

Cross-Party Group of the Scottish Parliament on the Scots Language

Convener
Rob Gibson MSP
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh

Please reply to:
Scots Language Resource Centre
c/o A.K. Bell Library
York Place, Perth PH2 8EP
email: office@scotsyett.com

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Proposal for a comprehensive languages question in the 2011
Census – a consultation paper

Executive Summary:

1. Origins of this proposal
2. Why this matters to the community of Scotland
3. Usefulness of the resultant Census data
4. Layout of the proposed question
5. Request for support and feedback

Please note: We are circulating this paper by email in order to save cost and time, but if readers would prefer hard copy to be posted please advise us accordingly. We would prefer formal response by email if possible, to the Scots Language Resource Centre (address above) which acts as Secretariat to this Parliamentary Group.

1. Origins of this Proposal

In the run-up to the 2001 Census, people interested in the Scots language mounted a campaign for the inclusion of a question similar to the question that has regularly been asked concerning Gaelic. The mood of the Scottish Parliament (which is sovereign in this matter) was not supportive at the time, and a motion to include such a question fell.

Since then, the Cross-Party Group on Scots has had a number of consultative meetings with Executive Ministers and others, and indications are that an acceptably designed question that could attract broad support in the community and among Census users might perhaps go forward with all-party support.

Within the broad Scots language movement, we have considered that we should not now advance a question that dealt only with the Scots-speaking community, but that as the largest 'minority language' community in Scotland, we might perhaps offer to help to lead or co-ordinate an initiative that would also meet the needs of other language groups in the Scottish community. Who are these groups?

In the first session of the Scottish Parliament, its Education, Culture and Sport Committee produced in 2003 a report which identified the predominant minority languages as Scots, Gaelic, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Chinese, Arabic and British Sign Language and stated:

- This report concludes that the many questions and concerns surrounding the languages of Scotland and their place in education and culture can only be properly addressed by creating an inclusive, cohesive Languages Policy.
- To ensure the development of a satisfactory Policy, substantive research, consultation and reporting needs to be carried out to gather much more information than is currently available on the specific needs of each language.

The proposal set out in this paper aims to contribute to that requirement for 'substantive research', and would extend that list of languages in an open manner, so that significant new communities of minority language speakers could be identified – something that may be very important in European Scotland where labour mobility leads now to a significant presence of workers from member states, particularly in the health and catering industries.

Respecting and planning for the language needs and rights of our new communities and migrant workers should be no less important than ensuring the survival of our heritage languages Gaelic and Scots.

2. Why this matters to the community of Scotland

The ideals of multiculturalism and equal opportunity are grounded in the moral principle of respect for others, summed up well in the Scots saw that ‘we’re aa Jock Tamson’s bairns’, the departure point for our own noblest national ideal. However, we fall short if we fail to ask ourselves the questions that a considerate host nation would ask, when there are new folk, not guests, but members of the family living among us whose needs we may have failed to think of and make provision for.

We would argue that local authorities ought to know, in order to plan provision for translation services, education courses or cultural activities, who lives, who works in a given area and what languages do they understand, what are the heart-languages of their own communities? This is precisely the information that the Census can provide. Health organisations need to know this, and business organisations might find opportunity in knowing what resource they have in the languages knowledge of the general population.

Respect for others goes beyond making simple provision for competence in the *lingua franca*, English. Unless new members of the community have some means of access to Gaelic and Scots in areas where these languages remain strong, we are giving them a cold welcome. At the same time, neglect of general language rights damages our native culture also, and more dangerously. Our neglect cannot damage the Punjabi or Arabic languages, only individual rights; but neglect in Scotland of our own indigenous languages will entail their demise.

The question we are putting forward should identify the particular languages spoken in our country, and the circumstances in which they were learned by individuals, thus distinguishing native-speaking language attainment from attainment through education, and identifying real language communities, as well as providing a limited measure of the impact of education, including self-education.

We have not attempted to assess in this question general difficulty with any language through different forms of disability: we feel that that is a distinct subject which may merit its own form of question. However, we recognise that though associated with hearing disability British Sign Language is a language in its own right. It is the purpose of this paper to invite others to propose refinements to the exact form and wording of the question we are putting forward in order to meet their needs and wishes, though clearly we are not in a position to dictate formats which will be decided within the General Registrar’s Office and in the end, by Parliament. There are practical constraints on space and complexity, so that in the version set out in section 4 only Urdu, of the non-indigenous languages group, is mentioned explicitly.

3. Usefulness of the resultant Census data

Referring the question format overleaf, it is designed in the form of a table with language selections totalling five rows, with the first four filled in as 'English / Gaelic / Scots / Urdu' and the fifth left for other options. The focus of the question is therefore on 'native' languages – community languages – for the moment without specific, inflexible insistence on this, since people often have more than one native language, or cannot easily say what is native or non-native as they may experience the matter. The columns to the right ask for competence in *understanding / speaking / reading / writing*; and then whether each language is a *home language* or *learnt elsewhere*. Urdu is mentioned explicitly, as we think it is the largest non-indigenous language: mentioning all possibilities would over-encumber the form.

The aim is to identify where groups of the speakers of particular languages are located in the general population, and to test levels of competence in ways that can inform policy decision-making about the needs of the speakers concerned.

Competence found in *understanding* and *speaking* with a lower response rate for *reading* and/or *writing* would be a primary indication of a literacy problem in a given language, with implications for education provision.

An inability to *write* in English, or indeed to *speak* it, would point to a problem in accessing the *lingua franca*, with implications for training needs especially in health and welfare services. Difficulty identified in *reading* it, in part of a given community, might establish a need for particular translation resources for official publications.

Ignorance of Gaelic or Scots, in communities where these languages are otherwise found to be strong, creates a case for cultural outreach.

The usefulness of the final two columns is in assessing the ways in which given languages are effectively transmitted, and this should be of particular interest in the indigenous group English, Scots and Gaelic, perhaps in different ways. With statistics from these columns, we can begin to understand how many new Gaelic speakers are learners, and whether and to what extent Scots is transmitted through families nowadays, or whether it is assimilated more diffusely. We have some test of the effectiveness of education in enabling English for those who do not have it as a home language. These are all vital to proper language planning in the long term: essential first steps to inform the correct starting points for later, research-supported studies.

It is our expectation that this question, in whatever developed form may issue from this consultation, will be piloted by the General Registrar's Office in 2006, and issues concerning its reliability, and the degree to which it is understood properly by respondents, will be investigated then.

4. Layout of the proposed question

H9 What languages are you familiar with?

- Please tick all boxes that apply

	Understand	Speak	Read	Write	Learnt ...	
					at home	elsewhere
English	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gaelic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Scots	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Urdu	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Write in below (including e.g. BSL and Punjabi etc).

The above layout was prepared by the General Registrar's Office in their preferred house style. (In this consultation we welcome comments on the proposed layout, and would observe that one change under consideration by the GRO itself is to make it clearer in the presentation that the question is not seeking to elicit whether people remember the French they learned at school, for example, but wants to focus on languages with a real community presence.)

5. Request for support and feedback

(i) other community language groups or individuals

We are circulating this paper to such advocacy organisations as we can identify; and would ask that if this proposal meets with your support, that you make that support known to us, as simply as by completing the form given immediately below, and if you wish write to us with any other observations for improvement of the proposal.

Name of organisation / individual

Contact point / email

Support the proposal for this Census question and wish to see it implemented

Yes / No (please circle option)

Have attached additional observations, or briefly comment as follows:

5. Request for support and feedback (continued)

(ii) Census data users

Name of organisation

Contact point / email

We could make constructive use of the data generated by the proposed question in the following fields:

Health Service planning

Translation services planning

Education planning

Cultural services planning

Other (please specify)

None

(please circle all that apply)

Support the proposal for this Census question and wish to see it implemented

Yes / No (please circle option)

Have attached additional observations, or briefly comment as follows:
