

**The Royal Society of Edinburgh**  
**in partnership with the British Academy and the Philological Society**

**Discussion Forum**

***Variation in Scots***

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Report by Jennifer Trueland

*There are many local and regional dialects of Scots, which raises questions of how it can best be promoted and preserved for future generations. Experts gathered to discuss the history, structure and evolution of Scots and its part in the country's heritage, identity and future. The event was introduced by the President of the Philological Society, Professor Aditi Lahiri, who spoke of the value of the British Academy and the Philological Society working together to create events such as this.*

**Chair: Professor Jeremy Smith FRSE, Professor of English Philology at the University of Glasgow**

Professor Smith introduced each panel member and asked them to speak for a few minutes to explain why they were there, and the points they hoped to discuss.

**Bruce Eunson, Scots Language Co-ordinator, Education Scotland**

Mr Eunson described his job with Education Scotland as promoting the use of Scots in schools, universities, adult learning settings and prisons. He previously did the same job in his native Shetland, but now he promotes all the dialects and varieties of Scots. He also writes poetry in the Shetland dialect, and believes that learning languages benefits literacy. He posed the question of whether it is an issue that speakers of different dialects consider they speak 'Shetland' or 'Doric' rather than Scots – does that mean there is a lack of unity and would that matter?

**Michael Hance, Director, Scots Language Centre**

Describing himself as an Aberdeen 'loon' with relatives in Shetland, Mr Hance has been Director of the Scots Language Centre for 16 years. He was also secretary of the Scots Language cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament, and is a former Director of the Saltire Society. His specific area of interest for discussion is the realisation of the Scots language on social media – has it been a liberating influence? He is also interested in the collection of data. In the 2011 census, a third of people in Scotland said they spoke Scots, but should the question be changed?

**Alice Heywood, Learning Officer, National Library of Scotland**

Ms Heywood hails from California, where she studied English literature, before moving to London and working in web design. She is now lead for digital learning at the NLS, with particular responsibility for Gaelic and Scots resources. She pointed out that the Gaelic language plan has helped raise the profile of Gaelic, and posited whether a Scots language policy for national institutions would help increase buy-in.

**Professor Robert McColl Millar, Professor in Linguistics and Scottish Language, University of Aberdeen**

Professor Millar is the author of several books on Scots, including *Modern Scots: an analytic survey*, and claims a ‘visceral’ interest in the subject; for him it is “not just an academic pursuit”. He pointed out that Scots terms are not used as much as they used to be, partly because industries such as fishing are dying out. He paraphrased Gide’s sentiment that patriotism is the food of childhood, saying that for him, while ‘mince and tatties’ has its charm, it is the words of childhood that count more.

He remarked that 70 years ago, Edinburgh University carried out a linguistic study of Scots, but that this is now an historic document. He called for a new, comprehensive study covering all places and ages, saying it is important to understand what is already happening before making policy decisions.

**Professor Jennifer Smith, Professor of Sociolinguistics, University of Glasgow**

Professor Smith explained that she works on varieties of Scots and how they are changing in the here and now, and how they are transmitted through generations. This includes how the primary care-giver, usually a mother, talks to children. She is also interested in the Scots linguistic continuum – how people change the way they speak depending on circumstances, including the formality of a situation or being at home or at play. She is currently working on the Scots Syntax Atlas, a major new digital resource for the analysis of speech patterns across 130 locations in Scotland.

**Discussion**

The discussion began with consideration of how the panelists themselves tend to speak. Mr Eunson said he speaks to his two children in Shetland dialect, but that their mother doesn’t. He speaks the broadest Scots when he speaks to his father, but it is done unconsciously. Professor Jennifer Smith elaborated a little on the linguistic continuum, saying that people tend to move between standard Scots (in formal situations) and broader Scots in less formal situations. This is transmitted from parent to child, giving children a valuable linguistic tool. In fact, children are ‘linguistic geniuses’ from a young age, because they change their language depending on whether they are playing, or in a formal situation. Professor Millar said his mother spoke Scots except when she was really angry, when she would speak in an exaggerated English accent. Mr Hance said his Shetlander mother would speak in a Shetland dialect on the telephone to her Shetland relatives, and it became a treat for the children to persuade her to speak it to them. He remembers making a conscious effort to learn Shetland words and practicing so that he would know what to say when he went to the shop on holiday.

The discussion moved on to whether giving a dialect a name makes it more valued: while Doric is respected and associated with a long history (although it is less well known that the dialect, traditionally associated with the Northeast, was once much more widely spoken and survives in Roxburghshire), there is no accepted name for the dialect spoken in West Lothian, for example, although it has its own distinctive words.

Professor Jennifer Smith said that many people who speak Scots do not consider that they do. At the beginning of each university year, she asks her students which of them speaks Scots and a very few put their hands up, although the student intake is overwhelmingly Scottish. She then asks them if anyone has ever recognised that they are Scottish from their speech, and many more people put their hands up when she asks “how do they know you are Scottish if you are not speaking Scots?”.

Mr Eunson's experience of teachers in training has taught him that attitudes vary across Scotland; people from Dundee and Glasgow, for example, are "almost a little embarrassed" that they speak Scots. He believes that as a nation, Scots are not proud of their literary heritage, and that language suffers as a result. We ought to be open to new Scots speakers, to make it acceptable to be a learner of Scots, he said, adding that this would require culture change.

The Chair (Professor Jeremy Smith) pointed out that all languages change – and that's what makes them exciting. Professor Millar commented on the 'merging' of colloquial English with Scots as a result of "large-scale contact" taking place. He pointed out that the University of Aberdeen is in a relatively working-class area of the city, and that local people's speech sounds "remarkably West of Scotland".

Does Scots have to be 'pure'? Mr Eunson said that to anyone aged over 70 he would not be thought a 'good' speaker of Shetland because he has "watched too much TV". Professor Smith said that there is a tendency to think that 'old is better' and Professor Millar agreed, saying that young Gaelic speakers have been accused of 'deforming' the language.

"It is hard to unpick change", said Mr Hance: "It's happening, but there's not a lot of data," he added. He said people use Scots words a lot, but most are not campaigners – they are on social media talking about the "fitba", for example.

Professor Jennifer Smith said that Glaswegians don't talk about language in the way that speakers of the Doric do. 'It's not a *thing* for them,' she said, adding that there is something interesting about the impact of naming and talking about a language or dialect.

There is a balance to be struck – some people are suspicious of people saying they are proud of how they speak, said Professor Millar, and the Doric label, for example, can put people off.

## Questions

One member of the audience suggested it would be good to offer evening classes in Scots, but wondered if variation in dialects across the country would be an issue. Mr Eunson said variations are of immense importance, but that the learner responds best to the language they hear around them. Trying to capture each local or regional dialect is complicated and would make any translation of a text (such as children's book *The Gruffalo*, which has been translated into several varieties of Scots, including Doric and Dundonian) more parochial. Professor Millar pointed out that organisations already teach local variations of Scots; for example, bus companies want their staff to understand customers locally, and so does the NHS. In the first instance, it has to be local dialect, he said, adding that the variations are not that different from each other.

One audience member said that it is a problem when Scots speakers 'mumble' and then when asked to repeat what they have said, will 'translate' it into standard English. Thus, the Scots word is not transmitted, which makes it hard for a foreigner trying to learn Scots, the questioner said.

Another said that as a foreigner, they would like the opportunity to learn Scots but, on the point of the linguistic continuum, are concerned that Scots is considered 'down', while 'up' is more formal speech. Professor Smith said the continuum is horizontal, not vertical, and Ms Heywood said the NLS is trying to elevate the importance of Scots and give people ownership of texts.

Mr Hance said there is great variety in what is spoken in the workplace - it depends on the linguistic norms. Many workplaces are "heartlands of Scots language

speakers,” he added, while Professor Smith added that prejudice goes both ways (i.e., there are some places where it would not be the norm to speak more formally).

There was some discussion around how to define a ‘unified’ Scots language, with one audience member suggesting that the French approach of prescribing and unifying a language was pioneering. Professor Millar is not convinced, but conceded that some kind of language planning board might be a good thing. Mr Hance said that such an approach sometimes did not work, giving the example of Galicia. If a language is a compromise, then the ‘unified’ or official language is not actually something that anyone speaks.

There was a suggestion that it is problematic that we do not tend to read or write in Scots. Professor Smith conceded that we ‘privilege’ the written word, but said that social media is an example of where Scots is being written and read, with the movement coming from the ground up. Mr Hance said he has always thought the spoken word is the most important thing, and that hearing it in the public sphere is positive. Keeping it alive means encouraging people to speak in Scots, he added.

Mr Eunson said that some schools are teaching the Scots language but that outcomes vary depending on approach. He gave the example of a school in Glasgow that taught Scots to the lowest performers, who excelled. This compared to a school in Edinburgh which offered it as an ‘extra’ to the highest-achieving pupils. They could write it, and were very good at using dictionaries, but they didn’t speak it, he said.

One member of the audience asked about the impact of constantly ‘correcting’ our speech into standard English. Professor Millar said that he is not back in his native Paisley very often, but has noticed that speech there now sounds more ‘Glasgow’. This, he surmised, is because there is more ‘prestige’ conferred to Glaswegian speech. Professor Jennifer Smith said that vocabulary changes more quickly than sound and grammar – they are more transient than other parts of language.

Asked about the impact of Scots being part of popular culture, Mr Hance said many minority languages have a popular culture. Professor Smith said that Scots has long been part of the indie scene, citing Arab Strap as one band that sings in Scots.

One audience member said that saving a minority language means taking action, including making it learnable, with clear rules so that it can be taught, and basing it on the strongest, most widely spoken dialect. Professor Millar said he does not like the idea of one dialect being chosen above others – this would tend to privilege the middle-class language of the capital city. There is also the issue that if you ‘plan’ a language, the difficulty is that nobody is a native speaker.

Mr Hance said that he and other enthusiasts are always looking for answers and are not closed minded, but the issue is that there are almost no successful examples [of saving a minority language] and that each potential solution is fraught with challenges.

In his Vote of Thanks, Professor Jeremy Smith thanked the panelists and the audience for an evening of interesting discussion.

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