

Aithisg deireannach airson Stòras Rannsachaidh Shoillse

# CUIMHNICHIBH OIRNN: DÀ-CHÀNANAS, SEARGADH INNTINN & A' GHÀIDHLIG

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## Background

The project Cuimnichibh Oirnn – Dà-chànanas, seargadh inntinne agus a' Ghàidhlig is an innovative knowledge exchange project which is based on an arts-led study of bilingualism and dementia in Gaelic-speaking contexts. The play, "five to midnight", provides a dramatization of the complex issues that bilinguals face as they get older and start to display age-related degenerative cognitive health issues, such as dementia. The purpose of the play is to provide a vehicle for discussion of the complex issues involving these bilingual individuals and their families and / or carers in terms of language loss and reactivation, identify, care provision, language transmission and the neuropsychology of bilingualism.

## Project Aims

This unique project aimed to bring together academics in the field of cognitive neuroscience, linguistics and language with health care professionals and policy makers to allow for an exchange of creative, scholarly and lived understanding of dementia and bilingualism in Gaelic-speaking contexts, using the drama performance as a catalyst to discuss these complex and emotive issues.

## Expected project outputs

This initial stage of this project, the workshop, aimed to provide a forum for discussion of the issues which might face bilingual dementia patients and their caregivers, with a particular focus on Gaelic and the lived experience of this being a family and community language. These discussions aimed to influence public policy with regard to the care of Gaelic speakers through a dialogue between academics, health care professionals, individuals who are care-givers or family members and Gaelic speakers.

## Cuimnichibh Oirnn Performance-led workshop on Dementia and Bilingualism

### Overview

This day-long performance-led workshop on dementia and bilingualism took place at the University of Strathclyde on Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> of June 2019. The focus of the workshop was the rehearsals of a play that highlights the experiences of a bilingual Gaelic-English speaker with dementia and its effects on her family. The play shows the main character progressively moving into a reality that she expresses exclusively through Gaelic. As a result, family dynamics undergo a profound and traumatic shift. Roles are renegotiated, and language and dementia become the basis for exploring complex relationships based on connections, exclusions and uncertainties about who must play what role. The workshop was a collaboration between the Glasgow-based Theatre Tog-ì and four academics from the Universities of Edinburgh, Stirling and Strathclyde whose research interests are connected by shared interests in understandings of bi/multilingualism. A key aim of the workshop was to highlight the relevance of the play's Gaelic context to international research priorities in the areas of health and well-being as well as culture. Invited professionals (including care and support professionals, policy makers, academics, community arts workers) were asked to respond to a range of issues raised by the performance. These included language and dementia, language-based care provision, language, memory and identity, language and cultural loss/regeneration, intergenerational minority language transmission, translation in clinical contexts. Another aim of the workshop was to explore the role of the arts in raising awareness about the language-based realities of dementia as well as providing effective support for those living with the condition as well as their carers.

### Workshop details

The workshop was advertised through a variety of channels; the participating universities, through social media (in particular Twitter), and the organisers directly contacting individuals and organisations working with the elderly, dementia or in linguistics (or a combination of these). Participants were asked to indicate their interest by completing the EventBrite link. This allowed the organisers to estimate the level of interest and organise catering. The venue chosen for the event was the Insight Institute at the University of Strathclyde which provided a clear space for the performers as well as the audience to interact.

The workshop itself was attended by around 40 individuals with a wide variety of backgrounds; academics, health professionals and language scholars as well as members of the public with an interest in bilingualism, dementia and / or Gaelic. A further 15 individuals showed an interest in being updated with the findings of the workshop and any future events.

## Outline of the workshop

The workshop day was organised around the three acts of the play “Five to Midnight” which centres on a native Gaelic speaker whose English begins to fade as she develops dementia. Her husband increasingly finds himself not being able to communicate with his wife as she retreats into the past and a language which he does not speak.

### *Part 1 – Bilingualism and the medical context*

Speakers: Thomas Bak (University of Edinburgh), Renate Winkler (Guardian Carers) & Robbie Norval (Lingo Flamingo).

### *Part 2 – Dementia’s impact on family and the bilingual community*

Speakers: Wilson McLeod (University of Edinburgh), Zibiah Loakthar (Irish in Britain), Meinir Jones (Welsh Language Commissioner)

### *Part 3 – Dementia and bilingualism and the arts*

Speakers: Magaidh Smith (Community Arts Worker), Bairbre Uí Theighneàin (Seirbhís na Gaeilge, Rannóg Cumarsáide FSS), Aedín Loingsigh (University of Stirling)

## Outputs

### *BBC Naidheachdan*

The Cuimhnichibh Oirnn workshop was reported on the BBC Alba news programme An Là on the 26th of June:

<https://www.bbc.com/naidheachdan/48779577>

### *The Conversation*

An article appeared on The Conversation based on the workshop conducted in June. This article was co-authored by David Murphy, Thomas Bak, Aedín Loingsigh and Ingeborg Birnie.

<https://theconversation.com/bilingualism-and-dementia-how-some-patients-lose-their-second-language-and-rediscover-their-first-126631>

The article contains a link to current research being carried out by Thomas Bak & Brittany Blankinship on language changes in people that speak more than one language. This will form the basis of further research studies.

### *Recordings of the Cuimhnichibh Oirnn Event*

The workshop event was recorded – the videos are in the process of being edited and details such as sponsorship (by Soillse) added.

The recordings, once completed, will form the basis of a study and academic paper on the perceptions of language loss and bilingualism in the Gaelic context.

Dr Ingeborg Birnie

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