



The Scots Language and Its European Roots

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The following is an edited version of a paper which the late Dr Sheila Douglas (1932-2013) gave at the Robert Gordon University's Heritage Conference in 1994. Sheila was a member of the SLRC's Council and our thanks are due to her and her family for giving permission to allow this paper to be reproduced on this site.

In the North of Europe there is a family of languages all of which bear certain resemblances to one another, most of which have been subject to each other's influences as well as those of other languages and all of which are consequently of a mixed character, as many languages are.

These are the Germanic languages, which in turn are only one of the groups of languages that form the Indo-European language map. English and Scots are two of these Germanic languages as are for example, German and Dutch, Norwegian and Danish.

No one argues against the separate existence of any of these languages, except for Scots. What are the grounds for this argument? The most common one is that Scots is just a dialect of English. To anyone who knows anything at all about Scots, or language in general, this is manifestly absurd. First of all, Scots is not one dialect but several. Put a man from Wick, another from Aberdeen, a third from Perth, in a room with a Fifer, a Glaswegian and a Borderer, and see if they all speak the same dialect. They are just as distinct from one another as a Scouse, a Cockney, a Geordie, a man from Avon, Dorset or Devon would be. Yet Scots is the name applied to the way people speak everywhere north of the Tweed, which would seem in itself an admission that this is a separate language.

Certainly it was not until the 15th century that the term *Scottis* was used for the language by Gavin Douglas and by that he meant the literary Scots he helped to forge out of the spoken language of the majority of the population, along with the other Medieval Makars who, like Geoffrey Chaucer in England,

raised the status of the language they spoke to the position hitherto occupied by Latin. It had of course existed along with Norman French for some time, until the barons gave that tongue up in favour of the majority language. In calling it Scottis, Gavin Douglas was appropriating a term that had earlier had been used for the Gaelic of Scotland and Ireland. In an age of growing nationalism and the feeling of being one nation, however diverse within itself, one can see why Gavin Douglas chose to call his language by a name that the whole country had come to apply to itself. He obviously felt it was different from the language spoken over the Border in the country from which Scots under Bruce and Wallace had fought to free themselves two centuries earlier. In fact the Lowland tongue had been called English and was derived from the Northumbrian dialect of the Anglo-Saxons heavily influenced by the Norse of the Vikings. In Scottish that influence was retained and can be demonstrated to this day, while in England it existed most strongly in the North and did not last to the same extent in standard English.

This Norse-influenced English formed the basis of the language later to become known as Scots. But, as languages always do in different places, it developed in a different way, was subject to different influences and was used to create a quite distinctive literature. For example there was a strong Gaelic influence on Scots which English did not receive. To be a separate language related to English as well as to Danish and German, makes Scots no different from other Germanic languages. Of course nowadays there is no Standard Scots in the way as there is Standard English. There is no standard Scots spelling, just a series of allowable alternatives based on dialectal variation.

Efforts to recreate a literary Scots have not met with conspicuous success. The Lallans devised by writers of the 20th century Renaissance some of them great poets, all too often seems artificial and full of affectation to most Scots readers. It suffers from what I like to call the "ettle to jalouse" syndrome - that is the determination to use old Scots words at all costs, whether they sound natural or effective or not. However this may just be a characteristic of an early stage of development. For one thing is sure - one cannot create a literary language in a short space of time, any more than you can bring a Standard language into being by passing a law. It has to evolve and it may well be doing so in spite of the drawbacks noted.

If Scots were to be used by the media, not all the time, but regularly as a normal practice; if schools and colleges were to treat Scots as an acceptable form of expression; if people in everyday life were to feel able to express

themselves in Scots without feeling ashamed of it for any reason, then we might see the emergence of a Standard Scots. The fact that it does not exist at the moment is not an argument against bringing it about.

There is also the equally mistaken theory that Scots is a "corrupted" form of English. This word carries with it a suggestion of inferiority that cannot be reconciled with the fact that our so-called "corrupted" language has from very early times produced a literature of the very highest quality, from the Medieval Makars to Hugh MacDairmid and beyond. The people who hold this viewpoint can never explain how the language came to be "corrupted" or even what exactly they mean by the word and why that makes it inferior. In linguistic terms of course, it is meaningless, but of course linguistic terms are not what these critics have in mind.

What they are expressing are social and political prejudices that come from their blinkered view of their country in its European context. It is noteworthy that those who claim Scots is just a form of English are often the same people who say they cannot understand anyone who speaks Scots, even if it is only Scots-accented English. If it isn't all that different, why is it so hard to understand? If they can't understand it, perhaps it's because it has for example, so many Scandinavian words in it. I shall return to this point in due course.

First, I want to denounce the poisonous racism inherent in the system by which generations of Scots have been taught to reject their own language. "Speak properly" has long meant for Scottish school-children "Speak English". This is a monstrous piece of cultural oppression and something I am glad to report our Universities and schools are beginning to banish from their curricula. To speak of the three I know about - there may be others - Professor Graham Caie of Glasgow University who significantly has experience of living and working in Denmark, devotes a considerable amount of time to teaching Scots, as does Professor Charles Jones of Edinburgh University, and Derrick McClure and Caroline Macafee at Aberdeen University.

All this means we are likely to get more language teachers in our schools who know something about Scots. The Scots which students in these three Universities bring with them is accepted and studied instead of being regarded as something to be eliminated. But as I know from experience, those teachers who at present try to teach Scots language and literature in our schools are still up against barriers of prejudice and ignorance among teachers and parents.

Often work with pupils is made more difficult by the influence of the home, as well as the ethos of the school, which may both be resolutely opposed to Scots.

During my teaching career I had to disabuse quite a lot of my pupils of the idea that Scots is some kind of slang and I experienced more than once the use of Scots intended as a form of insolence. These were quite easy things to deal with. One can easily explain the difference between slang and dialect, show the long history of the usage of Scots in literature and defuse attempts at making speaking Scots a way of giving cheek by switching the conversation into Scots. But to get people to understand that Scots is a living language to be proud of, one has to try to help them to grasp the nature of language itself, which is not so easy to do. Present day Scots is often described as "eroded" or "diluted", as if there were something unnatural about this. But it is part of a natural process, akin to that which affects the landscape.

To say Scots is different from what it was one or two hundred years ago is of course true: a living language does not stay the same; it changes constantly, and you can't put the clock back or stop it. All languages evolve, losing words that are no longer needed and acquiring words for new ideas, inventions or purposes. On the other hand, it is true that Scots has suffered heavy blows to its development, from the publication of the Authorised Version of the Bible in English, to the moving of the royal court to London in 1603, to the Union of the Parliaments in 1707, since when Scots has been actively discouraged for political and social reasons, since it is no longer the language of law and government or of the more pretentious sections of society.

The trouble is that the establishment has tried to disguise these political and social reasons as educational and linguistic ones. Scots have been given the impression by their teachers that there is something inherently wrong or inferior about their mither tongue and consequently it has had to be confined to the playground, the pub and the tartan variety show, the back lanes of Scottish life, rather than the main street. Fortunately this has not been fatal to it, but it did upset the continuity of our cultural development until MacDiarmid came along to raise it to the heights once more.

In the meantime, Scots have had to become bi-lingual, which is not in itself either unusual or disadvantageous. The trouble is that Scots have also lost a sense of identity and the confidence that goes with it: that is what has been taken from us by the pernicious system that seeks to trample on the Scots

language. In the political situation we are in today drastic action is called for in education and in every branch of Scottish culture. The modest changes taking place in education as regards language, literature and history have to be stepped up. It's not good enough for anything Scottish to be just an option that pupils or teachers can choose if they like or if they have time. In what other country of Europe would you find such a state of affairs? It's all the more tragic when we have had such a wonderful literature, that it should be so neglected. Look through the bookshelves of Scottish schools and see how much Scots literature, prose and poetry you'll find among the English authors. The fact that we have had this century a poetic renaissance of world-shattering proportions seems to have passed the majority of our population by.

Most of us have been brought up to write off our own language, our literature and our history as so much lumber from the past, something to be discarded as of no value, only of interest to antiquarians and nutty folklorists. Scots language in particular is to be avoided at all costs. Do other Europeans think like this? Certainly not in Denmark or Germany. In Switzerland, which has four languages, it's quite normal for people to speak at least two of them, as well as English, for their vital tourist trade. In Scotland, which was a European country on good terms with countries like France Spain and Holland when England was fighting them, we must stop thinking as if we were under colonial rule and start living in a way more in keeping with our European roots.

To return to the link I referred to between Danish and Scots, it might well open a few eyes if I were to give some illustration of the extent to which these two languages share a vocabulary. I would ask for the following sample to be considered as proof of the fact that Scots is not merely some variation of English or any kind of aberration by a whole population over a period of centuries. It is a language with European roots and connections.

The words in this list are pronounced exactly the same or almost exactly the same in Danish as in Scots and have the same meaning :- SCOTS DANISH aff af alane alene bairn barn bane ben blae bleg blad blad brent braende claith klaide clart klatte coo ko cruik krykke cruisie kruse dook dykke drucken drukken efter efter forbye forbi fremmit fremmed gang gang gavel gavl greet graede grey-hairit graharet grue gru grund grund hals hals het hed hoose hus ken kunne, kende kilt kilte kirk kirke lang lang ligg ligge lirk lirke lowe lue mair mer moose mus oot ud reek rog rowan ron saip saepe sark saerk sang sang seck saek seik syg siccar sikker skaith skade skellum skaelm skelly skele smaa sma smiddy smedje smool smugle smit smitte soor syre starn, stern stjerne stane sten.

This list is not exhaustive : a Danish friend who visited Scotland some years ago for about ten days, made a list even in that short time, of over three hundred words common to both languages and pronounced the same or almost the same. What conclusions can we draw from these examples? The Danish words, like the Scots words, have a common Germanic ancestor as does Anglo-Saxon but the fact that these words exist in parallel in Scots and Danish in the present day while their English equivalents where they did once exist do not exist now, points to the divergent paths these languages have followed. Can we therefore say that English is just a dialect or just a corrupt form of the original? I think not. In the same way it is just as wrong to say Scots is just a dialect or a corruption of English. This comparison of Scots and Danish, superficial though it may seem, is surely sufficient to show that Scots has strong European roots and is not just an off-shoot of English.

Other links can be made with other languages, such as French, through words that exist in Scots but not in English. This reflects the Auld Alliance and the fact that there were links between the royal houses of both countries, rather than the effects of conquest or takeover. SCOTS FRENCH arles arles ashet assiette aumry armoire bien bien braw brave douce doux, douce dour dur fash facher gigot gigot tassie tasse.

Dr J Derrick McClure in his excellent book 'Why Scots Matters' also points out the list of words Scots has acquired from Dutch, including the following, some of which will have a familiar ring to anyone from the North-East:- craig, cuit, dowp, bucht, farrow, heck, owsen, callant, doit, howff, redd and scone. Similarities between Scots and German and Scots and Norwegian can also be shown, including the famous "stursuker" (phonetic spelling) for "vacuum cleaner".

Scots of course also has words that have come into it from our country's other language, Gaelic. Many place names and surnames show this connection as well as words such as the following brief selection:- glen, ben, loch, strath, clachan, kyle, ceilidh, banshee and boorach. Although Gaelic is now spoken only by 2% of the population as a first language, it is now being learned by many other Scots keen to enrich themselves culturally. Gaelic is also a language with European roots linked to other languages like Irish, Welsh and Breton.

In this present day, when the European community is drawing together, part of its attraction is not the uniformity so many people dread as a consequence of centralisation, but the rich variety of cultures that is one of the means by which one country learns to respect another. If countries are to retain their own identity, they must retain their languages. Thus a plea for recognition of the Scots language as a medium for Scots culture is not an attempt to hang on to something that is outdated, but a way of affirming ourselves as twenty-first century Scots, a people with European roots.

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