

# HOW THE SCOTS LANGUAGE WORKS

## A GUIDE TO SCOTLAND'S OTHER NATIONAL TONGUE

**DR CLIVE P L YOUNG (UNLOCKING SCOTS 01)**

This booklet is a part of *Unlocking Scots*, a new overview and history of Scots, due for release in 2023.



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*How Scots Works* is an extract from *Unlocking Scots*, a new history and overview of the Scots language, due for completion in 2023.

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Clive created one of the first websites dedicated to Scots in 1996, coining the word 'wabsteid' on the way and curates **scotslanguage.info** an archive a searchable archive of Scots news from the press and social media, going back to 2012.

He has written *The Scots Learners' Grammar*, a brief overview of the main features of Scots syntax and *550 Scots phrases ye jist canna dae wi'oot*.

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**March 2022**

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## Preface

This booklet is a part of *Unlocking Scots*, a new overview and history of Scots. Due for completion in 2023, it aims to contribute to a more positive discussion of Scots and its future. People who are learning about Scots for the first time as speakers, scholars, teachers, or creative writers frequently believe we are at ‘ground zero’ and must start everything from scratch. That could hardly be further from the truth. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the nature and future of Scots has attracted the attention of exceptional thinkers and writers. To be fair, very little of this lengthy, multi-voice debate is easily accessible. Much is hidden in obscure and dense scholarly articles, dusty library books, newspaper archives, government documents, long-forgotten position papers and reports and, more recently, social media posts.

The mission of *Unlocking Scots* is to help people reconnect with and take part in in this discussion but also recognises the task will not be easy. Scots language activist Billy Kay warns us of problems when we begin to speak seriously about Scots,

It is a veritable tinder box of a subject, for although only a tiny group of people have had the opportunity to to study it, everyone has very strong opinions on the matter.<sup>1</sup>

I believe that any future debate about Scots should build on the past, but also be informed by new ideas from sociolinguists, social theory, cultural studies, language rights, and minority language revitalisation. Such perspectives can provide fresh and constructive ways of discussing Scots and maybe chip away at long fossilised attitudes and biases. That said, I am not a historian, professional linguist, or even a Scots language activist. I am simply a former, and now very rusty, native speaker. To borrow a quote from the indefatigable Scots lexicographer William Graham, ‘a much better-known authority should have been entrusted with the task of compiling such a work’.<sup>2</sup>

***The following booklet contains Scots***

*Many Scots words and extended quotes can be found throughout this booklet. There is no glossary, but this is the modern world, and there are lots of Scots dictionaries available, both online and printed. Scots is no different from any other language. It is perfectly OK to look up a word if you don't know it.*

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<sup>1</sup> Kay 1993:177

<sup>2</sup> Graham 1977:8

### 1. The missing manual

The Scots language is a mark of the distinctive identity of the Scottish people; and as such we should be concerned to preserve it, even if there were no other reason, because it is ours. This statement requires neither explanation nor apology.<sup>1</sup>

The Scots language is history's gift to the Scottish people, though, to be fair, not a gift always appreciated. I was lucky to be brought up in in the Scots-speaking areas of East Lothian, Fife, and Perthshire in the late 1960s and early 1970s. All the wee bairns around me spoke Scots, as did most of the adults. I learned Scots naturally alongside Scottish English, usually mixing them, as was the habit in those parts. Scots was 'just the way we spoke,' but it was always something more, too. Many of us mastered the skill of fine-tuning the density of our Scots-Scottish English mix on the fly, more Scots or more English depending on the circumstances. One admiring Fife teacher called us 'bilinguals'; she said we used one language in the classroom and another on the playground. I always liked that idea.

My interest in Scots is not nostalgic, though, but political. As an adult I learned that the everyday language of my childhood had been suppressed, and all but erased from any serious debate about Scottish culture and politics. I might never have got this at all, but in the early 1990s I spent lots of time in Barcelona. I learned there how Catalan, itself once proscribed, could be revitalised, and restored to something like normality. Of course, post-Franco Spain was not the same as pre-devolution Scotland, but I slowly began to see my other native tongue in a new way.

Let's take a simple example. The *Manual of Modern Scots*, the first comprehensive grammar of the language, reached its centenary in 2021.<sup>2</sup> The *Manual* established the very foundation of our understanding of Scots as a language distinct from English. The authors, William Grant and James Main Dixon, analysed the rich use of spoken Scots in 18th and 19th century Scottish literature. They described a structure and vocabulary that can still be recognised, albeit faintly at times, in modern Scottish vernacular. No native Scots speaker can read *The Manual* without feeling the joy of realising that the language they use (or used to use) every day has roots deep in Scotland's history.

I know, you've never heard of *The Manual of Modern Scots*. Scots is still trapped in what the radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire called a 'culture of silence'; a silence caused by oppression. The subjugation of Scots was not primarily violent, though Scots-speaking school children were certainly

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<sup>1</sup> McClure 1997

<sup>2</sup> Grant and Dixon 1921

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punished for that crime, but by something far more insidious. Bairns had it drummed into them that their natural Scots speech was inferior and deficient. As novelist Val McDermid remembers,

At school, we were told off when we slipped into Scots. Dialect words collided with the red pencil if they appeared in our written work and the only time they were permitted in our speech was in January, when we were practising our recitations for Burns Night... Inside the classroom, we tidied up our diction. But outside, I spoke guid braid Fife, ken.<sup>3</sup>

Learning standard English was of course beneficial for McDermid and the rest of us. But in that mission generations of bairns were denied literacy in their native tongue. Its history and social significance were ignored, and the language they spoke at home often derided. People in such repressive conditions tend to internalise negative feelings about their language, and maybe even about themselves.

## 2. A dislocation

Prof. Robert McColl Millar, a leading academic expert in the Scots language, describes the result as a *dislocation*. The language has become estranged from its speakers, and many feel alienated from their way of speaking. Some do not believe their own tongue is ‘separate or even worthy of survival’<sup>4</sup>. He adds,

Indeed, it is one of the saddest experiences of field work to find speakers of extremely “dense” Scots refer to their language as “slang”.

Language policy researcher, Johann Unger<sup>5</sup> sees the long-term stigmatisation of Scots as a clear social wrong, arguing,

1. ‘There is generally (even within Scotland) a lack of awareness that Scots can be regarded as a language (or even a legitimate language variety) that differs from English. Instead it is seen as ‘just a dialect’ (of English) or as ‘bad English’.
2. Scots suffers from low prestige both amongst its speakers and amongst non-speakers, especially in most registers of its written varieties and in written contexts.
3. There has to date been a high level of discrimination against Scots speakers in all areas of Scottish society, and in many cases this is

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<sup>3</sup> McDermid 2021

<sup>4</sup> Millar 2011:2

<sup>5</sup> Unger 2013:2

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(knowingly or unknowingly) sanctioned by institutions and supported or at least allowed by official language policies.’

As a minority, non-official tongue, Scots is hardly alone in suffering this type of injustice. Yet, in recent decades many countries have taken significant steps to counter linguistic marginalisation, stigmatisation, and discrimination. Generally speaking, ‘authorities across the EU now tend to see linguistic diversity as a strength’.<sup>6</sup> In Scotland, official support for Scotland’s other indigenous tongue, Gaelic has been transformed over this period, but not for Scots. Even though a third of the population speak Scots to some extent, the language remains largely ignored, and left to fragment and fade. A social wrong indeed.

### 3. What is ‘Scots’ anyway?

The single thing that always tells me I am home is when I hear Scots around me — in the street, on the bus, in the shops, in the pubs.<sup>7</sup>

Scotland has a unique soundscape. It is usually the first thing new visitors and returnees alike notice. One guidebook put it, ‘the Scots speak English with a varying accent – in places like Glasgow and Aberdeen, it can often be indecipherable’.<sup>8</sup> Practically all Scots speak Scottish English, characteristically accented but recognisably a variant of English, but about 30% of the population can also use Scots, a quite distinctive form of speech. Scottish spoken language may certainly sound like a dialect of English laced with ‘Scotticisms’<sup>9</sup>, but when people are chatting together informally, it can shift into something that sounds to outsiders at least like a different language. What is going on? Scots language advocate Billy Kay explains,

[W]hen Scots speakers use the full canon of their dialect, not only the sounds and words, but also the syntax and grammar, differ greatly from the English equivalent.<sup>10</sup>

Kay recognises, ‘full canon’ Scots is not the norm, and as J. Derrick McClure explains,

Relatively few people speak unequivocal Scots on some occasions and unequivocal English on others... The much commoner situation is that the language of a given individual will sometimes contain a greater and sometimes a lesser number of Scots forms.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Leask 2021

<sup>7</sup> McDermid 2021

<sup>8</sup> Lonely Planet, 2017

<sup>9</sup> Scottish words and phrases

<sup>10</sup> Kay 1993:17

<sup>11</sup> McClure 1979:27



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The mix itself is dynamic, and Millar below refers to the idea of a ‘continuum’, or a scale with Scots at one end and English at the other<sup>12</sup>,

It is quite possible - indeed necessary under most conditions - to speak about a continuum between dense varieties of Scots and the most standard forms of Scottish Standard English....Most Scots ... ‘commute’ along this continuum on a day-to-day basis depending on context<sup>13</sup>

Compare with Gaelic speakers, who naturally switch cleanly to English and back again, using either one language or the other. Scots, on the other hand, typically works alongside English on a ‘more-less’ basis. While in some areas speakers may still be able to switch abruptly from broad Scots to pure Scottish English (I have heard this in Shetland, for example), the Scots component in the Central Scots area where I grew up tended to fade in and out as needed.

The linear nature of the continuum implies the existence of both English (no-Scots) and Scots (no-English) poles. However, these two ends are not equivalent. The (Scottish) English end is taught formally and examined in Scottish schools. However, at the other extreme, Scots vocabulary and grammatical structure are picked up haphazardly from family members, friends, and the surrounding community. In the spoken language, knowledge and skills tend to be highly variable and usually locally inflected.

Scots is more than a spoken variety, though, until fairly recently oral skills were backed up by knowledge of traditional Scots writing, poems, and songs. Scots has a celebrated literary tradition that has long inspired a strong sense of autonomous identity and indeed ‘linguageness’. Something called Scots has been recognised for centuries, with thousands of words distinct from standard English. The *Concise Scots Dictionary*<sup>14</sup> alone contains 40,000 entries. Though even the most proficient Scots speaker today would only know a fraction of them, McClure was probably correct in upholding, ‘all of us know, or know roughly, or have some idea, of what is meant by “Lowland Scots”’.<sup>15</sup>

The assumed ability to loosely define ‘Scots’ underpinned a question in the 2011 UK Census asking Scottish people’s abilities to speak, read and write Scots. When the results revealed that a million and a half people claimed to be able to speak Scots, people asked, “What does ‘speaking Scots’ actually mean?” Earlier Census researchers provide a useful working definition,

A person classified as speaking with a Scots accent would use the same words as an English-speaker but sound different; a person speaking with a dialect would choose words that are local variants of the ‘mainstream’

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<sup>12</sup> e.g. Aitken 1979

<sup>13</sup> Millar 2018:3

<sup>14</sup> Scottish Lang. Dictionaries 2017

<sup>15</sup> McClure 1980:11

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language; a person whose speech was classified as being a different language would use constructions of the language as well as vocabulary.<sup>16</sup>

As mentioned, the way that Scots is pronounced, as well as some words themselves, differs across regions. Distinctive local patterns of speech are often grouped into 'dialects' such as Doric, Glaswegian etc. often evoking strong feelings of local pride. Some even claim these varieties are somehow 'not Scots' but all Scots dialects are mutually comprehensible, and even the urban versions retain shared Scots roots.

Scots is unique to Scotland, except for a linguistic offshoot just across the water in Ulster. It is spoken with its regional variations throughout the Lowlands, from the northern isles of Shetland and Orkney down the eastern coast, through the major central belt cities to the coast and rolling hills of Ayrshire, and all the way down to the Borders. Scots' southern limit corresponds to the country's frontier with England. The people on the other side may speak in their own distinctive manner but, despite sharing words with their northern cousins, few would consider what they say to be Scots. In comparison, Ulster Scots, bears its unmistakably Scots origins with pride.

### 4. But is Scots really a language?

The question of whether Scots is a language or 'merely' a dialect of English, or 'bad' English or even a current favourite, 'slang', has disrupted deliberations around Scots for a long time. According to Leith, labelling Scots as a dialect (or worse) is just part of its marginalisation.

The notion that Scots is at most a dialect of English has been communicated to most Scottish people,.... many Scottish people, like some speakers of English-based creoles, may feel that their tongue is not different enough from English to justify calling it a separate language. In other words, it is linguistic criteria that are uppermost in their minds (as they are in the minds of most English people in their attitude to Scots): Scots sounds, grammar and vocabulary are close to those of English in a way that those of Gaelic, say, are not.<sup>17</sup>

So, what is the current expert opinion? In late 2019 The Open University (OU), published a two-part online course *Scots language and culture*.<sup>18</sup> With contributions from 16 prominent experts in the field and covering 20 topics, the course represents a snapshot of how the language/dialect/whatever debate has progressed over recent decades. Scots is treated throughout the course as a language. According to one of its authors, Simon Hall, 'most linguists and

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<sup>16</sup> Máté 1996

<sup>17</sup> Leith 1983:157

<sup>18</sup> The Open University 2019

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academics agree that Scots is a language in its own right'.<sup>19</sup> . The claim was validated the following year when Peter Trudgill, the leading authority on the dialects of English wrote; 'The indigenous languages of Britain are English, Scots, Welsh, and Scottish Gaelic', confirming unambiguously, 'Of the non-English UK languages, Scots has the largest number of speakers, with 1.5 million'. In the OU course, Hall lists six reasons why such authorities now consider Scots a language.

1. Along with Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, and Irish, Scots and Ulster Scots were formally classified as UK minority languages when the UK Labour administration ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) in 2001. Since then, the UK government has acknowledged Scots as a language in regular ECRML reports, and the Scottish Parliament routinely uses the term 'language' to designate Scots releasing its own Scots Language Policy in 2015.
2. Scots has a vast vocabulary, but also a range of unique grammatical features, a huge store of idiomatic expressions, and sounds uncommon in English. Trudgill notes, 'its pronunciation, grammatical structures, orthography, and vocabulary are significantly different from English', adding 'and so is its history'.<sup>20</sup>
3. Scots indeed has a long history. One of the 20th century's leading Scots scholars, Jack Aitken, wrote of the 'ancient belief' dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century that 'there is an entity with some form of separate existence called the Scots language'.<sup>21</sup> Hall adds; 'It is the language of a magnificent, centuries-old literature, and was once a language of state used by kings, politicians and ordinary people alike'.<sup>22</sup>
4. Scots has its own 'dialects', including distinctive varieties used in the cities of Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Hall emphasises; 'It is important not to confuse these dialects of Scots with dialects of English, or to imagine that Scots is a dialect of English. So, the dialects of Caithness, Orkney or Shetland are varieties of Scots. The language used in the North East of Scotland and known as the Doric is a variety of Scots.'
5. Trudgill reminds us, 'The status of a linguistic variety as a language or dialect is often more of a political, cultural and historical than linguistic matter, so to an extent it is a matter of perception'.<sup>23</sup> This is neatly summed up in the well-known maxim 'a language is a dialect with an army and navy', attributed to Yiddish historian Max Weinreich. It should be said in passing that academic linguists are nowadays wary of

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<sup>19</sup> Hall 2019

<sup>20</sup> Trudgill 2021b

<sup>21</sup> Aitken 1982, 2015:2

<sup>22</sup> Hall 2019

<sup>23</sup> Trudgill 2021b

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hierarchical labels like language and dialect, preferring the neutral term ‘variety’.

What about the ‘linguistic criteria’, cited by Leith above? He was referring to “mutual intelligibility”, a staple of folk or popular linguistics, which claims that when two varieties are commonly understandable, they should be thought of as dialects rather than separate languages. Hence Gaelic and English are obviously different languages, but what about Scots and English? The first thing to note is that the criterion of mutual intelligibility is problematic. The Scandinavian languages Swedish, Danish and Norwegian are, for example, very similar and likewise Gaelic is partially intelligible to Irish speakers. Edinburgh-based linguist Graeme Trousdale believes Scots’ relationship to English as, ‘a particularly good example of the problem’, adding; ‘It is the case that some speakers of Scots are not fully intelligible - even if they speak slowly - to some speakers of English’.<sup>24</sup> Trudgill concludes that the Scots-English intelligibility criterion is meaningless anyway.

Scots and English are historically closely related and linguistically similar – just as Norwegian and Danish are related and similar – and both pairs of languages are mutually intelligible to a fair degree.

The website Elinguistics.net<sup>25</sup> hosts an intriguing ‘genetic proximity calculator, comparing 170 languages. Here, lower proximity index figures represent linguistic closeness. The English-Scots pairing scores of 10.2, Danish-Norwegian (Bokmal) is only 3.7 and Gaelic-Irish is 7.3. Even closer language pairs are Croatian-Serbian: 2.8, Afrikaans-Dutch: 2.9, Russian-Ukrainian: 3.4, Hindi-Urdu: 4.3 and Czech-Slovak: 5.7. From the linguistic perspective, McClure summed up the broad claim of Scots’ autonomy,

[S]ince Scots has at least as good a claim to be called a language as many other speech forms which are regularly so called, those who wish it to regard it as a language are fully entitled to do so; and the onus is on those who would deny it this status to prove that another classification is more appropriate.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Trousdale 2010:6

<sup>25</sup> Elinguistics.net undated

<sup>26</sup> McClure 1998:11

## 5. What kind of language is Scots?

Classifying ‘full canon’ Scots as a language on historical, political, and linguistic grounds is the easy part. It is more challenging to try to describe how Scots functions as a language today, when is not generally spoken in the ‘idealised form’<sup>27</sup>. While Scots words and phrases can be heard in much of everyday Lowland Scottish speech, they are almost always mixed in various combinations with the dominant tongue Scottish English. According to the *Concise Scots Dictionary*,

The language of contemporary Scotland can clearly be described as fluid. It is marked by a wide and highly variable range of speech-styles, ranging from the broad Scots of some fishing and farming communities, through various intermediate ‘mixtures of Scots and English’, to a variety of standard English spoken in a Scottish accent (i.e. Scottish Standard English). Even the last of these usages retains obvious affiliations with the more fully Scottish speech styles - in the accent with which it is pronounced [and] in the speakers’ frequent recourse to repertory of Scotticisms...<sup>28</sup>

People are just not used to thinking about ‘languages’ operating in that way. In the face of such formidable fuzziness, there has been a temptation to label all Lowland vernacular speech as ‘Scots’. In 1997 Scottish National Dictionary lexicographer Iseabail Macleod declared, ‘Scots covers everything from dialects that the English - or other Scots - wouldn’t understand, to the way we’re speaking right now, which is English with a Scottish accent’.<sup>29</sup> If you are compiling lists of Scotticisms, an all-inclusive definition may be logical, but it undermines the case just made for Scots being a separate language system. An over-permeable classification also allows other scholars to name the exactly the same complex Macleod described as ‘Scottish English’<sup>30</sup>.

We will explore mixing in more detail later, but in my view, hazy terminologies risk the term ‘Scots’ becoming a nebulous descriptor rather than referring to a discrete language. To consider Scots as a normal minority language we need far more precise terminology, one that unambiguously identifies the Scots language elements in Scottish Lowland vernacular. To this end, three distinct patterns of Scottish speech can be identified, drawing from the definitions above.

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<sup>27</sup> Millar 2020:6

<sup>28</sup> Macleod & Cairns 1993

<sup>29</sup> quoted in Dossena 2005:15

<sup>30</sup> e.g. Stuart-Smith 2018

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- **The Scots language** Several (closely) related spoken dialects underpinned by a literary tradition employing established and prestigious (pan-dialect) orthographic conventions.<sup>31</sup> This is ‘dictionary’ Scots written or spoken at full cannon. The use of the ‘**The**’ definite article here is significant.
- **Scottish (Standard) English** English pronounced with a Scottish accent and including a few Scotticisms<sup>32</sup>. Trudgill calls SSE, ‘the local form of an originally non-local language which has become institutionalised and is spoken with a distinctive pronunciation and some distinctive words and grammatical structures’.<sup>33</sup>
- **Scottish language** The range of spoken mixtures forming a continuum between two poles, broad vernacular/dialectal Scots at one end, and SSE the other. Sometimes **Scots language** but in both cases without the ‘The’ definite article.

These terms are commonly used, but they are not necessarily defined in this precise way. The third definition stands out. Surprisingly, there is no common term for the everyday dynamic mix of Scots and Scottish English. We lack a label such as “Spanglish” which refers to a Spanish-English mix. Really, the only term to hand is “Scottish (or Scots) language”. It is not very satisfactory, but at least has some authority, being the phrase favoured in the Scots language policy of *Creative Scotland* in 2015. The official body conspicuously dropped the ‘the’, stating, ‘We recognise that Scots language is an integral part of Scotland’s identity and cultural life’<sup>34</sup>. While this term may be taken as referring to the spoken mix, it is not actually defined as such.

By applying this type of clear classification, the ‘languageness’ of Scots as a recognisable component in vernacular Scottish language mix is made more distinct without denying the fluidity of the spoken blend. ‘The Scots Language’ remains available as a cohesive linguistic system, even if only used intermittently in its entirety.

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<sup>31</sup> e.g. Eagle 2011

<sup>32</sup> Melchers and Shaw 2011

<sup>33</sup> Trudgill 2021b

<sup>34</sup> Creative Scotland 2015:2

## 7. The “no standards” myth

With these definitions in mind, I will next explore three areas often portrayed as problematic when discussing Scots as a language. These are; standards (or lack thereof) for written Scots, literacy, and dialect variation. All three are interconnected, as illustrated by a quote from Sir James Wilson, an unsung early pioneer of Scots linguistic field research. In the foreword to one of his monographs in 1915, Wilson writes

[T]he Lowland dialects are not at all sharply divided from each other, so that there is little apparent ground for dealing with each of them separately. The tendency has been to consider Scottish speech as a whole, instead of as a collection of dialects, a view which has been greatly assisted by the use of a more or less standard form for literary purposes.<sup>35</sup>

At a time when Scots was arguably at its peak in terms of speaker numbers and general literacy, Wilson makes two important points, firstly on the cohesion of the spoken dialects and secondly that the sense of Scots as a unified language was fortified by a widely read literature written in something approaching a standard. Over the intervening century those three core principles underpinning the languageness of Scots have been undermined, sometimes by its own champions. Let us start with the standards issue, seen variously over the years as a geeky irrelevance, an authoritarian menace to creatives, a death-sentence for dialects or, hopefully more common nowadays, an essential step for survival.

Despite its governmental recognition, Scots is rarely used in official settings. Last time I looked, even the Scottish Parliament did not have any signage in the Scots language. The main justification for Scots’ institutional invisibility is that it has ‘no standards’. The mantra is repeated in almost all discussions around Scots. The ground-breaking *Scots language and culture* course opened with, ‘As opposed to English and Gaelic, Scots is a non-standard language’<sup>36</sup>. *Scots Warks: Support and guidance for writing*, from the authoritative Scots Language Centre (SLC) published in 2021 makes the same point, ‘Scots has no standardisation’, adding maybe more accurately that it is ‘something that has been debated for decades in the Scots language community’.<sup>37</sup>

While it is a truism to say that the Scots language has no *official* standard form, it seems a stretch to assert it has ‘no standardisation’ or even that it is ‘a non-standard language’. History and common sense suggest quite the opposite. *The Manual* was published just six years after Wilson’s quote and there was certainly a notion of a Scots standard at the time. A century later a

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<sup>35</sup> Wilson 1915: Foreword

<sup>36</sup> Warnecke 2019

<sup>37</sup> Scots Language Centre 2021

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growing range of modern literature in Scots, supported by dictionaries, grammars and so on, also act as potential models of modern Scots. Do these publications have ‘no standardisation’? Obviously they do, as Costa explains,

While there is no Scots standard *de jure*, numerous debates have come to shape sets of expectations, if not of norms, as to what Scots should *de facto* look like...the writing of Scots is constrained by a number of covert rules, stratified through decades of academic and scholarly conversations.<sup>38</sup>

So, although there is no ‘official’ standard in the strict *Académie française* sense, through hundreds of years of printing Scots texts a soft standard has emerged, covering spelling and structure but also recognising some dialectical and other variants. This is more subjective and opinion-focused than we would think of as normal for a language, but written Scots certainly has conventions and traditions aplenty which, as with any other language, can be respected or ignored. The SLC guidance acknowledges, ‘We do have well known spellings that are favoured and patterns of grammar and syntax that are uniquely ours’. Again it is useful to distinguish The Scots language as the target for standardisation, rather than the vernacular Scottish language mix in all its richness and variety. There has never been any call to standardise vernacular spoken and dialectical Scots, which would in my view be neither desirable nor possible.

We should celebrate the communal ‘soft standardisation’ of written Scots just a little more, but where did these ‘norms’ come from? As we know from the opening section, the linguistic structure of literary and spoken Scots has been well documented for over a century. The first Scots dictionaries were published in the 19th century, and scholars began to chronicle the spoken and written language systematically in the early twentieth century. More than 40 years ago William Graham published the first edition of *The Scots Word Book*, a Scots-English and more significantly English-Scots wordlist<sup>39</sup> that would eventually find its realisation twenty years later in the *Essential Scots Dictionary*. In parallel there have been various expert-led initiatives to ‘harden’ the traditional standards by suggesting stricter orthographic (spelling) rules.<sup>40</sup> Without governmental support these were easy to ignore.

Should Scots have an official standard written form anyway? In my view it would not be difficult to stabilise and strengthen the existing soft standards. Much of the groundwork was done in the late 1990s to build on existing dictionary conventions. Apart from enabling official use of Scots, standardisation would formalise, clarify, and document the ‘linguistic distance’ between Scots and (Scottish) English, so ratifying its languageness. To illustrate this very point, at the beginning of his textbook *An Introduction to English Sociolinguistics* Trousdale asks his readers a question,

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<sup>38</sup> Costa 2017:50

<sup>39</sup> Graham 1977

<sup>40</sup> Scots Spellin Comatee 1998



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Consider the following language varieties: ‘German’, ‘English’, ‘Scots’, ‘American. Which of these are languages? Most people are of the opinion that German and English are definitely languages, American definitely not, and Scots is hard to classify...Because there is little consensus on the formal and functional differences between Scots and English, some people erroneously consider Scots to be ‘bad English’.<sup>41</sup>

Standardisation, and its systematic official implementation, would help end the confusion, at least regarding the status of the Scots language itself. As a useful by-product, some long-overdue standardisation of Scottish English might maybe be useful, too.

### 8. The loss of literacy

Scots is too often seen as just an oral language, which suggests that it is not something you can be literate in. However, when you think about it, all languages are oral except for sign language.<sup>42</sup>

But recently, for the first time, I’ve seen contemporary Scottish literature written in Scots. If people read a book in Scots and they see it legitimately written on a page in print, then we can start having discussions about how it’s so connected to people’s lives, often in ways they don’t realise.<sup>43</sup>

A major part of Scots’ claim for ‘languageness’ has always been its written form, and widespread literacy in the language was implied in the 1915 Wilson quote. Half a century later, I learned to read Scots informally at home via the then-ubiquitous comics *Oor Wullie* and *The Broons* at much the same time as I learned to read standard English at school. Scots was not entirely absent from our 1960s primary school classrooms either. We memorised poems by Burns and other Scots writers, most of which were in *The Manual* style. In fact, Scots reading books, containing stories, songs, and poetry, were still being printed for schools until the early 1970s. However, the unbroken tradition of informal and folk literacy around Scots that had survived for centuries began to be weakened in the late 1960s, and was all but obliterated in a couple of generations. The cost was not just ‘literacy’ in the technical sense, *Manual*-style Scots is still easily readable, but literacy as a broad cultural and shared community activity. I work in education, so it should come as no surprise that I am a big fan of all forms of literacy. You don’t have to be a radical like Freire to recognise the importance of literacy to empower individuals and communities. By the same token, illiteracy can be a weapon of social control.

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<sup>41</sup> Trousdale 2010:8

<sup>42</sup> Briggs 2021:6

<sup>43</sup> Len Pennie, quoted in Hinds, 2021

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So, what happened to Scots in the 1960s? Just as language was becoming a powerful symbol of defiance and decolonisation in Catalonia and elsewhere, the cohesive literary identity of Scots began to be undermined. Eccentric *ad hoc* written representations of Scottish speech were popularised in both elitist poetry and popular comedy alike. Long-familiar print conventions, the very foundation of Scots dictionaries, were scorned in favour of avant-garde or amusing 'eye-dialect' spellings. These deliberately exoticised and disconnected speakers from longstanding orthographic traditions. While often claiming to be anti-establishment, 'authentic,' and radical, this literary trope had the real effect of further disempowering and marginalising Scots and its speakers. The written representation of Scots began to descend into DIY chaos and many Scots speakers who went to school from the 1980s onwards seem unaware that a consistent written form ever existed. Macafee describes the 1970s as 'probably the nadir of education in Scots'.<sup>44</sup>

Here, I believe, is the origin of what Millar referred to earlier as 'dislocation', the disempowering separation of written and spoken forms of the language. Illiteracy was repackaged as authenticity, dictionaries were distained and standardisation efforts condemned as fogeyish finger-wagging. Moreover, as fewer people spoke Scots regularly in its purest forms anymore, written texts that amped up the Scots elements appeared forced or unnatural, especially to new readers who had rarely, if ever, seen 'full canon' written representations.

One other reason for dislocation is more nuanced, and it stems from a century of discrimination between rural 'good Scots' and urban 'bad Scots' variants. Although this distinction has largely faded, it continues to cast a long shadow. Some writers dismiss 'dictionary' Scots as an idealised, rigid, or purist form of the language, disconnected from both regional dialect and the fluid mixing of most vernacular speech. This positioning typically rejects any form of standardisation. It is difficult to overstate how bizarre this attitude is. Almost all other endangered minority languages, including Gaelic view standardisation and expansion of the language as quite normal and crucial for survival.

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<sup>44</sup> Commentary on Aitken 1981, 2015

### 9. What about the Scots dialects?

While written representations are indispensable in a highly literate society, written language always derives from speech, and gains its vitality from spoken forms. Linguists rightly talk about the ‘primacy’ of spoken language and, equally, speakers nowadays tend to judge any use on their own experience of spoken Scots. The Scots Language Centre guidance for Scots writers advises, ‘listen to your own Scots voice: How does it sound when you say a phrase or sentence?’<sup>45</sup> That voice is likely to have local tones. If the tenacity of Scots as a recognisable component of Scottish vernacular speech is remarkable, just as noticeable is the distinctiveness of local varieties. Irvine Welsh remarks,

I tell people in England or America that if you go out of Edinburgh into East Lothian or Fife, the accent and language changes. It’s to Scotland’s credit that such a small country can produce such diversity.<sup>46</sup>

Millar emphasises, ‘there is no one way to speak Scots’.<sup>47</sup> Vernacular Scots is usually grouped into five main dialects: Insular (Orkney and Shetland), Northern (North East Scots ‘Doric’), Central (including the major urban dialects), Southern (mainly the Borders) and Ulster. Clark<sup>48</sup> believes Scots’ very survival is a result of the tenacity of these local linguistic identities,

So whit kept it alive fae then tae nou? Naethin but the spoken dialects o the wirkin classes. Borders Scots, Glesga Scots, Dundonian an Doric an Orkney Scots; these were the life-support machines that saved the tongue fae oblivion. These are the reasons wiv a language left tae talk about.

Absolutely, but the downside is that the decline in literacy, minimal media exposure, negligible political action and lack of official standardisation have all undermined the holistic linguistic identity of Scots.

Scots has been fragmented as a language and, with the dearth of broadcasting in the remaining dialects, very few people have first-hand experience of the spectrum of Scots which is spoken across the country.<sup>49</sup>

Such was this concern that Scots language promoters sometimes fear people might have lost the idea that Scots ever existed as a national language. For example, after reminding visitors of the language status of Scots, the Scots Language Centre website expands, ‘Scots is the collective name for Scottish dialects known also as ‘Doric’, ‘Lallans’ and ‘Scotch’ or by more local names such as ‘Buchan’, ‘Dundonian’, ‘Glesca’ or ‘Shetland’’. It is hard to imagine equivalent Gaelic or Welsh resource centres describing their

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<sup>45</sup> Briggs 2021:7

<sup>46</sup> quoted in Trainer 2021

<sup>47</sup> Millar 2018:198

<sup>48</sup> Clark, T 2016

<sup>49</sup> Kay 1993:133

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languages as ‘a collection of dialects’, though it is just as truthful for those tongues. A natural consequence of this misconception is a claim that the Scots dialects are so different from each other they should even be considered as different languages. For example, North East Scots is generally called (The) Doric nowadays and, as Kay remarks, half-jokingly, ‘appears to have declared U.D.I. from Scots’.<sup>50</sup>

From a linguistic standpoint, the various dialects, when spoken in a reasonably pure form, are distinctive phonetically and in terms of local words used, but back in 1915 Wilson observed they were, ‘not at all sharply divided from each other’. After a century of dialect erosion and population movement, it is hard to imagine the dialects are any more divergent now. Eagle echoes Wilson as he describes the underlying cohesion of current spoken Scots.

[T]he differences between the (broad) Scots dialects are not as ‘striking’ as they may at first appear, all Scots dialects share the same underlying phonological system and much the same syntactical and morphological conventions. The different pronunciations of the same general Scots words are largely predictable, the differences are more often than not on the level of accent, particularly among the Central Scots dialects spoken south of the Tay.<sup>51</sup>

Kay is particularly critical of the the ‘myth’ that Scots is only intelligible within a small local area and and that, ‘one dialect speaker cannot communicate with another one from a different area’. This has served to reduce the the public use of Scots and reinforce ‘the local rather than the national identity with the tongue’.<sup>52</sup> In the OU course mentioned earlier, Bruce Eunson appreciates the ‘passion and feeling of pride’ evoked by Scots dialects, but also explains a significant disadvantage,

Whilst recognition of this element of Scots language is essential to properly grasp the sense of identity Scots speakers from different parts of Scotland have, the over-emphasis placed by Scots speakers on the diversity aspect of the language is one of the reasons for the division that keeps Scots language from truly uniting as a language with a community of 1.5 million speakers, and may hinder the chances of the figure rising in the future.<sup>53</sup>

Later in the OU course, Ashley Douglas implies there may be a ‘divide and rule’ political rationale to dialectism.

In the past, some politicians have been more likely to view Scots as a disparate group of dialects, as opposed to a coherent national language. They are also often more likely to be supportive to a regional dialect - such as Doric.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Kay 1993:157

<sup>51</sup> Eagle 2011

<sup>52</sup> Kay 1993:157

<sup>53</sup> Eunson 2019:21

<sup>54</sup> Douglas 2019:13

### 10. Scots as ‘nobody’s child’

Turning to politics, in comparison with most other minority languages, including Gaelic, civic activism to promote Scots is remarkably weak. I can think of three possible reasons.

1. Nowadays Scots is mainly spoken in working-class and rural communities who may lack the resources and social capital to self-organise. By contrast, Gaelic enjoys a determined and organised cadre of middle-class champions able to campaign for it. A self-sustaining Gaelic infrastructure, providing services associated with Gaelic culture and language, has gradually been built up and supported by public funding over decades. None of this exists for Scots.

2. Gaelic also benefits from having a readily available tried-and-tested template for Celtic minority language revitalisation, derived from Welsh and Irish. Gaelic is therefore promoted not just because it is the right thing to do (which it is) but also because the government knows *what* to do. Scots is more complex, still stigmatised, and is spoken in that perplexing mix with Scottish English. Without a revitalisation roadmap for Scots, and in the absence of popular agitation to demand one, Scots requires ‘top-down’ governmental action. In this regard, Scots faces yet another barrier, this time political.

3. The lack of political support is the most limiting factor for Scots. Unionist parties, who dominated Scottish politics for most of my lifetime, have a history of voting down Scots-positive policies, maybe fearing of the disruptive potential of another symbol of Scottish identity. The Scottish National Party (SNP), once the natural champions of Scots are nowadays ambivalent. Their former enthusiasm waned noticeably when so many people declared themselves to be Scots speakers in the 2011 Census. Perhaps the party began to consider the potential economic costs of support for Scots, and thus the political benefits of maintaining their own culture of silence. Only now at the time of writing is some minor political interest stirring again.

4. Scots' does not follow to traditional notions of a 'normal' language bound by purity and regularity. This has consequences not only for describing the language, but also for its use in education and government. According to Millar, ‘the lack of a strong idea of what Scots is probably leads to non-linguists shying away from too much discussion of the matter’.<sup>55</sup>

The outcome of such cloudy, competing, and contradictory notions of Scots is political and policy paralysis. Existing government action is

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<sup>55</sup> Millar 2005:195

ineffective, underfunded, and slow to implement, often appearing cynical or tokenistic. Policies and statements may refer to Scots as a minority language on occasion, but far more frequently it is framed as a hazily defined cultural asset or creative resource. Even if public and popular interest is resurfacing, vague and varied views on what Scots is and what to do with it undermine any attempts at consistent and ambitious action, especially when they risk being scrutinised by a hostile press and possibly sceptical public.

### **11. The threat to Scots**

In 2021 Scots was named on a list of 12 UK and European languages that are at risk of extinction.<sup>56</sup> The ranking was based on the UNESCO system with its six levels to determine how at-risk each language is. Rather than being decided by the number of speakers, classifications are mostly determined by the ‘intergenerational transmission’ of a language, that is whether older speakers pass on the language to their offspring. As Millar observes, ‘Everything flows from this relationship’.<sup>57</sup> He reports that even in its supposedly North East heartlands, the bairns are simply not learning Scots from the people around them.

The reasons are both social and economic. Older people, who in previous generations would have passed on their spoken language to their grandchildren, are now more isolated. Workplace Scots is disappearing as locally based manual labour declines. Leisure is increasingly anglicised; English-only radio, cinema, and television have long been thought of as dangers to Scots, and online social media is overwhelmingly in English. At the Scots end of the continuum, the distinctive grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and expressions are in decline. Simply put, adults now use fewer Scots structures and don't pass on what they do know to their bairns. With little exposure to Scots in schools and the media to counterbalance it, Scots terms are becoming less common and thus less useful. After all, it's pointless to use Scots words and phrases if you think no one ‘gets’ them. To save face, the natural tendency is to shift your speech habits to the English end of the continuum.

The risk is that Scots will become a hobby language like Manx on the Isle of Man where the last native speaker died in 1974 and the language is now preserved by enthusiasts. Scots will not perish just as dramatically as that, though. As Millar puts it, ‘sheer numbers of speakers mean that there is unlikely to be a time when a “no speaker” outcome will be possible. That these varieties will be less Scots and have more affinities with colloquial

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<sup>56</sup> Hebditch 2021

<sup>57</sup> Millar 2020:13

forms of (Standard) English is extremely likely'.<sup>58</sup> He notes that spoken Scots usages compete with and are influenced by the ubiquitous and dominant vernacular forms of English. He is concerned that with the loss of its Scots components, colloquial Scots language and maybe, by extension, Scots itself is becoming dialectised, mutating into the 'real' dialect of English that it never was in history. Scots may one day be reduced to just an accent, and even accents are vulnerable to globalisation. By the end of the century, our distinctive Scottish soundscape may be reduced to a faint murmur in the wind.

### 12. 'Ye'r no deid yet'

Before we fall completely into despondency, the 'death of Scots' has long been predicted, yet the language miraculously, defiantly, survives.

The Scots language can be heard in almost every community in Scotland. For many it is an integral part of Scottish life and is heard on a daily basis in the workplace, at sports and communal events, in shops and in the family.<sup>59</sup>

When the UK government finally agreed to include a question on Scots in the 2011 Census, one suspects they were secretly hoping that the 'inconvenient tongue' was dead, or nearly so. If so, the outcome was a shock. Over one and a half million people in Scotland identified themselves as Scots speakers, indeed more speakers than all other indigenous UK minority languages combined. Some had assumed that Scots had retreated to heartland areas such as Aberdeenshire and Shetland, but the Census revealed that Scots is spoken all over Scotland, from the cities to the Highlands.

These national statistics on Scots proved beyond doubt that the Scots language is a significant part of many people's lives in Scotland.<sup>60</sup>

The release of the Census figures in 2013 should have been a cause of celebration, a joyous affirmation of Scottish identity and culture. Unfortunately the timing could hardly have been worse. In the period leading up to the 2014 independence referendum, Scottish identity was being politicised and the Census results were suppressed. The official response was to belittle Scots speakers' ability to rate their own abilities, and then to try to dismiss the inconvenient result as 'bad data'.

Scots speakers have a right to expect a lot more. Any language that has endured seven centuries, most of them without government backing or money, ignored by politicians, and scorned by educators, deserves a little

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<sup>58</sup> Millar 2020:189

<sup>60</sup> Fitt 2019:8

<sup>59</sup> Fitt 2019:11

more love, and a little more understanding. In the next section we will see how sociolinguistics may help us unlock our own language.

### **Conclusion: What next for Scots?**

Scots is certainly not a dialect, for the simple reason that it includes numerous different dialects; but with equal certainty it is not a language in the full sense of that English and French are languages.<sup>61</sup>

For all the official and scholarly declarations of the language status of Scots, it still languishes in a linguistic limbo, not a dialect, slang, or bad English but not quite a language either. What McClure means by ‘full sense’ in the quote above is that Scots has not yet been developed and used as an official language with official standards. The German linguist Heinz Kloss infamously labelled Scots, ‘Halbsprache’ (‘half language’). Writing in 1967, Kloss made a distinction between ‘abstand’ languages and ‘ausbau’ languages. Abstand languages are ‘standalone’ due to their inherent linguistic individuality (e.g. English versus Gaelic) while ausbau languages are built up by a conscious effort of language planning and especially standardisation (e.g. Norwegian versus Swedish). In his original binary model, varieties that are neither abstand nor ausbau were classed as dialects. Scots, predictably, does not fit into simple binary distinctions and in 1984 Kloss came up with the Halbsprache concept for limbo varieties like Scots and Luxembourgish. In my view, ‘half’ seems rather uncharitable, given Scots’ linguistic richness and literary standards. Perhaps ‘Fastsprache’ (almost language) would have been a more accurate term. The concept of creating an ausbau standard language soon became a central focus for the planning and development of minority languages in Scotland as elsewhere. Ironically, fellow Halbsprache Luxembourgish achieved official ausbau status in 1984, and has since been developed to be used officially.

Many, though not all, of its supporters believe Scots should be treated as a full minority language like Gaelic, with at least some of the status, educational structure, speaker rights and financial support that entails. The recently-formed Oorvyce campaign group lists its demands, ‘tae increase the provision and fundin fir Scots and pit forrit the presence o the Scots leid in Scotland’s cultur and public life’,

Giein the leid offeecial status wi a Scots Leid Act providin for the foonin o a statutory Scots Leid Board.

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<sup>61</sup> McClure 1998:11



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Contributin tae public policy and political processes tae mak sure that Scots is taen tent o in futur leid policies.

Giein Scots a position as a ilkaday wirkin, livin, and eedicational leid at the hairt o Scottish society wi equal status tae the English, the Gàidhlig and the British Sign leids.

Giein Scots a position as an offeecial national leid o Scotland, baith in law an fact.

If we really want to save this unique aspect of our culture, and, in Oorvyce's words, 'mak siccar that Scots' lang history hauds forrit in the 21st century an ayont', Scots speakers and non-speakers alike must find a way to 'unlock' Scots from the cage of ignorance and bias that we have allowed it to rot in for far too long. And do it quickly, time is always the enemy of any minority language, especially one labelled 'at risk'.

Although beyond the scope of this publication, it is not difficult to imagine a pragmatic and workable revitalisation strategy to stabilise and develop the Scots language by applying the principles already discussed. But that is not the point. More importantly, we must strengthen our linguistic attachment to a tongue that has received so little affection over the last three centuries. We need to better understand its strengths and address its weaknesses. It is easy to agree Scots is a language, but what kind of language do we want it to be? What do we want to achieve with it? What does Scots mean to our linguistic and national identity? These are challenging questions; to unlock Scots fully we may end up having to unlock far more than our language.

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