



Brief Analysis of the 2011 Census Results

1. Background

In March 2011 the census of Scotland asked for the first time in its history whether people could speak, read, write or understand Scots. The inclusion of a question on Scots came as the result of years of campaigning and research which had their origins as far back as 1993. On 26 September 2013 the National Records of Scotland (who replaced the former General Register Office for Scotland) reported the results of the census in relation to language.

2. Scots Language Totals

The total number of people who stated they could either, speak, read, write or understand Scots was:

1.9 million (38% of the population).

Out of this figure the number of people aged 3 and over who said they could speak Scots was:

1,541,693 (30% of the population).

3. Cultural & Political Setting

In order to gain an appreciation of the cultural and political context within which the Scots language is set, is interesting to note the following sets of figures for 2011:

Population

Total Population of Scotland: 5,295,403.

Of this total, 83% were born in Scotland and 17% outside Scotland.

National Identity

Those who felt Scottish only: 3,306,138 (62% of the population)

Those who felt both Scottish and British: 968,759 (18% of the population)

Those who felt British only: 443,275 (8% of the population)

4. Scots Language Regional Totals

The figures for the most Scots-speaking regions may be broken down into, (i) the biggest single figures, and (ii) the biggest percentages as part of the regional council population.

Biggest single figures

Glasgow City Council Region: 142,111

Fife Council Region: 123,205

Aberdeenshire Council Region: 119,078

Biggest percentages of regional council population

Aberdeenshire Council Region: 49%

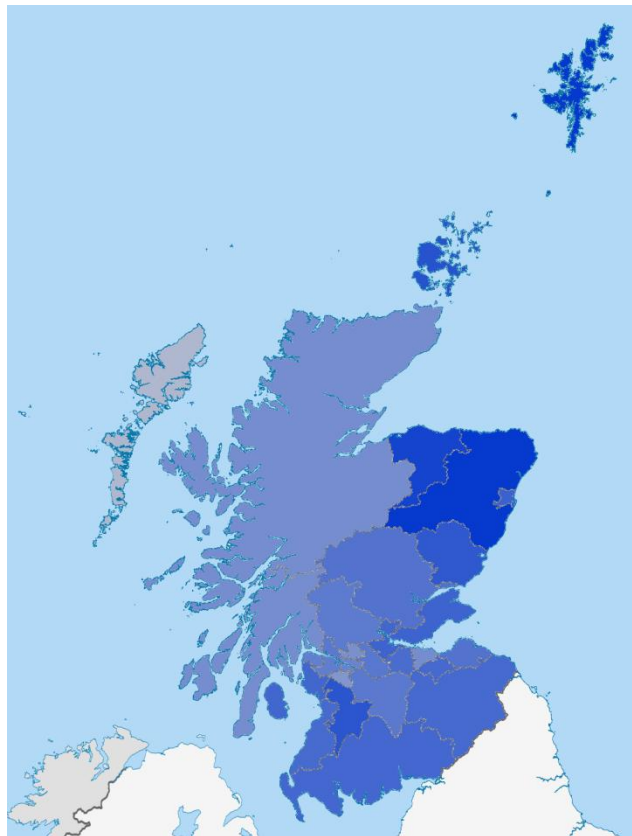
Shetland Council Region: 49%

Moray Council Region: 45%

In other words, almost half the population in Aberdeenshire and Shetland council regions, and nearly half in Moray, stated they could speak Scots.

5. Predictable Map

The map below, which was created and supplied by Thomas Widman, shows the levels of Scots-speaking according to the various regions of Scotland in 2011.



Even without a census, it has long been common knowledge among anyone with a degree of familiarity with Scots communities, or with linguistic expertise in the field of Scots, that Scots was strong in certain regions, and that, in fact, the overall results of an *accurate* census count could have been predicted. The fact that Shetland, Orkney and the North East have come out as the strongest speaking regions is testimony to the accuracy of the census figures, and to previous research conducted by the General Register Office for Scotland. The comments made by the NRS in its own report – which seek to cast doubt on consistent data - serve only to undermine the professionalism and neutrality of the NRS.

6. Relationship with English

The relationship with the question on English is more problematic, but not for the suggestions the NRS advances. It is not certain that the (no.18) question on English was presented to the public in the clearest fashion, and certainly little attempt was

made to explain the context of the English question to the public. The census reported that 93% of the Scottish population said they spoke only English at home, yet this is immediately contradicted by the figure of 1.5 million speakers for Scots. Given that there is an almost total lack of institutional means by which Scots may be learned, the only way in which the language is learned and transmitted is in the home and among the community. This fact alone shows something is far amiss with question 18. It is worth quoting in full the statement by the National Records for Scotland regarding the relationship between Scots and English:

“The census data on language skills in Scots needs to be carefully qualified. The question on language skills in the census questionnaire was relatively poorly answered. For example, a significant number of respondents provided information on their skills in Scots but did not indicate any corresponding abilities in relation to English, perhaps suggesting they considered Scots and English as inter-changeable in this context.” (StatsBulletin2A, page 28).

‘Perhaps suggesting’ means that the NRS does not in fact know. It is a bizarre interpretation to pluck out of the air the idea that Scots speakers declining to indicate similar abilities for English must mean they consider the two languages ‘inter-changeable’. This is putting words into the mouths of respondents. A much simpler explanation is that those Scots speakers who declined to indicate abilities in English did so because they do not consider English as their native language, and so left it blank. We suggest that it is not the data on language skills on Scots that needs to be so ‘carefully qualified’ but rather the question *on English* and the way in which it is presented.

Question 18 of the 2011 census form asked respondents “Do you use a language other than English at home”, but the presentation and wording of this question is problematic (it was placed on the census in relation to UK-wide gathering of statistics on immigration). The question immediately predisposes people in their mind to think in terms of the English language on one hand, and perhaps a foreign (non-Scottish) language on the other. Given that most Scots (theoretically at least) can also speak English and that the choices presented to them were (i) English only, (ii) Sign Language, and (iii) other, it is quite understandable if many people simply assumed the difference being asked was between knowing and using English (and therefore excluding a foreign choice) and a foreign language. After all, they had already been asked about Scots, and may have assumed this was only about English, given that it followed question 17 with regard to how well respondents could speak English. If, on the other hand, the question asked had specifically included a choice box for Scots, or, if the question asked had been instead “What language do you consider to be your home or native language”, then the statistics for this question would probably have been quite different. Indeed, it is worth noting that had the original proposition to exclude a specific question on Scots been allowed to stand, giving Scots speakers no option except the ‘other’ box in question 18, then we would today be discussing a mere 55,000 speakers of Scots (1% of population), which would have resulted from a flawed question. In light of these points, we suggest that the figure of 93% of the population speaking English only at home is the result of a question that predisposed people to simply tick English because it was open to misinterpretation.

7. The identity of the Scots Language

In its 2011 census report the NRS has made the following claim:

“Research carried out prior to the census also suggests that people vary considerably in their interpretation of what is meant by ‘Scots’ as a language, resulting in the potential for inconsistencies in the data collected.”

This claim reveals that because the NRS is itself unfamiliar with the language it makes the assumption that speakers must also be unfamiliar with it and don't understand. We cannot see that this is based on any scientific rationale and, in fact, linguistic prejudices are being allowed to cloud the interpretation of data that could not be more consistent and clear.

One thing that the 2011 census has shown strikingly is that the concept of the Scots language is widely, and generally, understood. Indeed, previous research carried out by the General Register Office for Scotland (which is the body from which the National Records of Scotland was partly created) in 1996 directly contradicts the above statement. In that year the GROS conducted a *Cognitive Survey* of Scots, touring the country, together with a panel of advisors, interviewing groups around the country. The GROS concluded in its report that an estimated 1.5 million people spoke Scots. The 2011 figure is, remember, 1,541,693. We could not have a more striking vindication of the fact the GROS was then on the right track, and that the population generally does understand, otherwise we should expect widely overblown statistics (such as, for example, 3 or 4 million speakers). We do not, of course, rule out inconsistencies in data at regional level, but this is a risk with any set of statistics. Indeed, in relation to language, the first census to include Gaelic (in 1881) is considered not to be statistically accurate, and as late as the 1960's it had to be explained on the census form that Gaelic did not mean Irish.

Conclusion

- i. The data from the 2011 census, answered by the Scottish population, is a vindication of the 1996 report by the General Register Office for Scotland, which then estimated that 1.5 million people spoke Scots. The 2011 figure of 1.5 million matches this. Had people poorly understood the concept of the Scots language this should have resulted in wild, overblown figures. It did not. People who speak Scots know they speak Scots.
- ii. Given that the census results *for Scots* are clearly consistent with the GROS findings, it is bizarre that the NRS has added a note of caveat immediately following the data that it 'needs to be carefully qualified'. This is clearly intended to cast doubt on what is sound data.
- iii. The suggestion that there may be inaccuracies, or that speakers don't know what they are talking about, echoes a tactic by those in the past who sought to sow doubt, exclude a Scots question from the census, to prevent it being asked. Admitting that a large part of the Scottish population (30%) speaks Scots, and wants to speak Scots, has many implications for the cultural and political status quo in this country, cultural and linguistic questions that those in some quarters would prefer were not addressed.
- iv. We suggest that in relation to the census form itself, it is rather the wording and positioning of questions *in relation to English*, and assumptions being made about it and its relationship to Scots, that need to be carefully examined for any future surveys. On the one hand we have data for Scots which is consistent with what we

already know, and on the other hand we have data for English which clearly does not reflect reality. We question the usefulness of including additional questions related to English, which increase the margins for error and misinterpretation, when one or two general questions clearly specifying the languages by name would suffice.

v. Finally, we suggest that the unnecessary caveats placed next to the Scots data - data which consistently refutes attempts to interpose a contrary, subjective, and unscientific interpretation on the results - are in the wrong place, and should rather be placed after the data related to English, given the wildly inaccurate figure which has resulted from the widespread misinterpretation of question 18.

26 September, 2013