

A. J. Aitken

Bad Scots: some superstitions about Scots speech (1982)¹

Edited by Caroline Macafee, 2015

Editor's Introduction

In this paper, AJA develops ideas about linguistic prejudice that he had earlier expressed in 'The Scots Language and the Teacher of English in Scotland' (1976, 2015). The term 'bad Scots' was a coinage for rhetorical effect: the term speakers tend to use is 'slang', or (especially for non-standard grammar) 'bad English': subsequent studies have confirmed that Scots is often perceived as slang (for instance Menzies, 1991; Macafee, 1994; [Máté], 1996; Macafee, 2000). AJA's 'good Scots/bad Scots' model was tested by Karl Inge Sandred (1983), with rather inconclusive results, perhaps for this reason of terminology. Sandred did, however, find evidence of the covert prestige of Scots forms amongst working-class speakers.

A recent overview by John Hodgart (2012) of the present position of Scots language (and Scottish literature) in the curriculum illustrates how AJA's insights continue to inform the debate. Hodgart refers to style switching and drifting, to covert Scotticisms, and to the "double discrimination o tellin them that they neither speak 'good' English, nor 'guid' Scots". In another context, Bill Findlay, discussing the earlier neglect of Glasgow drama in accounts of Scottish theatre, also refers to the good/bad Scots distinction (2003).

How to cite this paper (adapt to the desired style): Aitken, A. J. (1982, 2015) 'Bad Scots: some superstitions about Scots speech' in †A. J. Aitken, ed. Caroline Macafee, 'Collected Writings on the Scots Language' (2015), [online] Scots Language Centre
[http://medio.scotslanguage.com/library/document/aitken/Bad_Scots_some_superstitions_about_Scots_speech_\(1982\)](http://medio.scotslanguage.com/library/document/aitken/Bad_Scots_some_superstitions_about_Scots_speech_(1982))
(accessed DATE). Originally published *Scottish Language* 1 (1982), 30–44.

[³⁰] Perhaps I should begin by saying that everything in this paper will concern the speech of Lowland Scotland, the native speech of the great majority (well over 90%) of Scots people. I will be saying nothing about the other indigenous language of Scotland, Scottish Gaelic, which is today spoken by under 2% of the total population, the great majority of these being natives of the Hebrides. So I will be talking about what some call Scots English, others Scots, others just English, in fact the way most people in Scotland speak and indeed have spoken since the seventeenth century.

Among all the national varieties of the English Language family – I am thinking of varieties such as Irish English or American English – the language of Lowland Scotland is unique in several interesting ways. Among them is the existence of a number of highly persistent traditional beliefs about the Lowland Scots language, which are not matched for the other national varieties.

¹ The text of a paper delivered to a one-day conference on 'Scottish Urban Dialects' held under the auspices of the University of Glasgow Department of Adult and Continuing Education in conjunction with the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, in the University of Glasgow on 22 November, 1980.

Editor's note: originally published in *Scottish Language* 1 (1982), 30–44, and *Schools Scottish Studies Review* 1:2 (1983) 4–20. There are some minor differences of phrasing between the two and a number of misprints in the latter. The present text is that of *Scottish Language* and is reproduced by kind permission of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies.

The text has been edited for uniformity of style with other Aitken papers and some bibliographical references have been expanded or added. The original page numbers are shown in square brackets.

One of these, indeed, is the ancient belief – dating from 1494 – that there is an entity with some form of separate existence called the Scots language. There is still a good deal in this statement so far as Scottish literature is concerned. As regards the spoken language of today and the few most recent centuries, it seems to me a misleading and over-simple way of putting the matter. I would prefer to say merely that there is a large and continuing Scottish component to the English speech of Scotland as a whole. It is true that this Scottish component has a special origin. Much of it goes back to and is, if you like, a continuation of the speech habits which distinguished the old national language of Stewart Scotland before the seventeenth century, Older Scots, the Scots of Barbour and Henryson and Dunbar. Nevertheless I would regard it today as no more than a distinctive component in the total body of Scottish language, which can fairly be called a highly distinctive national variety of English.

Then there is the notion which has been stated by Scotsmen since the middle of the eighteenth century or earlier, that the Scots language, which is often talked of as if it had a separate identity, though as you see I rather doubt this, is dying or in decay or giving place to the English language or whatever. Scots people have been making this statement for over 200 years. A variant on this is to state that one's own generation is the last to be able to read Burns without a glossary, a statement which goes back to Burns' own time but is still often propounded today. A further variant is to say that Scots is now going out or giving way to English very rapidly. The idea is that until the last but one generation it was doing so slowly and gradually, now it is doing so very rapidly. Well, the minister of Dalmeny, West Lothian, wrote in 1791: "The Dano-Saxon language" – he means Scots – "has continued to be spoken in the greater part of Scotland and particularly what is called the Lowlands with little deviation from the original, till near the present time, [that is 1791], in which it has been giving place very rapidly to the modern English language" (*The Statistical Account of Scotland*, 1791–1799).

So Scots has been believed to be rapidly giving way to English for ^[31] about 200 years. So if it has been dying, it has been a long time about it. I think this is a myth. If you think around contemporary Scots poetry, contemporary Scots drama, and the conversation of middle-class and working-class Scots, it is clear that Scots pronunciations and Scots usages are in constant use. Of course one could qualify this in various ways. The most fully Scottish kind of Scots, the broadest kind of Scots, is certainly not the dominant vernacular of Scotland. Very few people speak it consistently, almost nobody does so on formal occasions.² Also, there has apparently been a net decline in the number of Scots expressions in currency, though to balance losses there are also of course constant inventions of new Scotticisms, something often forgotten. For example, the adjective *fantoosh*, the nouns *high-heid-yin* and *housing-scheme*, the expressions *to put so-and-so's gas at a peep* or *to be up to high doh about something*, and scores more, are all Scotticisms originating in this or late in the last century. Even so, I believe that Scots, in the sense of what I called a large and continuing component of Scots speech, much of which is admittedly now optional rather than obligatory for many

² Editor's note: in a 1950 typescript on the history of Scots, AJA has this comment on the subject:

Since the end of the 18th century, any Scotsman with any kind of social ambitions has had to learn to speak English, though English with a Scottish accent will do. On the other hand it does not matter to him in the least whether or not he can speak Scots. And, indeed, the Scot who moves in middle-class society will soon forget any Scots he has known, since he has no opportunity for practising it. So that really broad Scots is now spoken mostly by countryfolk, shepherds, farm labourers and so on, and by schoolchildren – people who don't care so much about social climbing.

Douglas-Cowie was the first to use social ambition as an independent sociolinguistic variable (1978).

speakers, is a very long way from disappearing. I happen to think also that the current situation is much less different from the nineteenth and eighteenth century situations as concerns Scots and English speaking in Scotland than most people have believed.

These are some of the major beliefs or myths about Scots speech. There are some minor ones, such as the one about the best English being that of Inverness, a belief expounded by among others Dr Samuel Johnson 205 years ago (well done, Inverness! Keep it up!), or the more recent myth that modern vernacular Scots is heavily Americanised, which I believe to be bunkum.

My original idea, when I first thought about what I should say today was to talk at greater length about some of the beliefs I have just mentioned. Some of these, especially the belief in a distinct Scottish language and the myth that it is in imminent danger of extinction, have a certain political relevance: they could, for example, serve as supporting planks to a nationalist political platform, and they do indeed often accompany strong Scottish nationalist political leanings. Even so, there is an academic air about them. They are not exactly burning issues for most people.

But there is one set of beliefs about Scottish language, which does have an immediate and a day to day social and educational relevance which none of the others have. It's true that it is less exclusively Scottish than some of these, for variants of it are found in other English-speaking regions and countries, and also countries with quite other languages than English. But though it is not unique to Scotland, the form it takes in Scotland is strongly coloured by its Scottish setting. It is a tartan version of a more universal myth. This is the belief that there are certain forms of non-standard Scots speech which are markedly inferior to all other sorts of Scots speech, both middle-class standard English, and peasant class dialect Scots.

This belief and the attitudes associated with it constantly affect the ways in which people react to each other and, in the school setting, in particular, greatly affect the interactions of teachers and pupils.^[32] I believe it is surrounded by misconceptions.

So I decided to focus on this particular belief or myth, and try to demonstrate the fallacies it depends on. Some others of the beliefs I have mentioned will pop in now and again incidentally, but this one will be at the centre.

The belief that some Scots speakers have substituted an inferior or debased kind of Scots speech for a more excellent variety formerly spoken or still spoken only in rural parts – this belief is quite ancient. It appears e.g. in 1768 (Alexander Ross, see below) and again in 1840 (Crawfurd, n.d.).³ But for my purposes it will be enough to illustrate this belief, central to my theme, from twentieth-century sources.

What I take to be a typical twentieth-century Scottish middle-class attitude to Scottish speech varieties was expressed in 1901 by the Galwegian writer, R. de B. Trotter. In that year Trotter delivered a scathing attack on “a certain wonderful gibberish which now passes current for Scots”, which he dubbed Glasgow-Irish, or, alternatively, Factory Irish or Factory Scotch. He said this gibberish originated in Glasgow about 1840 and that by 1901 “the young are speaking it universally except in the rural villages” so that in 20 or 30 years it would be the general language of Scotland. (So, according to him, all Scots should have been speaking Glasgow-Irish by 1930.)

What are some of the features of the Glasgow-Irish?

“This Glasgow-Irish is spoken in a high key, with a peculiar snivel as if the soft palate was wanting. It sounds most like Chinese. The words are snapped off short as in Chinese” (Trotter appears to know a lot about Chinese!) “and the central consonants converted into H, so *better* comes out as *be'a* and *water* as *wa'a*.”

³ See Aitken (1979: 98–99 and n. 6).

Editor's note: in the present edition, see 'Scottish Accents and dialects' (1984a, 2015: n. 62).

He compares a few forms of words of Glasgow-Irish with those of what he calls Scotch – which apparently is his version of the kind of Scots he approves of. These last turn out to be forms characteristic of Galloway, to which Trotter belonged as compared with Central Scots forms, which he calls Glasgow-Irish – though in fact they're general Central Scots forms – of which he disapproved. So Trotter's ideal Scots is Galwegian – very commendable – and Central Scots is a deviation from this.⁴

Another writer in the same year, 1901, Duncan McNaught president of the Burns Club, had the same sort of view of different sorts of Scots, though, according to him, the kind of Scots *he* approved of had by 1901 been more or less entirely displaced by the degraded modern Scots. Also he adds still another deplorable speech variety to his list – what he calls “the ‘Keelvinsoide’ patois of the West End of Glasgow”. Between that and “the degraded hotchpotch of the Gallowgate”, he says, “is Hobson's choice. Nine-tenths of so-called modern Scots is a concrete of vulgarised, imperfect English in which are sparsely embedded more or less corrupted forms of the lovely words with which Burns wove his verbal magic.”

Pretty well the same set of attitudes was still the regular establishment ^[33] attitude in the middle of this century and of course it is still held by many today. In addition to that, however, it was until recently the authoritatively expressed opinion of the Scottish Education Department.

In 1946 the SED Advisory Report on *Primary Education in Scotland* commented favourably on “the homely, natural and pithy everyday speech of country and small-town folk in Aberdeenshire and adjacent counties”. But elsewhere, says the Report, Scots has “sadly degenerated and become a worthless jumble of slipshod, ungrammatical and vulgar forms, still further debased by the intrusion of the less desirable Americanisms of Hollywood”. Outside of Buchan, most Scots, it seems, has now degenerated. However, the Report goes on to point out that even Aberdeenshire Scots “is not the language of ‘educated’ people anywhere and could not be described as a suitable medium of education and culture”.

In 1952 the SED published a pamphlet on *English in Secondary Schools*. This presents three categories of Scots speech: 1. “an exemplar of English generally acceptable to educated Scots”, (approvable); 2, “genuine dialect whether of the Borders or of Buchan” (approvable, though somewhat patronisingly – it should find *some* place in the classroom); and 3. “slovenly perversions of dialect” (not approvable). Both reports emphasise that the third variety, bad Scots, is to be excluded from the classroom, and the 1946 Report says that ‘the teacher is to wage unceasing war against these unlovely forms of speech masquerading as Scots’.

Such opinions and attitudes no longer receive official expression by the SED. Indeed the Scottish Education Department a few years ago published an essay which expressed entirely opposite views (Aitken, 1976, 2015) and these have appeared in a number of other recent publications. And these opinions are less *universally* held than they once were. There are today many senior people in schools and colleges who do not accept them. Still, they are a long way from having faded away. They are still held by many, including many parents, teachers and employers. They are still a very lively part of our linguistic mythology. So there is some point in questioning them, as I shall now be doing.

To do this, I want to propose some simple labels for the three categories of Scots speech presumed by the kind of mythology we are concerned with. I propose to call the English generally acceptable to educated Scots, Scots (standard) English; ‘genuine dialect’ I will call Good Scots, and the disapproved kind of Scots speech Bad Scots. Of course these are in my

⁴ Editor's note: elsewhere (1981, 2015; 1984b, 2015), AJA develops the concept of ‘Ideal Scots’. This term is taken up by Görlach (2002: 162–163), who applies it to a particular style of written Scots, unnaturally free from admixture with English. AJA cites *Johnny Gibb of Gushetneuk* and *Eppie Elrick* as possible examples of Ideal Scots, but on the whole regards it as imaginary (1984b: 522).

case *mere* labels. I happen not to think Bad Scots is all that bad. But as a label it's a reminder of general attitudes to it.

There are some difficulties about conducting a discussion using this system of categories and these labels. One is that there is a good deal of vagueness and relativity about where Good Scots and Bad Scots are to be found. Many statements about them fall to locate them at all. I suspect that Scots people disagree widely about how to ^[34] categorise actual specimens of Scots speech – as English or as Good Scots or as Bad Scots. So one person's speech will be regarded as Bad Scots by one observer but Good Scots by another. And it is probable that the majority of Scots speakers' speech-varieties lie indeterminately between the archetypes of acceptable English, Good Scots and Bad Scots. The categories are in practice pretty vague and vary from person to person and maybe for the same person on different occasions.

However, most people, when pressed, including R. de B. Trotter, without being pressed, seem to be in no doubt that Bad Scots is to be heard from many people in working-class districts of Glasgow, and some would add Edinburgh and Dundee. Others again would add to this list their own local urban centre – so I have heard the Scots of Aberdeen city treated as Bad Scots though rural Aberdeenshire is always held to be Good Scots, and similar judgements have been made of Hawick (Bad Scots), as against rural Roxburghshire (Good Scots), Penicuik (Bad Scots), rural Midlothian (Good Scots), etc. But beyond their own localities and outside Buchan and the Borders, most people are pretty hazy about where to find Good Scots.

Despite all this haziness, commentators on Scots speech within the tradition we are considering do not hesitate to apply emotive epithets freely and copiously to the two opposed varieties of Scots. Good Scots, wherever it can be found (if anywhere), is genuine, authentic, pithy, expressive, forceful, rich, fine, lovely, and often old or good old. Bad Scots on the other hand is degraded, corrupted, degenerated, vulgarised, debased, perverted, slovenly, slipshod, uncouth, gibberish, jumble, hotchpotch and so-called Modern Scots.

I want to spend the rest of my time casting doubt on the validity – the soundness – of these epithets, since I believe that some people *are* deceived into imagining that they are genuine linguistic descriptions. I believe they are *not*. They are merely emotive terms expressing an irrational emotional reaction to a few well known typical features or shibboleths of each variety. So I want to try and demonstrate that certain pejorative descriptions applied to Bad Scots *are* no more than pejorative or disparaging epithets. In so doing, there will be one or two aspects of Bad Scots speech which I won't have time to tackle. I will say nothing on its vocabulary, for instance. Of course there *are* answers to those who put down Bad Scots because of its alleged impoverishment of vocabulary. Unfortunately, I haven't time to provide them.

Among these accusations against Bad Scots I do hope to discuss, I will begin with two of the most recurrent but also least tangible of them. One, which has been current since at least 1768 and is still very much with us, is that Bad Scots is, to quote my 1768 source, "Neither gweed fish nor flesh, nor yet sa't herrin" (Ross ed. Wattie, 1938: 11), that is, it is neither one thing nor another; it is a nondescript hybrid. Similarly it is often described as a hotchpotch, a jumble, a confusion of imperfect English and corrupted Scots. Sometimes it is said to be not really Scots at all, just corrupt or debased or bastard English. It is also said to have degenerated, become debased, become perverted.

^[35] So far as we can turn this stuff into objective unemotional statements, what I suppose it means is that Bad Scots has fewer – maybe far fewer – exclusively Scottish characteristics than it should have – it falls short in Scottishness of an imaginary ideal Good Scots – yet at the same time it has enough native and local and non-standard characteristics so that it is not acceptable middle-class standard English either. Also it has (presumably at some date in the past) begun to degenerate or decline in pure Scottish features from the Good Scots it once

was. It would be interesting to know when this happened. Well, you may remember, R. de B. Trotter actually tells us. According to him, it was in 1840.

Underlying both these accusations is the notion of an ideal (and in fact all but imaginary) perfect Good Scots which is *not* impure or corrupt but perfect and uncorrupt. Presumably this means that Good Scots is fully Scots in every possible respect, it is consistently and unvaryingly Scottish in its choice between linguistic options, so it *always* chooses *hame* and never *home*, *always tuim* and never *empty*, *always disjaskit* and never *exhausted* or *tired* or *muddled*, and so on. This imaginary perfect and uncorrupted Good Scots is thought to be spoken by some elderly rural peasants or, if this is not so, is believed to have *been* spoken by Scots generally in the not too distant past or, in R. de B. Trotter's case, before 1840.

In speech, though not in writing of course, I am afraid this Good Scots is mythical. If this sort of thing exists at all today it is the speech of a minuscule minority, though maybe it was less exceptional in earlier times. The normal Scots speech anywhere in Scotland is not this imaginary pure Scots but a range of more or less fully Scottish varieties with even the most Scottish of these far from purely Scottish. If Bad Scots is nondescript through not using all the available broad Scots forms, the same is true of everybody else's Scots. And of course, educated Scots English is not 'perfect' *English* either: apart from its many exclusively Scottish pronunciation characteristics, its speakers use lots of Scotticisms of grammar and vocabulary and idiom, such as *pinkie* and *swither* and *to miss yourself* and *come into the body of the kirk* and *keep a calm sough* and *dreich* and *wersh* and *shoogly* and *peelie-wallie*, and of course *ach* and *och* and *mphm* and thousands more. So Scots English is certainly not the same as English English.

So both pure spoken Scots – really genuine, unadulterated Good Scots – and pure spoken English are imaginary or mythical so far as Scots people brought up and educated in Scotland today are concerned, though of course this is not true in either of these cases of the written language. So if Bad Scots is bad because it is neither completely Scots nor completely English, then we are all tarred more or less with the same brush. But anyway, if a mixed or hybrid form of speech is to be classed as degenerate, then the languages of Shakespeare and Bernard Shaw are certainly degenerate – indeed *all* English has been so since the time of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*. Purity is really imaginary or lost in remote time. Hotchpotchness is normal, certainly today, and perhaps was so as far back as the time of Burns.⁵

⁵ Editor's note: AJA actually tried to recruit Burns himself, the epitome of Good Scots as an exemplar of Bad, or at any rate inconsistent (and thus less than Ideal), Scots, in a talk given at a Burns Supper in 1981, where he took Bad Scots as his theme (quoted from AJA's MS notebook):

Some other deplorable features of Bad Scots are brought out in this passage from Murison (1977: 56):

Scots ... is rapidly losing its historic forms and structure through constant confusion with the official speech. Scots and English forms are jumbled up haphazardly so that a clear and consistent pattern can no longer be traced, and a systematic grammar has gone out of the window.

What he seems to be lamenting is the fact that Scots speakers are often inconsistent – using, say *hoose* in one sentence, *house* in the next, and that their grammar fails to conform with the list of forms someone has extracted from earlier Scots writings so as to form a selective norm. In short, the only Scots we now get is Bad Scots, which is a degeneration from the consistent and homogenous Good Scots which used to be. ...

Murison is quite right, of course. *All* Scots speakers today *are* more or less inconsistent in the ways he indicates. In even the most Scottish-spoken of Scots one can now find occasional lapses into what Murison would call English forms or words. ...

But as a matter of fact, consistency and perfection in the way Murison hankers after was probably exceptional even in Robert Burns' time. Certainly even in his most fully Scottish poems, Burns' language is a long way from the wholly consistent Scots Murison seems to want. And it is well known that some others of his poems are in very slightly but quite inconsistently scotticised English. Of course,

[36] So I do not regard this accusation of impurity or hybridness as a serious or meaningful complaint against Bad Scots.

But how about the accusation that Bad Scots is slipshod, slovenly, careless or incorrect? Let us leave the generalities we have been dealing in so far and consider a few specific instances of the allegedly slipshod etc. pronunciation and grammar of Bad Scots. Let us look first at the most notorious of the slipshod or slovenly pronunciation features, the dreaded glottal stop.

The speech-sound known as the glottal stop is made by a momentary bringing together and releasing of the vocal chords, in the glottis behind the Adam's apple. Certain uses of this have been condemned in Scotland since at least 1895 by school inspectors, authors of books on speech-training, parents and teachers, and of course by R. de B. Trotter (see his forms *be'a*, *wa'a* – he means what we now call glottal stopped forms). These uses of the glottal stop which are condemned are those most often heard from working-class speakers in Scotland and also in England. However, use of the glottal stop in English speech is *not* by any means confined to working-class speakers. In fact, most of us, whoever we are, use it in at least some of its possible ways. Indeed, some of the most admired speakers of BBC-type English (for example, Lady Antonia Fraser) put a glottal stop into expressions like *co'operate* or into *law' and order*. Many of the same group of speakers and most of the rest of us, I daresay, use it freely before another consonant – *that table*, *great joke*, *Scotland*, *book case*, *butcher*. However this sort of speaker does not often use it between vowels and before pauses as in *butter* and *Is that where we sit?*

It turns out that what people in Scotland disapprove of is not the glottal stop in itself, it is the glottal stop in certain positions in the word. Of course it is not only Scots people who use the glottal stop in this way – you'll hear it all over England and in some parts of the U.S. as well in words like *mountain* and *somp'n*. Oddly enough it seems not to be disapproved of in American English, and in English English, even Cockney, disapproval seems to be much less overt than in Scotland.

In Scotland itself the disapproved use turns out *not* to be confined to working-class speakers or to speech with lots of other Bad Scots features. The middle classes, including many who condemn glottal stop use in others, also use it themselves, less regularly than

the majority of Burns' spellings are ambiguous, so we cannot tell, when he spells *out* as <out>, if he means *out* or *oot*, or *fought* as <fought> whether *fought* or *focht*.

But the rhymes are less equivocal. And it turns out that even in the most fully Scottish of his poems, when it suits him he is just as likely to rhyme an English form with a Scots one as two Scots or two English – as Murison puts it, he jumbles Scots and English forms up haphazardly. For example, in 'Tam o' Shanter':

And every nag was ca'd a shoe on
The smith and thee gat roarin fu on

we find English *shoe* not Scots *shae*. Or "She prophesied late or soon : Doon", where *soon* is an English form. There are other rhymes like these in 'Tam o' Shanter' and in most of the other Scots poems. We even find one in what is perhaps the most fully Scots of all his poems, 'The Auld Farmer', *power : owre*.

AJA even manages to find an example of 'bad grammar' (*wrote* as a past participle) in:

That auld, capricious carlin, *Nature*,
To mak amends for scrimpet stature,
She 's turn'd you off, a human-creature
On her first plan,
And in her freaks, on ev'ry feature,
She 's wrote, *the Man*.

(from 'Epistle to J. Smith', quoted from James Kinsley, ed. *Burns. Poems and Songs*, Oxford University Press, 1969, No. 79, 'To J. S*****')

working-class speakers do certainly, but virtually every Scots speaker in many parts of Scotland does it occasionally.

This is certainly true of the glottal stop among Glasgow middle-class speakers as Macaulay (1977) discovered in his recent study of Glasgow speech: he found *no* Glasgow speaker, including what he called his Upper Class (most people would call them middle class) speakers, without some occasional disapproved glottal stops, though it is true of course that the Upper Class scores were much lower than those of his Lower Class, that is, unskilled working-class, speakers – the latter scored around 90 to 100% for glottal stop use, whereas some ^[37] of his Upper Class scored only about 10%. But every *one* of his speakers scored *something*.

This means, I believe, that occasional use of a glottal stop for a *t*, a *p*, or a *k* between vowels and before a pause, is a *normal* feature of *all* Glasgow speech and is probably *normal* too of the majority of speakers in Britain. In Scotland this habit seems to be increasing in popularity and spreading quite rapidly regionally and I expect it will be nearly universal in a few generations. It is hard to see how a normal usage of the majority of native speakers of a community can rightly be called incorrect or careless language. It could only be called this by the standards of some other variety of speech in which this usage is not normal. In Scotland this could only be the speech of the small minority of upper-class speakers who never use this feature, or the speech of middle-class Englishmen. So we can only call this glottal stop feature incorrect if we impose the norms of a minority of Scots speakers on the majority, or the norms of speakers from outside Scotland altogether, the middle-classes of England. This is as undemocratic or subservient in language as in any other sphere. There is no good reason why Scots speakers should observe the norms of, say, speakers of Oxford English.

So these uses of the glottal stop are not incorrect, since they are normal.

But, incorrect or not, could we not rightly say that the adoption of this feature is due to slovenliness or slipshodness in speaking, as is often alleged?

The change in the rules of articulation which brought the disapproved glottal stop pronunciations into being – it apparently began some time during the last century – certainly seems to be an example of the type of sound-change which is due to what has been called ‘the principle of less effort’. Other examples of this very common, indeed normal, sort of sound-change and the operation of this principle would be the sound-changes which changed earlier English (Anglo-Saxon) *eall-swā* in later English *as*, earlier (Anglo-Saxon) *mylen* into modern *mill*, earlier (Anglo-Saxon) *cnāwan* into modern *know*, earlier (Anglo-Saxon) *wlispān* into modern *lisp*, and earlier American English [ˈbætər] into present day American English [ˈbʌdə] or [ˈbʌrə]. Like these and many, many other sound-changes, the glottal-stop substitution for *t* was originally motivated by a saving of effort principle.

A sound-change still more closely analogous to the glottal-stop one is the change in Southern varieties of English, including BBC English, whereby earlier English *better* [ˈbɛtər] has become [ˈbɛtə], earlier *hard* [hard], [hɑ:d], earlier *four* [fɔ:r], [fɔ:]; in other words, the sound *r* has been dropped in these and similar words.

If you think the operation of the saving of effort principle in speech is to be deplored, if you regard it as slipshod or slovenly, then you ought to apply the same description in all these other cases, including the last one, which is in fact a notable and noted distinguishing characteristic of what many people regard as the best and most elegant kind of English speech. But if you did this, you ^[38] would never be done, for there are hardly any present-day English or Scottish words which have not undergone a saving of effort sound-change some time in the past. If we go back beyond Anglo-Saxon in the history of the language there are maybe none.

Of course it is true that such sound-changes do lead to occasional ambiguities – confusion between originally distinct words – which were not present before. In modern Southern

English the words *farther* and *father* (which I and perhaps you distinguish quite clearly) are pronounced exactly alike. This was not the case before the seventeenth century, when the sound-change I mentioned (which was a loss of post-vocalic *r*) took place. Similarly the words *know* and *no used* to be distinct, as [knou] and [no]. But this merging of originally separate words is a normal consequence of sound-changes in the history of a language and the language has various ways of coping with it. In these cases, the contexts of the words I mentioned nearly always makes clear which word is meant. As it happens the glottal stop sound-change does not often give rise to ambiguities of the same sort, but even if it did, it would not be any different from these other sound-changes in this respect.

In short, I do not believe there are any fair or rational grounds and certainly no *linguistic* reason for disapproving of the between-vowels glottal stop feature, any more than for disapproving of any one of hundreds of other saving of effort sound-changes which have operated in English and Scots.

I do not believe there are rational grounds for disapproving of the other commonly disparaged Bad Scots pronunciations either, a number of which, unlike the glottal stop feature, are of quite ancient *Scottish* origin, such as those exemplified in *girrul* or *fillum* or *arrum* or the disyllabic pronunciation of words like *more* as *moe-er* or *there* as *thai-er* or [kaxlæk] for *catholic* or [hri:] for *three* or [bēt] (*bit*) or [jÿ] (*you*) or [njÿz] (*news*). The difference between these and Standard English is the result of earlier sound-changes, but there is no more reason for disapproving of them than of any other sound-changed forms, of which English has tens of thousands.

Apart from its allegedly slovenly pronunciations, another aspect of Bad Scots is its allegedly slipshod grammar. Trotter gave us a sample of this:

As we waz goin' dinn the street we seen Toamie Tode an if he hadnae went awoe
when he seed huz he wad hae fell intae the syvor or he wad been cleverer as he
look'd.

There are several non-standard grammatical features exemplified here, including one which had been peculiar to Scots since the Middle Ages and is practised by most or all of the Middle Scots makars. The one I want to look at is, however, not exclusively Scots. This is a worldwide feature of working-class English everywhere. It's also universally disapproved of in Bad Scots, Bad English, Bad American, and so on.

^[39] The form it takes is this. The majority of verbs in English have only one form for both their past tense and their past participle. For example, the verb *to try* has as its past tense *I tried* (i.e. *tried*) and its past participle *I have tried* (also *tried*). So it has only one form in the past – *tried*. Similarly with *met*, past tense and past participle of *meet*, *dug* of *dig*, and so on. Most English verbs are like this. There is also, though, a smaller number like *see*, which has not one but two different forms in the past – *saw* and *seen*. What Bad Scots and Bad English are in the process of doing is moving some of those verbs with the more complex two forms in the past, into the main set that has only one form in the past, or, in other words, simplifying the rules for forming the past tenses of these verbs. If no loss of intelligibility results from this, as it does not, this is surely a gain in simplicity for the language – in short, a gain.

This sort of thing is not new. The inflexional systems of modern English and modern Scots are *far* simpler than those of their ancestor, Anglo-Saxon, as a result of *numerous* simplifying changes of this very sort. One example is the Anglo-Saxon verb for 'to fight', In Anglo-Saxon the verb *to fight* had four distinct tense forms: *feohtan*, present tense; *feaht*, past tense singular *fuhton*, past tense plural; *fohten*, past participle. These four have been reduced to two in modern English or Scots, with only one for the past, so *fought* is now like *tried* and *dug*. This is a clear gain in simplicity over the Anglo-Saxon.

In the same way Bad Scots is in the process of eliminating the useless *saw-seen* distinction, just as useless as the *feaht-fuhton-fohten* distinction, and has completed the simplification of *fell* and *went*: *I fell, I went; I have fell, I have went*. On rational grounds this must be a gain. There is certainly no better case for calling it slovenly or careless than there is for saying that the modern forms of the verb *fight* are slovenly. However, whereas this and some other features of Bad Scots grammar represent simplifications as against the more conservative Standard English and Good Scots, there are other features of Scots grammar which are shared by both Bad and Good Scots, that actually involve greater complexity. In these the Scots speaker has more grammatical rules to learn than the English speaker has in the corresponding bit of grammar in English. I am thinking of the additional rules involved in the following set of examples:

The folk that speaks Scots is as good as them that speaks English;
They like their porridge;

and

Every time I sees him I aye thinks that.

The grammar here is perfectly rule-governed, of course, but it happens to be *more complex* than standard English grammar. Some parts of Bad Scots grammar like the *I fell, I have fell* rule, are simpler than the corresponding bits of Standard English grammar. Others, such as those I have just mentioned, are actually more complex and subtle and involve the learning of *more* rules, than the corresponding Standard English grammar. So Bad Scots grammar is to a small extent different from Standard English grammar in being simpler in some respects, more ^[40] complex in others. I do not accept, though, that by being different in these ways it is thus less correct. With other linguists I hold that each dialect or language is to be judged by its own standards, not by the standards of some other dialect or by the prescriptions of some self-appointed authority. So I do not believe that Bad Scots grammar should be judged by the rules either of Standard English or of Good Scots – which is of course what we are doing when we judge the features I have been mentioning incorrect. Since these are regular Bad Scots features, they are good Bad Scots; and since Bad Scots is a viable language, they are good language. They are not good Standard English, of course, but it is quite unreasonable to expect speakers of Bad Scots to conform to the rules of a different dialect, Standard English. Similarly *I fought* and *I have fought* are good modern English but bad Anglo-Saxon. But it is unreasonable to expect Modern English speakers to conform to the rules of a different dialect, Anglo-Saxon.

So I do not believe that, simply as language, Bad Scots is any more hotchpotch or degenerated or slipshod or slovenly or incorrect than other dialects or languages. But there is one other accusation sometimes levelled at Bad Scots. I have no time to do full justice to this but I will just mention it. This is the allegation that Bad Scots is ugly or uncouth.

One of the several arguments against accepting this judgement at its face value and the only argument I have time to offer is this. The kinds of speech in a speech community which its members regard as ugliest as well as most incorrect speech always turn out to be those typical of speakers of low social status – typically those of the unskilled proletariat of the urban slums – and the dialects and accents regarded as most attractive, as well, usually, as most correct and apt to be imitated, are those typical of speakers of high social status, broadly, the royal family, the aristocracy, the governing classes, the wealthy, the decision-makers, the power-holders, the admired and envied. And this correlation between high social

status and assumed attractiveness and correctness of dialect seems to be invariable.⁶ It is certainly universal throughout the English-speaking world.

In one experiment to verify this (Giles and Powesland, 1975),⁷ a group of 17-year-olds, themselves speaking regional accents of English, from South Wales and from Somerset, were asked to grade a number of tape-recorded specimens of speech in order of status and pleasantness. By and large they all agreed on the following order. They put highest for status and attractiveness:

1. unexaggerated BBC English;
2. affected Oxford English;
3. North American;
4. some provincial English accents including Irish, South Wales and Northern English;
5. Somerset;
6. Cockney and Indian;
7. and lowest, working-class Birmingham.

You notice that the judges' own accents, South Wales and Somerset, came quite low in the scale.

This and some other considerations have suggested to linguists that condemnation of dialects like Bad Scots for alleged slipshodness, lack of correctness and ugliness and all our other pejorative expressions ultimately represent a response not to their qualities^[41] as language but to social evaluation of the sort of people who speak them. The bad reputation of Bad Scots results from the fact that it is the speech of the Scottish slums, just as the good reputation of BBC English results from the fact that *it* is the speech of the royal family, the aristocracy and many of the middle classes. Most linguists believe that *as languages* there is nothing to choose between these two dialects, Bad Scots and Standard English. One happens to be the dialect typical of the admired and envied members of the community, the other happens to be that of the least admirable (so it seems) or most deprived in our society. So to the other deprivations the last group have to put up with, we saddle them in addition with general contempt for, or abhorrence of, the characteristic features of their language.

It is no doubt not a coincidence that the emergence of clear expressions of disapproval of Bad Scots – the first I know was in 1840, Trotter's in 1901 was a later one – come along shortly after the Industrial Revolution and are clearly associated with the downtrodden working classes crowded into the urban ghettos – Trotter's Glasgow Irish, no less. Bad Scots comes to notice after the Industrial Revolution. It is in origin a feature of slum life.

So the real underlying basis of the moral or aesthetic or puristic condemnations of Bad Scots is society's disparagement of the slum dweller and the social underdog; or, if you like, it has ultimately a snobbish basis. But it would be grossly wrong to suggest that the people who make these judgements today, who also of course include many Bad Scots speakers themselves, are in any way hypocritical in making them; on the contrary they fully believe them to be valid linguistic judgements. Some, especially Marxist, sociologists and linguists think that the institutionalising of the kinds of linguistic prejudice we have been discussing are what they term 'a means of social control' that is, roughly, a means whereby the upper and middle classes are enabled to keep the working classes under. They would not of course want to claim, I presume, that this is in any real sense consciously intended. Nevertheless, these Marxist linguists are clearly right in claiming that these speech prejudices certainly do contribute to keeping working-class people from getting above themselves, and make it that much harder for them to get on, as we say, socially, if they want to.

⁶ For development of this and other arguments against accepting at face value condemnations of Bad English and Bad Scots, see, *inter alia*, Labov (1970), Trudgill ([1974], 1975).

⁷ See also references there cited, especially Giles (1970).

So our condemnations of Bad Scots have no real validity in rational or linguistic terms. They are really social judgements, only masquerading as linguistic. But the fact that they are invalid does not of course mean that they are not both prevalent and important. All of us, even including people like myself who have learned to disbelieve intellectually in the disparagements of Bad Scots, still react unfavourably at gut level to actual specimens.

When we hear someone speaking Bad Scots our only reaction ought to be, to note that he is doubtless of working-class origin and that he has been too loyal to his own community (for whatever reason) to want to convert his speech into some variety which has greater establishment approval. In fact, though, we react *much* more ^[42] unfavourably – and quite irrationally and unfairly. A further unfairness of this situation is that the adverse judgements of Bad Scots have been so institutionalised, that Bad Scots speakers themselves have been brainwashed into holding them as well. They – Bad Scots speakers themselves – also know or think they know that their speech-habits are (in inverted commas) ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ or ‘incorrect’. Well, they have been told so often enough by their mothers and their teachers.

So all of us, including Bad Scots speakers themselves, laugh at caricatures of Bad Scots speech by stage comics like Stanley Baxter or Billy Connolly and we react appropriately to the ambivalent overtones of working-class Scots exploited by poets like Tom Leonard and Stephen Mulrine. So we react appropriately to things like: *See’s a daud i yer choaclit* or *He’s a wee chancer, so he is* or *Ya perr a herries*, and so on. Like everyone else we have learned at a very early age the system of social valuation of dialects and accents which our society holds. We have been taught this by anxious mothers and teachers: Talk proper English; There’s a *t* in that word; Don’t use bad grammar in my class; The word is *house* not *hoose*; and so on. Or consider this poem by Douglas Graham.⁸

School Broadcast

Ma! we git Jesus oan the wireless at school the day.
Ken whit he says last week?
Simon Peter says tae um
“Whit wey Lord wull ye no tell us
Whaur ye are going, and why we canna come wi ye?”
Coorse, Jesus disny talk like that.
He says, “I am going to a place that you do not know
Where I shall make everything ready for you.”
Ah says tae Miss Nicol,
“Ah wid like tae be like Jesus when ah grow up.”
An she says, “Would you, William? That’s nice.
But you will have to speak more carefully than that.
You didn’t hear Jesus say ‘ah wid’, did you?”
“I am going to a place that you do not know ...”
Ma! wull ah take ma Dad’s saw intae um
Oan ma wey tae school.

Messages like this have been reinforced by all the covert messages that such and such forms are vulgar or comic – in comic strips, by comedians, by the place of working-class speech in the media, even by the pussy-footed way well-meaning sympathetic people like me tread around the problem.

⁸ Editor’s note: I am grateful to the Scottish Poetry Library for attempting to identify this poet and poem for me; unfortunately no information is available.

And so, wholly unjust though this is, Bad Scots can on many occasions be a real disadvantage to its users. Some potential employers, for example, look fairly askance at Bad Scots speech.

So you might think it is to the Bad Scots speaker's advantage if he is constantly corrected for his speech, as Miss Nicol does with William, even if *we* happen to be enlightened enough to know that^[43] there is nothing *really* wrong with how he speaks.

This is another myth. Setting aside the arrogance this implies and the fact that people who do it commonly lack the linguistic skill to identify and analyse *all* the Bad Scots features in another person's speech, other reasons against this are these:

1. It cannot work. Young people will only change their speech habits if they themselves are motivated to do so, and if they are motivated, they will make the change themselves, without needing correction. This point could be developed, but perhaps the second point, which reinforces it, will serve.
2. It has not worked. There is evidence that the war by school inspectors and teachers against Bad Scots features such as the glottal stop has been waged since at least 1894 (Withrington, [1974]: 13–14).⁹ Yet Bad Scots still flourishes and some of its most disapproved features, such as the glottal stop feature, are clearly advancing and spreading rather than receding.
3. The actual effect of this kind of interference is not to cure the 'faults' but merely to undermine the victim's confidence in his own speech. It forcibly reminds him that his speech is full of so-called mistakes. So when he has to speak in circumstances where these mistakes may be noticed his fluency will be weakened. He will be too busy worrying in case he makes trivial 'mistakes' in pronunciation and grammar to think about the content and arrangement of what he is saying. So the effect of this treatment is harmful rather than beneficial.

Prejudice against Bad Scots seems to me to have many analogies with colour prejudice – both in the ways it arose, in its effects on its victims, and in how I believe it should be handled. Just as we ignore a coloured person's colour, behave towards him as one would behave towards anyone, so I believe the right treatment of Bad Scots is to behave to *it* as to any other speech-variety. In short, I believe in dialect tolerance.

Well, you will no doubt tell me that this is no real solution. Even without overt condemnation of his dialect, the Bad Scots speaker learns quickly enough that his is not the dialect of prestige and authority, and this alone will tend to undermine his confidence in his use of language. But at least we should not exert ourselves to increase his discomfort.

I am afraid that whatever we do about this, our puny efforts will not change the entire system of social privilege and prejudice attached to dialect and accent. Indeed, I believe that dialect and accent prejudice is even more firmly embedded in our social traditions than^[44] colour prejudice. So I have no easy or overnight solution to the problem of dialect and accent prejudice, which I fear may be an inherent and continuing aspect of the way our society works. All the same, we have a duty to our own consciences, not to contribute further to the unfair and socially divisive effects of prejudice against working-class dialects like Bad Scots, and not to subscribe to the myths and superstitions which help to maintain this prejudice.

⁹ In 1894, a Western Division inspector listed as a characteristic fault of the district "the slurring over of intermediate consonants" (Withrington, [1974]: 13). For a slightly earlier and more specific reference, see 'Scottish accents and dialects' (1984a, 2015: n. 30) in the present edition.

References

- Aitken, A. J. (1976, 2015) ‘The Scots language and the teacher of English in Scotland’, in Scottish Education Department, Scottish Central Committee on English, *Scottish Literature in the Secondary School* (Edinburgh: HMSO), 48–55. Reproduced in †Aitken ed. Macafee (2015), [online] [http://medio.scotslanguage.com/library/document/aitken/The Scots language and the teacher of English in Scotland \(1976\)](http://medio.scotslanguage.com/library/document/aitken/The_Scots_language_and_the_teacher_of_english_in_Scotland_(1976)) (accessed 27 April 2015).
- Aitken A. J. (1979) ‘Scottish speech: a historical view with special reference to the Standard English of Scotland’ in A. J. Aitken and Tom McArthur, eds., *Languages of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Chambers), 85–118
- Aitken, A. J. (1981, 2015) ‘The good old Scots tongue: Does Scots have an identity?’ in Einar Haugen, J. Derrick McClure and Derick Thomson, eds., *Minority Languages Today* (Edinburgh University Press), 72–90. Reproduced in †Aitken ed. Macafee (2015), [online] [http://medio.scotslanguage.com/library/document/aitken/The good old Scots tongue does Scots have an identity? \(1981\)](http://medio.scotslanguage.com/library/document/aitken/The_good_old_Scots_tongue_does_Scots_have_an_identity?.(1981)) (accessed 27 April 2015).
- Aitken, A. J. (1984a, 2015) ‘Scottish accents and dialects’, in Trudgill, ed., 94–114. Reproduced in †Aitken ed. Macafee (2015), [online] [http://medio.scotslanguage.com/library/document/aitken/Scottish accents and dialects \(1984\)](http://medio.scotslanguage.com/library/document/aitken/Scottish_accents_and_dialects_(1984)) (accessed 27 April 2015).
- Aitken, A. J. (1984b, 2015) ‘Scots and English in Scotland’ in Trudgill, ed., 517–532. Reproduced in †Aitken ed. Macafee (2015), [online] [http://medio.scotslanguage.com/library/document/aitken/Scots and English in Scotland \(1984\)](http://medio.scotslanguage.com/library/document/aitken/Scots_and_English_in_Scotland_(1984)) (accessed 27 April 2015).
- †Aitken, A. J., ed. Caroline Macafee (2015) ‘Collected Writings on the Scots Language’, [online] Scots Language Centre <http://www.scotslanguage.com/aitken-papers> (accessed 27 April 2015)
- Crawfurd, Andrew (n.d. [c.1827–1854]) ‘The Cairn of Lochwinnoch’ (unpublished MSS, Paisley Library)
- Douglas-Cowie, Ellen (1978) ‘Linguistic code-switching in a Northern Irish village: social interaction and social ambition’ in Peter Trudgill, ed., *Sociolinguistic Patterns in British English* (London: Edward Arnold), 37–51
- English in Secondary Schools* (1952) (Edinburgh: Scottish Education Department)
- Findlay, Bill (2003) ‘Modern Scots drama and language planning: a context and a caution’ in John Kirk and Dónall Ó Baoill, eds., *Towards our Goals in Broadcasting, the Press, the Performing Arts and the Economy: Minority Languages in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Scotland* (Belfast: Queen’s University), 165–174
- Giles, Howard (1970) ‘Evaluative reactions to accents’, *Educational Review* 22, 211–227
- Giles, Howard and Peter F. Powesland (1975) *Speech Style and Social Evaluation* (London: Academic Press), 27–33
- Görlach, Manfred (2002) *A Textual History of Scots* (Heidelberg: C. Winter)
- Hodgart, John (2012) ‘Scots and the Curriculum for Excellence’, [online] Scots Language Centre <http://www.scotslanguage.com/articles/view/3206> (accessed 18 February 2014)
- Kinsley, James, ed. (1969) *Burns. Poems and Songs* (Oxford University Press)
- Labov, William (1970) *The Study of Nonstandard English* (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English)
- Macafee, Caroline (1994) *Traditional Dialect in the Modern World: A Glasgow Case Study* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang)

- Macafee, Caroline (2000) 'The demography of Scots: the lessons of the Census campaign', *Scottish Language* 19, 1–44
- Macaulay, R. K. S. (1977) *Language, Social Class and Education. A Glasgow Study* (Edinburgh University Press)
- McClure, J. Derrick, ed. ([1974]) *The Scots Language in Education* (Association for Scottish Literary Studies, Occasional Papers No. 3)
- McNaught, D. (1901) 'The raucle tongue of Burns', *Annual Burns Chronicle* 10, 26–37
- [Máté, Iain] (1996) *Scots Language. A Report on the Scots Language Research carried out by the General Register Office for Scotland in 1996* (Edinburgh: General Register Office (Scotland))
- Menzies, Janet (1991) 'An investigation of attitudes to Scots and Glasgow dialect among secondary school pupils', *Scottish Language* 10, 30–46
- Murison, David (1977) *The Guid Scots Tongue* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood)
- Primary Education in Scotland* (1946) (Edinburgh: Scottish Education Department)
- Ross, Alexander, ed. M. Wattie (1938) *The Scottish Works of Alexander Ross* (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society)
- Sandred, Karl Inge (1983) *Good or Bad Scots? Attitudes to Optional Lexical and Grammatical Usages in Edinburgh* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia 48)
- The Statistical Account of Scotland [The Old Statistical Account]* (1791–1799) ed. Sir John Sinclair (Edinburgh). [Online] 'The Statistical Accounts of Scotland Online 1791–1845', EDINA <http://edina.ac.uk/stat-acc-scot/> (accessed 2 February 2012).
- Trotter, R. de B. (1901) 'The Scottish Language', *The Gallovidian* 3, 22–24
- Trudgill, Peter ([1974]) 'Sociolinguistics and Scots dialects' in McClure, ed., 28–34
- Trudgill, Peter (1975) *Accent, Dialect and the School* (London: Edward Arnold)
- Trudgill, Peter, ed. (1984) *Language in the British Isles* (Cambridge University Press)
- Withrington, Donald ([1974]) 'Scots in education: a historical retrospect' in McClure, ed., 9–