



The Dialects of the Scots Language

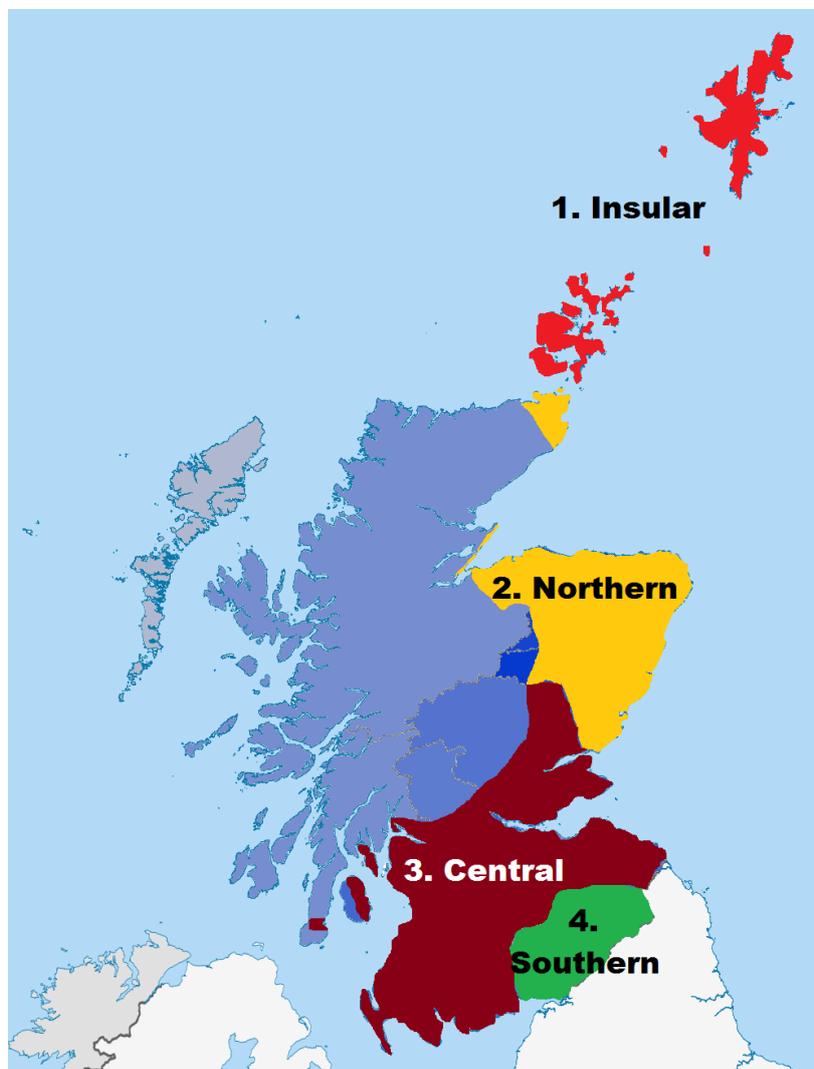
© Davit Horsbroch text and dialect maps © Thomas Widman Scottish county base maps

The Main Four Dialects

There are four main dialects of Scots in Scotland which are named:

1. **Insular** (from the Latin word for 'island')
2. **Northern**
3. **Central**
4. **Southern**

The boundaries of the four main dialects are shown on the map below:



The Ten Sub Dialects of Scots

Like all other languages, the four main dialects of Scots can be broken down into sub dialects, or, put it another way, groups of closely related regional forms which are spoken in smaller areas. Altogether the four main dialects of Scots can be broken down into ten regional forms. The ten regional forms are listed below under their main dialect as follows:

Insular

- (1) Shetland
- (2) Orkney

Northern

- (1) Caithness
- (2) North East
- (3) East Angus and Kincardine

Central

- (1) East Central North
- (2) East Central South
- (3) West Central
- (4) South Central

Southern

- (1) Southern (*aka* Borders)

The various regional forms listed above gradually developed from the Middle Ages onwards. Because Central Scots was the form favoured by Scottish kings and queens, and by the government, this is the form which is generally the earliest and best recorded, and it was used throughout Scots-speaking Scotland. However, the other regional forms also gradually began to appear until writing in the dialects became more common from the 17th and 18th centuries onwards. John Jamieson's *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (1808) was the first to begin cataloguing regional differences in a detailed and systematic way but it was John Murray who, in the year 1873, was the first to produce detailed maps of the ten sub dialects listed above.

Boundaries of the Ten Sub Dialects

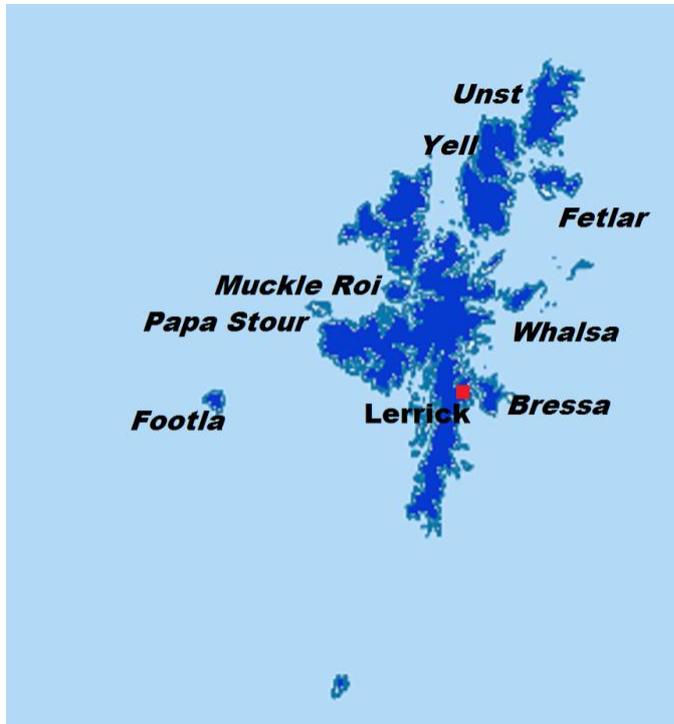
The ten sub dialects or regional forms are organised into distinct groupings which represent closely-related dialects. For example, Orkney and Shetland are both versions of Insular Scots because they have more in common with each other than the other dialects. In the same way, West Central and South Central Scots are grouped together because they have a close relationship and are more like each other than, say, Orkney and Shetland, which are more distant and different. So, on the one hand, taken altogether, the ten sub dialects have an underlying similarity, common pool of words and phrases, sounds, and grammar, which mean they all belong to a common language family called Scots, while, on the other hand, each dialect also has features which mark it out as distinct from its neighbours. The reasons for these differences and variations are due to events and influences that happened in the past, such as the input from other languages at certain times and

places, the use of words from particular industries in some regions and not others, or the loss of words by some regions which continued to be spoken in other dialects.

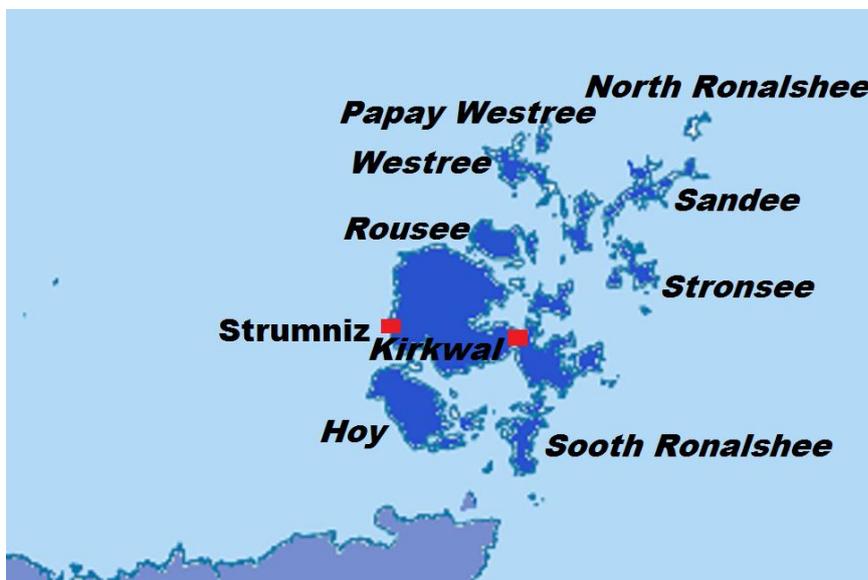
INSULAR ('island')

Insular has two sub dialects

1. Shetland



2. Orkney



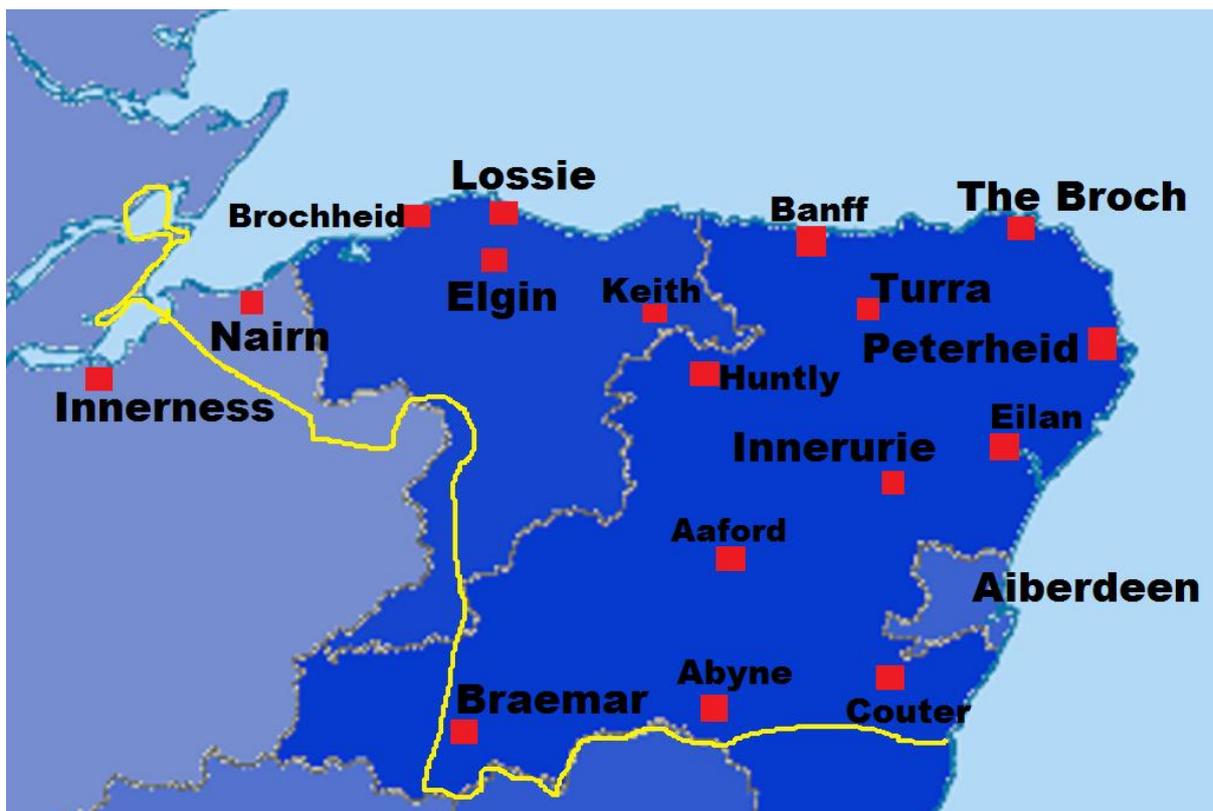
NORTHERN

Northern has three sub dialects:

1. **Caithness** (general boundary of dialect shown in yellow)



2. **North East** (general boundary of dialect shown in yellow)



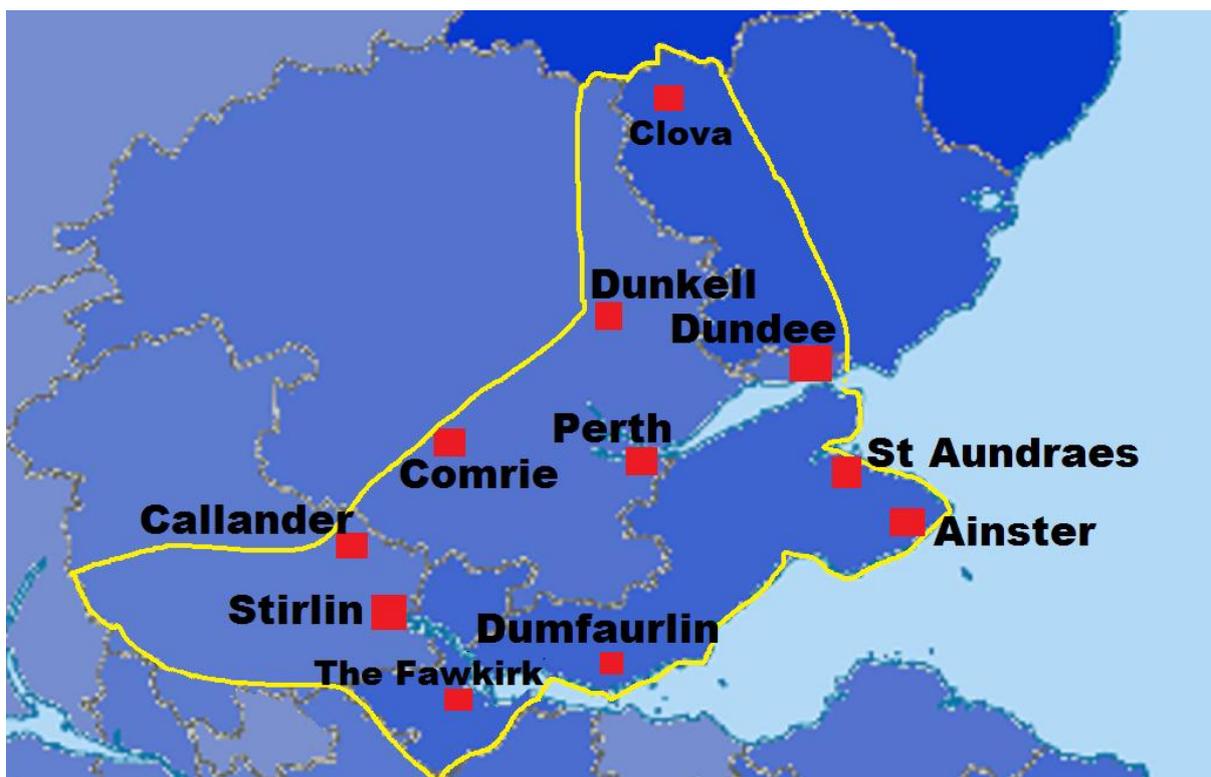
3. **East Angus and Kincardine** (general boundary of dialect shown in yellow)



CENTRAL

Central has four sub dialects and is the biggest dialect group

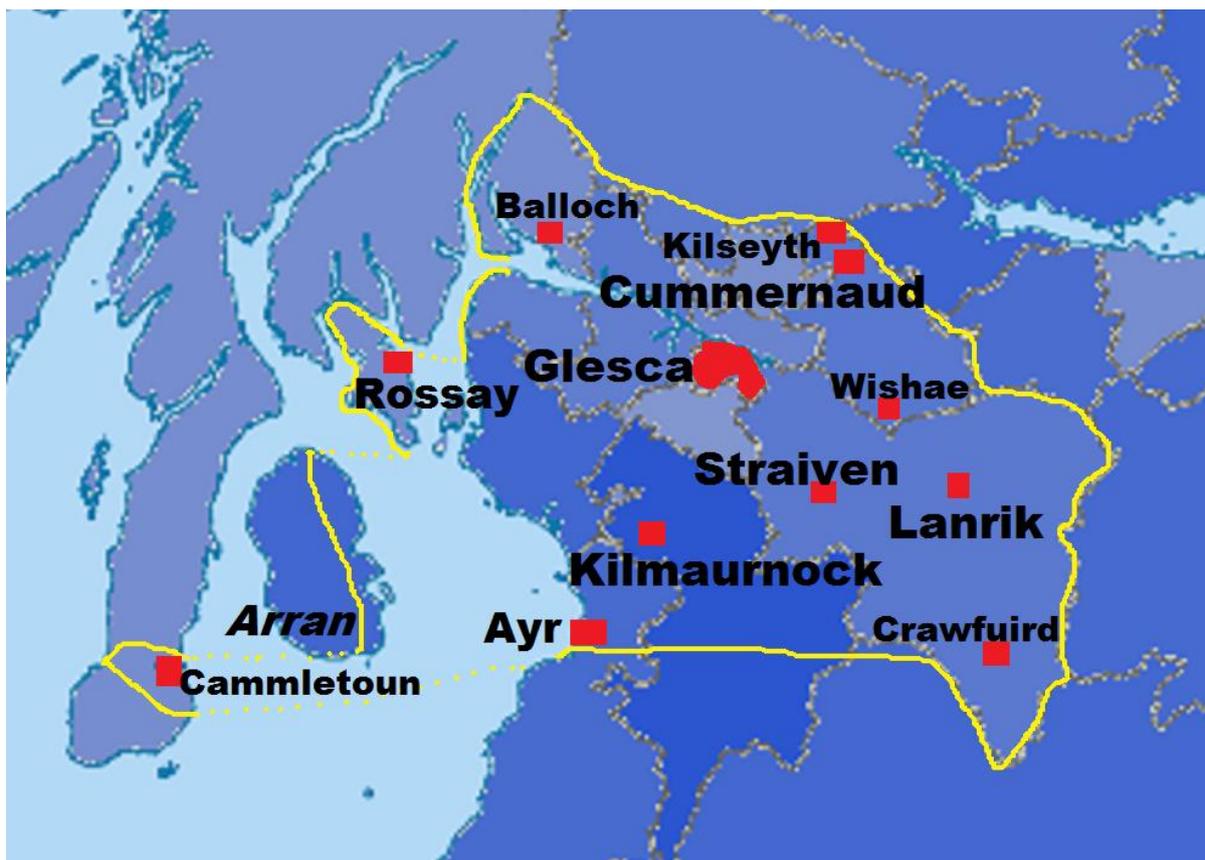
1. **East Central North** (general boundary of dialect shown in yellow)



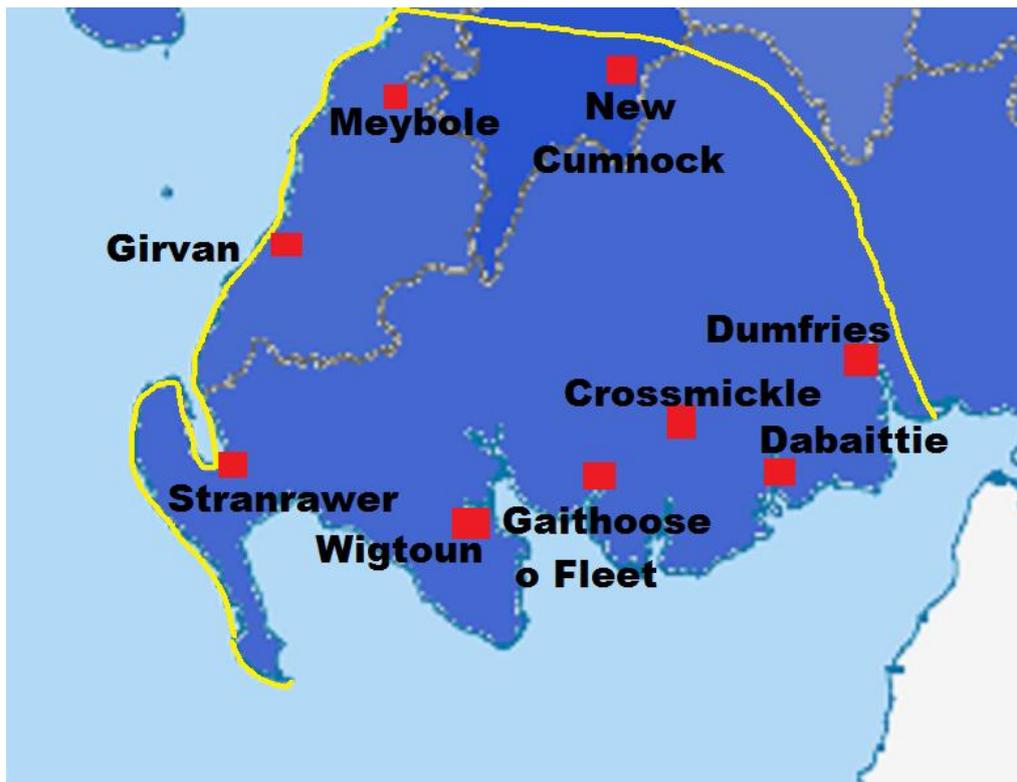
2. East Central South (general boundary of dialect shown in yellow)



3. West Central (general boundary of dialect shown in yellow)



4. **South Central** (general boundary of dialect shown in yellow)



SOUTHERN

The main dialect and sub dialect of Southern are one and the same. It is also often called Borders though it does not include the whole of the Borders region.

1. **Southern** (*aka* Borders) (general boundary of dialect shown in yellow)

