

All Members of the Saint Mary's University Community Are

Invited

To a Talk by: **Dr. Emily McEwan-Fujita***

**Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies
Saint Mary's University**

Gaelic in Scotland and Nova Scotia: Ideologies, Affect and Socialization in Language Shift and Revitalization

Friday, March 16th; 11:30 am-12:45 pm; Loyola 181

Abstract

“Gaelic is a Celtic language closely related to Irish and Manx. Gaelic has been undergoing language shift in Scotland for over six centuries, and has been the subject of language revitalization efforts since the 18th century. The 2001 census enumerated about 56,000 Gaelic speakers in Scotland, or around 1% of Scotland’s population. In the 1990s, as Thatcher’s neoliberalism and conservatism transformed the U.K., Gaelic language advocates made a bold economic argument to fund Gaelic television. Their effort was successful and marked the start of a new phase in language revitalization, characterized by professionalization, institutionalization, and nationalization. This has in turn provoked a backlash in the national media, a recycling of negative and racist stereotypes about Gaelic: it is obsolete, inhuman, and an object of mockery. Meanwhile, the use of Gaelic as a spoken language of daily use and child socialization in geographically-based communities continues to diminish.

Based on my ethnographic research, I will present a new theory of how communities shift from the habitual use of one language to the habitual use of another. This sociolinguistic and semiotic theory considers the crucial role of cultural ideologies and values, affect, social interaction, signs, and meaning-making in language shift.

I shall then discuss my current work which involves applying this theory to the design of language revitalization projects, incorporating the concept of situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) and best practice in other minority language revitalization programs. In Scotland I am designing a new community-based Gaelic revitalization project in partnership with a local Gaelic cultural centre on Islay, an island that is home to 9 whiskey distilleries and a moribund but highly-valued dialect of Gaelic. In Nova Scotia I have founded a new nonprofit organization and am developing ways to re-start the transmission of Gaelic to children in home and community settings.

Finally, I shall discuss the new direction that my research program will take next year, when I plan to conduct comprehensive research on adult Gaelic learners and ‘neo-native’ fluent speakers in Nova Scotia. These are the people who will maintain Gaelic as a spoken language and medium of the province’s rich Gaelic culture and heritage in the 21st century. They (we!) are a heterogeneous group, however, and I theorize that we must understand the patterned ways in which we differ in our ideologies, geographical and cultural orientations, dialects, and abilities, in order to effectively plan for Gaelic revitalization in the coming decades. In conclusion, I will share some thoughts on what lessons Scottish revitalization efforts hold for Nova Scotia Gaelic, and in turn what lessons Nova Scotia Gaelic communities hold for Scotland.”

*Dr. McEwan-Fujita is a candidate for an Assistant Professorship in Anthropology with a specialization in linguistic anthropology.