

The following article was written by Michael Hance, Director of the Scots Language Centre, and first appeared in the online journal Bella Caledonia on 16 March 2016.

SHRIEKING PRIVILEGE

“When you’re accustomed to privilege equality feels like oppression. A carefully constructed argument using the every day example of workplace relationships that was widely shared on social media explains in straight forward terms what happens when those used to having their status and rights taken for granted encounter an obstacle – in this case someone not prepared to be pushed out of the way. The person used to being granted leave of way suddenly feels oppressed and suggests that it’s the behaviour of the other that needs remedied.”

- Chris Boeskool, *The Huffington Post*, 3 March 2016

Appropriately I found this article on my facebook news feed the day after the Daily Mail and Stephen Daisley, an STV digital content editor, launched bitter attacks on the Scots language. Their shrieking sounded a lot to me like privilege meeting equality.

The background to the story is this – the author of the Mail’s schlock piece had recycled an old story about the Scots element on the Scottish Government’s web site which the Times had already covered a couple of weeks ago. Essentially there had been some formatting and editing errors on the government’s web site and as a result some of the Scots content didn’t make sense. Words had been strung together and there were some grammatical errors. The words that had been strung together ended up being described by journalists as ‘made-up’. Being made-up is the key charge that those hostile to Scots often level at the language and clearly they were thrilled to find evidence of it.

The not so subtle sub text to this charge is that Scots itself is not real, it’s a figment of some rabid and politically motivated imagination. There are many problems with this argument – the principal one being that the words aren’t made up at all. Possibly some are slightly out of date and maybe used slightly clumsily but they are real words – you can find them in a dictionary.

Indeed most of the people who write in Scots have generally eschewed the creation of neologisms, unlike, for example, language campaigners in Friesland who have a special department at the Fryske Akademy dedicated to the creation of Friesian replacements for words loaned from English and Dutch.

The words themselves are very real but, and this is where critics might have made some sensible observations, the register is one in which Scots is not usually found. Scots like most languages which have ever been spoken has not developed the range of registers that languages like English, French and Swedish have. It hasn't developed in that way because a range of political, social and economic factors meant it didn't undergo the processes which have lead other languages to be used in a wide variety of situations. The study of these factors happens within the academic discipline of socio-linguistics

But not having developed a wide range of registers is not unique to Scots. As speakers of minority languages have grown to understand the nature of linguistic prejudice – namely that it is groundless in linguistic terms and merely a manifestation of cultural, economic and political relationships – so we have increasingly sought to have our language forms represented in places that were previously off limits. In the case of Scots this has taken the form of a few pages on the Scottish Government's web site. Sometimes placing Scots somewhere like that, rather than say in the *Broons* or *Oor Wullie* strip cartoons, means that the authors of the material need to create a type of language – a register – from scratch. When you write this sort of material in English that's not part of the deal. The language is already well-known, it follows certain conventions, is replete with stock phrases and expressions. When you produce something similar in Scots it can and usually does look clumsy, awkward, gauche. But so what, does that really matter? Possibly, and those critiquing the Scottish Government's web site could quite reasonably have looked at and criticised the register, but instead they focused on editing errors and in some cases the archaic words used.

That's because the editing errors served a purpose which was to construct a narrative round the claim that the entire language is 'made up'. Editing errors are editing errors and no matter how hard you try they'll never be 'made-up' words. The use of archaic or seldom used language is another question that ought to be discussed and might have been the subject of considered and thoughtful responses. But of course those doing the criticising – if their subsequent tweets, posts and articles are anything to go by – have a very limited knowledge of basic linguistics. Not that that stops them from acting like experts but then again arrogance and ignorance are well-known bedfellows and concepts like slang, language, accent and dialect found themselves all mixed up in a stew of soor-faced silliness.

Anyway, in what world should 'made-up' and seldom used words incite such hysterical responses? It's hard to imagine anything less harmful to the general human condition than encountering a few unusual words now and again. The underlying problem isn't the words it's the challenge to linguistic and cultural orthodoxies that their appearance on a web site presents. Orthodoxies tend to be accepted uncritically even by those who imagine themselves to be thoughtful. Sometimes when given points of view are challenged the responses can be massively out of proportion to the new information received.

And in this case the common sense point of view about language held by many in the commentariat and elite society in Scotland combines with a sense of language entitlement to produce frothing at the mouth expressions of reaction and shameless

provincial ladder climbing. It's privilege bumping into the tiniest teeniest manifestation of equality and claiming oppression.

Daisley for example claims that Scots is 'pretend slang' though of course such a suggestion is utterly meaningless in linguistic terms. In another tweet he exhorts speakers to use their language 'at work, in job interviews, at the bank'. Of course those are exactly the places people do speak Scots. In some parts of Scotland Scots is the *lingua franca* – it's what you speak at work, in job interviews and in the bank. The notion that 'the way I do things is the only legitimate rule against which all other things must be measured' is not novel. Indeed it is very widespread but it doesn't suggest the presence of an enquiring mind. Nor does it reveal the truth.

The existence of Scots in our linguistic landscape – the term language experts use to describe language in its written form in places like street signs, information notices and business names – reveals the presence of the language in contemporary life and the existence of a large Scots speaking community. Take the Scots word 'piece' for example. If it wasn't widely known how could we have a sandwich shop chain called 'Piece Box' or an internet café with the name 'Bites and Pieces'. How about 'Bawbags' underwear, signs urging visitors 'tae sneck the gate', words like neep, tattie, loon, quine, hoose, fash, fitbaw – the list goes on and on. Scots is all around you – look and listen and you'll find it easily.

And let's mention too the facebook groups for Scots speakers: ['Wir Midder Tongue'](#) for Shetland Dialect speakers, ['Doric Tongue'](#) for North East folk, the always lively [Scots Language Forum](#) group, and [Scottish Memes and Banter](#), a hugely popular social media group awash with Scots language words and expressions. Those are some of the locations 'contemporary Scots' can be found and, you know what, with the exception of a few adventurous creators of neologisms, the language used in these places is not 'made up' at all.

This country is one of the most interesting, lively and exciting linguistic spaces in Europe. We have a thrilling range of language forms. In every street, every train, every boring old supermarket you can encounter a symphony of voices and accents. Wonderful voices replete with the cadences and words of our long language history. Words and expressions that would have been used and understood by those who preceded us centuries since. Scots jumbles alongside the arresting accents and idiosyncratic grammar of Scottish Standard English. Many of our place names reveal the Gaelic and Brythonic past and in the islands Gaelic and Scandinavian influenced Scots live on. How wonderful it all is and what a splendid linguistic space we are privileged to inhabit. It's something that makes us unique and special and, really, what could be wrong with that?

There's nothing wrong with criticism. It's hard to take and easy to give. But let's accept that it's really only legitimate when the people dishing it out know what they're talking about. Until they do my advice to them would be 'haud yer wheesht!'

Michael Hance