

LANGUAGE, POLITICS AND POWER

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Language has always been a political issue, violently so at times. In 1948 Pakistan ordained Urdu as its sole national language. The result was mass discontent, particularly among the Bengali-speaking majority of East Bengal. Rising tension led to a ban on public protest, a ban defied in 1952 by students and language activists in Dhaka. Dozens were killed when the police opened fire on the protesters.

The date, 21 February, is commemorated as International Mother Language Day, set up by UNESCO to mark global linguistic diversity and the rights of native speakers. It's not a big day in Scotland, even though we are a small nation of five million people with three native languages birlin roon oor lugs: Scottish English; Scots; Gaelic.

ALMOST DIED OUT

The Gaels, particularly, have violent repression to recall. Their language was forcibly put down after the 1745 Jacobite Rising ended at Culloden a year later. Classical Gaelic was removed from schools, dialect tongues were ripped from mouths, and the English was forced in. Those in power feel threatened by the powerless, and need to exercise control of them. Our oldest indigenous language almost died out.

Meanwhile, the nation's Scots speakers were voluntarily suppressing their own tongue, an energetic enterprise they'd engaged in since the 1707 Union of the parliaments. Prior to that, Scots was the country's official language. In it, the business of state, kirk, education and commerce was conducted. It was the everyday speech of rich and poor, from gentry to commoner, academic to illiterate. That was to change.

With the formation of Great Britain, purging the guid Scots tongue became essential. Parliamentarians, late of Edinburgh, strove to avoid mockery of their speech among the clipped consonants of Westminster. Merchants growing rich on trade with England's newly available colonies discovered an interest in language and style. Societies formed for "Promoting the Reading and Speaking of the English language in Scotland". The actor Thomas Sheridan, an Irishman, was hired to teach them how to pronounce it – their attempts hilariously satirised almost two centuries later by Robert McLellan in his 1948 play *The Flouers o' Edinburgh*.

NORTH BRITISH

The notion of being North British rather than Scottish excited the luminaries of the Enlightenment. David Hume and Adam Smith strove to excise all Scotticisms from their writings in order to be understood by southern neighbours in the new unified country. In his autobiography, Alexander Carlyle wrote "To every man bred in Scotland the English language was in some respects a foreign tongue." Diarist James Boswell observed that Scotsmen were surely no smarter than Englishmen although the former could understand the latter, but not vice versa.

The cause, of course, lay with God. The Reformation had changed more than the state religion of Scotland. The 1560 Geneva Bible and 1611 King James Version were the most common books in any household, and the most read. Ministers and parishioners spoke the vernacular leid, but the presbyterian deity, by his written word, did not. Bilingualism with Latin eroded. The voice of God was English.

Despite Carlyle's assertion, the incomprehensible North Brits were readily familiar with the language of South Britain through reading their good book. England's citizens had, on the other hand, no recourse to the language of their new partners. Nor were they motivated to learn it. With communication a necessity, a remedy had to be found. One was in hand. Throughout Scotland, dominies took to swinging the tawse with admirable enthusiasm at the sound of every burr and velar fricative. In this brave union, Scottish children would be taught, not learned, their lessons.

The lessons learned were not as intended. While the upwardly mobile attempted to cast off the auld tongue, those who kept the country functioning didnae bother their bahookies. In fishing and farming, the language of exchange was Scots. Down pits, up moors, in factories, foundries, shipyards and in homes, the leid continued unabated. Teachers strove to encourage students to "get on" through speaking English but the majority of pupils were not destined for politics or the professions, and their guid Scots tongues, surreptitiously, survived.

CONVINCED OF THEIR OWN UNFITNESS

The psychological results were dire. Robbed of authority and respect, Scots lost its title and self-knowledge. It acquired other descriptors: slang; patter; not speaking properly; language of the gutter; inferior; corrupt. Paulo Friere, the Brazilian philosopher, states that "Self-deprecation is another characteristic of the oppressed,

which derives from their internalisation of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything – that they are sick, lazy and unproductive – that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness.” The speakers of Scots learned to depreciate their own language, their voices and what they might say. They learned to be worthless.

The educators, of course, had tripped themselves up. Despite the BBC invention of Forth, Clyde and Moray estuaries, it’s not possible to teach the geography of Scotland without lochs, glens, braes, bens, burns and firths. Place names are Scots and Gaelic. Janitors, not caretakers, look after our buildings. Advocates defend us in law. Pinkies, not little fingers, crook when taking tea. We stay where we live, take the huff, go down the road, use terms like outwith and never say nothing that isn’t Scots in some way or another.

We’re possessive where the English are not, saying “your dinner’s ready” as if there was any possibility the meal was for someone other – a neighbour or passing stranger perhaps. On retiring for the night, we announce “I’m off to my bed” or “Get awa tae yer bed”. But only in Scots is it necessary to proclaim whose bed you’ll be going to. We tell foreigners we speak English. They notice we don’t. Lacking education in it, our teachers have forgotten what is Scots and what is not so they no longer teach English in our schools. They say they do. They think they do. But an English editor would copiously red-pencil every lesson.

LINGUISTIC WEALTH

There are riches here to be plumbed. The smallest child is rapidly bilingual. Without any assistance to do so, children become adept at translating between home, peer group and school. Those considered poor at language are usually fluent in the mither tongue, a source of reward and encouragement which is cruelly ignored. Pupils who might shine are undermined. The opportunity is missed to improve English by extracting Scots vocabulary, grammar and syntax to teach alongside as an equally important and valid language. Instead of capitalising on the ability Boswell noted, we throw linguistic wealth oot the windae, and then complain of difficulty with languages.

A good grasp of Scots, in conjunction with English, opens up access to European languages. Shared words include efter, lang, grund, sang, kirke (Danish), douce, gigot (French), dowp, howff, redd, ingang, uitgang (Dutch). More occur in Norwegian

– bra(w), Swedish – polis, Frisian – twa, and German. Danish TV star of Borgen, Sidse Babett Knudsen, said hearing the Scots language made her feel at home. “The weird thing is I kept on hearing what I thought were Danish people. I had to listen again before I realised it was just Scottish people chatting away.” Recognising familiar sounds in Europe’s languages cuts both ways. As he lay dying, Goethe asked for “Mehr licht!”

SCOTS INTO THE STREET

Mair licht is now being shed. In my lifetime, Scots has come out of the house into the street, even on Sundays. It can now be heard in shops, from those who serve customers and clients. There are Indian restaurants where curries are described as no very nippy, a wee bit nippy, and awfy nippy. The leid has cheerfully adapted to email, texts, facebook. On a questionnaire asking about home language, children, for the first time, are writing “Scots” or “Scottish”. Now that pupils are no longer belted for its use, the tongue of the majority has returned to schools.

Many teachers, though by no means all, are discovering the value of this suppressed first language. At the behest of the director of education, and with the assistance of publisher Itchy Coo’s Matthew Fitt, Falkirk district introduced an extensive programme of teaching the teachers and, in turn, the bairns. The curriculum for excellence provides for development of this language children bring to school. Nurseries and primaries teach the vocabulary through games, body parts, poems and stories. In secondaries, well behind the curve of reclamation, there is now a compulsory Higher question on Scottish Literature. It’s long-overdue. What country doesn’t teach its own literature, and what do we think of ourselves if we don’t? The suggested texts are penned in Scottish English and Scots.

Future sociologists will see this re-emergence more clearly than we can. But I have played a small part in it, visiting schools around the country as a writer where I used work in Scots and found it made a greater connection than work in English. Through Scottish Book Trust’s Live Literature fund, other writers were doing the same. Teachers who had not used Scots noticed the reaction; delight from their pupils, the engagement of those normally silent during language lessons.

A few years back, in Glenrothes, while doing a workshop for students about to move into further or higher education, I set up the task of writing a dramatic monologue through discussion of how people actually speak in Fife. One particularly effective

result was, the young writer said, written in Cardenden Scots. Her home language was Punjabi. She spoke and read Urdu and Arabic, had Highers in English and German. This, she told me, was the first time she'd been asked to write in Scots, though she'd spoken it among her friends all of her life.

There have been many activists, from the Burns Society to the Scots Language Society. The Scots Language Centre is now government-funded, its resources available online at www.scotslanguage.com. Arguably, the rise in interest and awareness has been fuelled by academics: Scottish Language Dictionaries based at the University of Edinburgh, available at www.scotsdictionaries.org.uk; the Scots Corpus of Texts and Speech run by the University of Glasgow, online at www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk; also at Glasgow, our one chair of Scottish Literature, currently filled by Professor Alan Riach. We should note that – one chair of Scottish Literature, none for Scots Language, for nineteen universities.

There are many other resources, some community-created like Shetland ForWirds, others by educational needs, like Adult Literacies Online. Without doubt, the return of a parliament to the people of Scotland has caused an increase in confidence, greater self-awareness, the knowledge that we can, as individuals, make a difference to our political situation and how we might want to live. Having attained the means, the voices of Scotland begin to clamour for recognition.

ACTIVE PARLIAMENTARY GROUP

There is an active Cross-Party Parliamentary Group for the Scots language convened by Rob Gibson MSP. Several politicians contribute to debates in their ain tongue. Carrick MSP Adam Ingram seeks to promote it through cultural events and boost tourism, saying “In this part of the world, Burns country, the Scots language is still alive and well.” A thoroughly modern politician, Dr Alasdair Allan, Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland’s Languages, speaks Scots, Gaelic and English. As Minister for Culture, Mike Russell set up the Ministerial working group for the Scots language. Reporting to his successor in 2010, its extensive recommendations are still being put into effect.

These asserted the need for a Scots language policy in every public body, and the hope for natural growth into business, law, health and emergency services, where the language of communication can be vital, particularly for people under duress when native tongues are most likely to surface. In education, a dedicated permanent

Scots Language/Scottish Literature Bureau was suggested to meet the growing needs of teachers. The Studying Scotland resource, launched in March 2012, has input from the Scots Language Centre and Scottish Language Dictionaries.

Recommendations were made for a nationwide network of co-ordinators who could deliver Scots language training and advice on resources in all schools – the model for which already operates in Falkirk – and chairs in our literature and language in every university. Teacher training in the leid was requested, and a Continuous Professional development programme. Recently, the General Teaching Council for Scotland held an award ceremony for Professional Recognition for Scots Language Teaching at the Scottish parliament, a first for the language.

TRI-LINGUAL NATION

Other recommendations dealt with broadcasting, and its poor representation of Scots, with Visit-Scotland, Creative Scotland, and the National Theatre of Scotland all reminded that this is a tri-lingual nation. The working group strove to impress how Scots can be used, reflected fairly and celebrated, and the benefits of doing so.

In 2000, the UK government enshrined Scots in the European Charter for Regional and Minority languages as the second largest language of Britain, but only under Part II provisions. Part III – measures to promote the use of regional or minority languages – applies only to Welsh, Gaelic and Irish. Scots requires that commitment too. A language has to be written and read to achieve and maintain a literature, and literacy, in it.

Education, writing and publishing all feed reading. The dearth of education in it means there are few living writers of Scots. Those who use it are self-taught: Sheena Blackhall, Anne Donovan, Bill Herbert, James Kelman, Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead, Christine de Luca, Mary McCabe, Liz Niven, James Robertson, Irvine Welsh, Rab Wilson, among others. To write in it is normally an exercise in embracing financial poverty. Publishers are wary, reluctant to risk investment in a language few folk read. Speakers comfortable with the leid in their mouths find it unfamiliar and foreign to their eyes.

THE BROONS AND OOR WULLIE

Since 1936, the only regular written form of Scots seen by readers was the Sunday Post comic strips of “The Broons” and “Oor Wullie”. When I wrote my first Scots poem, the spelling of it prompted a phone call to my mother. She had taught me to speak this language. Surely she would know how to spell it. She’d had a good Scottish education and certainly knew how to spell any English word that might be wanted. “Whit?” she queried when I asked. “Breenge,” I repeated. “How do you spell it?” “Och,” she retorted. “Ye dinnae spell it, ye say it!”

Since then I have acquired The Concise Scots Dictionary (Aberdeen University Press), the Scots Thesaurus (Polygon), The Scots Dialect Dictionary (Waverley Books), many similar and smaller publications, old and new, and most recently, the Modren Scots Grammar by Christine Robinson (Luath Press).

But, for its literature, our mither tongue depends on support from Creative Scotland to see the light of day. Book grants help, but they don’t create sales or royalties. Only readers do that. If Robert Burns was writing now, he would struggle to publish. Rather than becoming an overnight sell-out sensation, he would barely be read. The solution to such illiteracy must start in schools, with teachers and textbooks. There are Welsh medium, Gaelic medium, and even Manx medium schools which demonstrate the benefits of immersion education for any doubters. The same can be achieved in Scots.

Three centuries of abasement have left our language badly wounded, but recovering. Its speakers are barely aware that they speak it. Listeners, because they understand it, believe they hear English when they don’t. To take its deserved place in a modern world, Scots requires the status of knowledge and comprehensive support. In Wales, they say “Cenedl heb iaith yw cenedl heb galon” – a nation without a language is a nation without a heart.

Only Scotland has care and custody of the Scots language. Gerry Hassan (Scotsman, 2 February 2013) wrote “It is time that we Scots had the confidence to believe in ourselves and realise that this is a moment for change beyond politics and politicians which is about our long-term maturing and changing our collective psychology, challenging ourselves to do better, be bolder and braver.” Confidence comes from being free to speak out, knowing we’ll be heard, from valuing our many voices.

We owe this to ourselves, our children, and the future, to finally and fully bring to an end this appalling cultural oppression. Far from being celebrated on 21 February, oor mither leid is crying out for help, like the boy buried under the Royal Mile tenement collapse of 1861 who, on hearing rescuers above, cried “Heave awa, lads. Ah’m no deid yit!”