

The Scots Continuum and Descriptive Linguistics

By Maggie Scott

There is a tendency to talk about 'Scots' and 'Scottish English' as though these two entities were somehow clearly delineated and neatly identifiable, but on closer examination the situation can appear less clear-cut. For this and other reasons, Scots has often been conceived of as a language continuum that reaches from Broad Scots to Scottish Standard English.

Scottish Standard English is the term used to describe the language accepted in formal written communication, and therefore includes a whien of Scottish terms, like *provost*, *pinkie*, *Higher Exam* and *Procurator Fiscal*. It is easy enough to identify individual words and phrases as belonging to this group, but for most Scottish people, their usage varies depending on the context in which they are writing or speaking. Some might use 'hame' in one situation and 'home' in another, giving more of a direct contrast between Scots and Scottish English usage, and many people are indeed bilingual in Scots and English. But if someone utters a sentence such as, 'och you never saw such a stooshie, ah wis black-affronted', we still have to be able to identify which *language* they are speaking. The concept of a language continuum allows for this variation, and could easily be extended to other forms of communication besides Scots. I once discussed these ideas with someone from Middlesbrough who compared his informal 'missus, yuv left yer broolly' with its formal equivalent, 'excuse me madam, you seem to have forgotten your umbrella'. That said, it should be remembered that our current tendency to equate Scots with informality and Scottish English with formality is a social phenomenon, our perception of the written and spoken word the consequence of history and politics. There was nothing informal or colloquial about King James VI of Scotland's [*Basilicon Doron*](#), his book on kingship, in which he wrote such comments as: 'The people quha sees but the outuarde pairt uill euer iudge of the substance be the circumstances.'

A piece of literature from another time or place often presents the reader with unfamiliar words and phrases, or with constructions that differ from expected

patterns. Because we very often learn about grammar and spelling only in terms of right and wrong, it is easy to fall into the habit of finding certain idioms quaint or unusual, and to judge language based on what we ourselves were judged on during our years of schooling. But in order to fully appreciate the diversity of Scotland's literature and language, we Scots need to shed our own insecurities about notions of 'correctness' and look at the evidence with fresh eyes.

As a lexicographer, it has often been my experience when meeting people that they expect me to be obsessed with 'correct' grammar and spelling. While this is far from true, such views have long been reflected in methods of language teaching and in dictionaries, so the assumption is understandable. Over the last hundred years or so, however, linguistics has evolved as a discipline, and the prescriptivism of yesteryear has been thoroughly displaced by a descriptive approach which examines how language is used, not how it 'should' be used. This change in attitude has been reflected in the A-Level course in English Language, which has proven popular in England although its equivalent has yet to do so in Scotland. Books by advocates of descriptive linguistics, such as [Professor David Crystal](#), are now being read for pleasure, and grammars are nowadays more likely to explain usage than to condemn it. Similarly, objectivity is an essential skill for the lexicographer.

Nevertheless, it takes a long time for evolving views to displace old methodologies and judgements, especially when punishment or humiliation has been employed to shame people into conformity. When a school pupil uses a Scots word in a classroom, this can be a wonderful opportunity for a teacher to get everyone talking about their own use of language and why you might use different forms of language in different contexts. Many modern teachers are responsive to these situations, and in increasingly multi-cultural teaching environments it can be a catalyst for all sorts of different cultural explorations. Those discovering their 'bad English' to be excellent Scots are often empowered by the experience, yet I have encountered older students for whom opening up the debate on Scots seemed like a retrograde step. The unfairness of having one teacher attempt to stamp the Scots out of you, then another, years later, encourage you to revisit linguistic syndromes that you thought had been cured of is sometimes more than a body can thole. But every experience is different. I used to think I had never been aware of anyone being checked for using a Scotticism when I was in school, until I learned that 'to sleep in' was a Scottish expression. One of my teachers

used to respond to this oft-heard excuse for lateness, 'ah slept in', with the words, 'what did you sleep in?', to which the poor unfortunate muttered 'a bed'. She would then continue, 'so did I but I got up at the right time! — You *overslept!*' Sic episodes didnae generate ony cultural explorations, but neither did they chyngewir speech owermuch. Besides unashamedly using this Scotticism, I say 'this needs *washed*' rather than 'this needs *washing*', and that a door opens 'in the way', not 'inwards'. I still have a *shot* at things and I *swither* on a regular basis. By saying 'that's me', I am probably intending to convey that I am ready to do something, not that Descartes' famous revelation of sentience has suddenly struck me.

Our modes of expression are an important part of our culture and are best explored unfettered by notions of 'correctness' if we are to respect multicultural and multilingual Scotland. And if indeed a man is a man, for a' that, then a little knowledge of Scotland's languages could have an unexpected impact on our readings of James Robertson's *Joseph Knight* (2003), Suhayl Saadi's *Psychoraag* (2004) and Kevin MacNeil's *The Stornoway Way* (2005).

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