based on *puirt-a-beul*, and to dismiss Gaelic poetry as "primitive." Not only does this have an effect on the group's self-esteem — which was seen to have an important role to play in language attitudes — but it has material consequences too. With

continuing high unemployment, Cape Breton Gaels depend upon tourism, but also upon government grants. Cultural funds are approved by (non-Gaelic) government organizations that determine the value of Gaelic culture from a mainstream perspective. Furthermore, such grants are made with at least one eye on the non-Gaelic tourist since they drive much of the economy. The healthier the economy, the less social assistance, unemployment and welfare must be provided by the government to local residents. Thus Cape Breton Gaels believe it in their best interest to promote literary Gaelic songs over *puirt-a-beul*. They suppose that the literary qualities of an eight-line song text are more likely to be recognized and understood by mainstream Anglo-Canadians than *puirt-a-beul*, since “literariness” or textual sophistication isn’t really relevant for the latter.

Due to their upbeat tempo, flashy vocalizations, and brevity, *puirt-a-beul* have proven quite popular with non-Gaelic speakers or those learning the language. As a result, *puirt-a-beul* have played a significant part of the “Celtic pop” movement as represented by The Rankins (formerly The Rankin Family), Ashley MacIsaac, Mary Jane Lamond and The Barra MacNeils. However, some fear that pop-stylized *puirt-a-beul* paint an inaccurate picture of Gaelic culture, both because of stylistic modifications (e.g., the use of studio effects, form manipulation, and use of electro-acoustic accompaniment), and because they represent a small part of the larger Gaelic song corpus. I spoke with one native Gaelic speaker involved in the music industry who had had a request from Alaska for Celtic music. After she sent a CD of Gaelic songs sung by traditional Cape Breton singers, the CD was returned with a note that said, “This is not Celtic music. We want *Celtic* music!” The woman who supplied the CD felt that it offered the best representation of the Cape Breton Gaelic song tradition and yet, in her mind, it was clear that the Alaskans had only a superficial interest in the tradition and were unwilling to explore it further. The Alaskans’ response was not unusual, in her experience.

The anxieties expressed about *puirt-a-beul* by Cape Breton Gaels involved more than concerns about outsiders’ perceptions of Gaelic culture. *Puirt-a-beul* may be fundamental to the enculturation of “new” Gaels. Language learners regularly encounter *puirt-a-beul* in the classroom. A concern, however, is that learners will stop at *puirt-a-beul* without making the effort to learn other types of songs. Young Cape Breton Gaels are drawn to the popularity of *puirt-a-beul* and the potential

to “make it big” with pop stylizations of Gaelic songs, which could come at the expense of other Gaelic traditions.

After all the Celtic hype over the last few years how many more people can really appreciate a march played by fiddler Donald MacLellan; a Gaelic song by Maxie MacNeil or the dance steps of Willie Fraser. Stage presentations and mass market interpretations of the music, song and dance we have taken for granted for so long have made it big among an audience hungry for a new interpretation of a world music. And this is a big, big market. What talented young musician from an island with the nation’s highest unemployment rate could resist it? (MacEachen 1998).

With fewer than five hundred native Gaelic speakers remaining in Cape Breton, the majority of whom are senior citizens, Gaelic culture is in serious danger of disappearing from the region. Cape Breton Gaels are highly conscious of the precarious situation of Gaelic culture. At the same time that they are attempting to arrest the decline of the culture, they are attempting to document its history, to preserve the culture for their descendants so they will know who they are and where they come from. Fewer and fewer tradition-bearers remain to remember, share, and teach the Gaelic song corpus. Which songs will they encourage others to learn? When a collector or singer or neighbour knocks on their door asking for a song, which will they sing?

Puirt-a-beul are unquestionably important both historically and culturally. However, as dance music, *puirt-a-beul* tunes have a healthy presence in the fiddle repertoire, and Cape Breton step-dancing is growing in popularity. Fiddle tunes and step-dancing transcend the language barrier and can be maintained independent of the Gaelic language. But Gaelic history and perspective, as well as the language itself (vocabulary, grammar, and idioms), are recorded in the lyrics of literary Gaelic songs.

Conclusion

By tracing the history of language policy in Scotland and by identifying the factors that contribute to the formation of language attitudes, one can see how Gaelic came to be regarded negatively in Cape Breton. The marginalization of the language has had a profound effect on the song tradition. As the Gaelic-speaking population declines, there are fewer people capable of learning, understanding, and

transmitting Gaelic songs, and so the active, living song repertoire shrinks along with the language. *Puirt-a-beul* are enjoying wide popularity because they are musically appealing and do not require linguistic competency for their appreciation. However, although their simple, amusing lyrics are part of what make *puirt-a-beul* attractive to non-Gaelic audiences, they are also what give Gaelic speakers pause. *Puirt-a-beul* lyrics are not representative of the song literature as a whole but may be judged as such by those unfamiliar with the broader song corpus. Such a misunderstanding can have very real ramifications, as an interpretation of Gaelic culture as “primitive” may propagate stereotyping and potentially affect material resources for the support and regeneration of the culture.

But the song tradition is not simply at the mercy of the health of the language. Rather, the language is reciprocally affected by the song tradition, as many learners begin language lessons after hearing Gaelic songs. Indeed, the language is frequently taught through the medium of songs. The song tradition provides a *raison d'être* for the language, as there is little reason to learn Gaelic in the absence of a living, vibrant culture.

The intent of this article is two-fold. First, I hope I have contributed to the academic community. My understanding of the connection between language and music attitudes is part of an ongoing articulation of the interrelatedness of all cultural aspects. Thus, this study may enable ethnomusicologists with different cultural specialties to evaluate the rapport between language and music elsewhere. It is also an interdisciplinary effort. Although Hoffman suggested that sociolinguistics requires the bridging of two or more social sciences (Hoffmann 1991: 245), this paper has attempted to bridge the gap between the social sciences and humanities. However, sociolinguistics tends to employ carefully constructed experiments in order to evaluate controlled empirical data, which is absent from this paper. It would indeed be exciting to have this same case study examined from a sociolinguist's perspective.

In addition, this paper has relied heavily on the discourse surrounding Gaelic language and song attitudes, rather than on other types of information. For example, it might prove fruitful to elaborate on the connections between language and music by correlating a spoken poetic text with its sung counterpart in order to evaluate the degree of

similarity between rhythm and pitch contour. Can native Gaelic speakers in fact tell whether a fiddler is fluent in Gaelic or not, simply by hearing him or her play a few tunes? This might be assessed through blind listening tests. How can the situation in Cape Breton be compared with that in Scotland, where Gaelic language attitudes have been relatively similar through history?

Second, as an ethnomusicologist interested in issues of ethnography, I hope that this paper is of use to Cape Breton Gaels. On a purely pragmatic level, I trust that such a publication might be of some use in applications to the government for cultural funds and assistance. But I also hope it brings awareness of their culture to a wider public while articulating some of their concerns in a cohesive manner. And while I certainly do not think that Gaelic culture needs to be legitimized by an outside academic such as myself, I am aware that academic acknowledgement carries significant weight. I therefore hope that my efforts to understand and convey the relationship between Gaelic language attitudes and musical choices will contribute to Cape Breton Gaels' growing but still tenuous pride in their culture and achievements.

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