

Linguistic marginality in Scotland: Scots and the Celtic languages

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1. Introduction

Scotland lies on the margins of Europe. Until the spread of English in the early modern period, it also marked the edge of the West Germanic world. This marginality was represented by contact throughout the Middle Ages and beyond between Gaelic and Scots, as well as earlier contact with P-Celtic languages.¹ Yet the Gaelic contact phenomena found in Scots dialects is often patchy, even in relation to the varieties primarily discussed in this essay. Why should this patchiness have come into being?

2. Early History: British, Pictish and Bernician

Scots is the northernmost variety of ‘English’ spoken on the Island of Britain. Although the set of Anglian varieties spoken in what is now Scotland are, with the exception of the runic inscription on the Anglo-Saxon cross at Ruthwell in Dumfriesshire and some place-name evidence in Latin charters, recorded only from the fifteenth century on, this marginality is likely to have been present for long before this.

Even before this parting of ways, it would be fair to say that the original heartlands of Scots and Northumbrian were also contact zones in post imperial northern Britain. One central tribe – the Votadini – were eventually renowned in song (most famously one of the earliest writings in Welsh, the *Gododdin*). The relationship between Northumbrian speakers and British speakers must have been considerable, intimate and long-lasting. It would be very easy to claim that a Celtic-English antipathy existed. This is not what passes for the historical record for the period between around 600 and 800 CE suggests, however. Although warfare between the various power blocs of the period – Gaelic-speaking Argyll, British-speaking Strathclyde (or ‘Clyde Rock’, as Fraser 2009 prefers), the ‘Pictish’ north and Anglian Bernicia – was practice-

¹ Some varieties of Scots – those of Shetland, Orkney and Caithness – also came into contact with North Germanic dialects; this contact will not be discussed in this essay, however. It is treated in, among others, Millar (2007) and (2008).

ally endemic, alliances between Bernicia and the other ethno-cultural groups were the norm; much intermarriage took place between leading families of the various peoples. It is very likely that the same happened among more lowly people, particularly, it could be imagined, across the ever-changing frontiers.

It is striking, therefore, how deep it is necessary to dig in Scots to find absolute evidence for British influence. There are a small number of British words in Scots; most of these are found in all varieties of English. Some, like *bannock*, may have been reinforced by both north British and Gaelic influence, but this cannot be verified. A fairly convincing argument has been made for the all-pervasive Northern verb-subject concord rule – where complex plural subjects are followed by ostensibly singular-marked verbs – as an example of British influence (for a discussion of this development, see Montgomery 2004). Even here, however, it needs to be recognised that other varieties of English which are unlikely to have had long-term contact of this type also realise either a partial or complete breakdown of historical verb-subject concord. It is, in fact, complete in the North Germanic languages spoken in Scandinavia. Beyond these, however, there is very little to say.

There are three ways in which this lack of evidence could be interpreted. The first, much favoured in the nineteenth century, is now considered highly dubious as a general principle. The suggestion was that a sufficient number of speakers commanding considerable political and economic force invaded a given area and that their arrival was so traumatic that local people either fled in large numbers or assimilated very quickly to their conquerors' culture and language. But genetic and other evidence suggests that this cannot have been the case. The majority of people who spoke the Bernician variety of Old English in Lothian in 700 were likely to be descended from speakers of British two hundred years earlier.

Jackson (1953) had a (for the time) revolutionary explanation for how population continuity could be squared with the comparative lack of British influence. He suggested that the reason why no variety of English had been profoundly influenced by contact with British was because of generations – often, centuries – of bilingualism. Contact generally has its greatest effects when knowledge of both languages is imperfect in the generation which passes over from one to the other. If a bilingual population existed for generations – a not unlikely conclusion – the bilingual population would probably have been able to produce accurate versions of both languages with little or no

interference from one to the other. Since Bernician was the prestige variety, producing a 'native' version of it without British interference would eventually have implied that the speaker had arrived, had been accepted.

More recently, a number of scholars have begun to suggest that *all* varieties of English have been profoundly influenced by the Celtic languages. Because of this omnipresence of influence, and because it would be fair to suggest that Celtophobia (or, perhaps more fairly, a complete ignorance of and lack of interest in Celtic) was common among historians of the early centuries of English in particular, such a suggestion would have received extremely short shrift until remarkably recently. Yet there may be something to it (see Schrijver 2002 and many of the essays collected in Higham 2007). It is certainly true that the historical trajectory of development for English led it to become strikingly different typologically from the other Germanic languages (see Lass 1997 for a discussion of these points). While these typological shifts were not started fully until some five hundred years after the coming of English to Britain (and may have been encouraged in part by the presence of Norse in central parts of the north of England), it is not impossible that informal registers, and quite possibly areas such as southern Scotland where contact lasted longer would have been considerably advanced in comparison to the written materials we have.

Whether Jackson or the Celticists are correct, however, one point remains. The marginal dialect of Old English which would eventually become Scots was undoubtedly influenced in one way or another by British, both due to its being spoken on a linguistic frontier and also because of the high levels of bilingualism present in the early stages of language shift. But the peculiarly lengthy nature of the contact meant that its effects are diffuse and not particularly central to the development of the unique patterns of the Scots dialects.

3. Scots and Gaelic

Given that Gaelic was at one time or another spoken throughout Scotland (with the partial exception, perhaps, of the Bernician south-east), and could be said still to be retreating into its heartlands while conversely spreading again in the last two hundred years into traditionally Scots-speaking centres through economically motivated migration, we would expect the language to have undergone a profound degree of contact with Scots. But, with a number of caveats which will be dealt with in the following, this has not been the case.

Again the case could be made that Scots speakers from an early point in the middle ages considered themselves to be socially and culturally superior to Gaelic speakers in the more fertile Lowlands. Bilingualism would have existed, but of a peculiarly unequal sort. This is likely to have some truth to it; we cannot escape from the Jackson theory already put forward: little Gaelic influence was felt in the majority of Southern and Central Scots dialects *not* because there was little contact, and that of brief duration, between speakers of the two languages; *instead* the contact was sufficiently lengthy and deep that little if any features were transferred from one language to the other. When the local populations shifted from Gaelic to Scots they already had a definite sense of what each language was.

In powerfully argued essays from 1997 (written with Ó Baoill) and 2004, Macafee has argued that Scots is *not* a ‘Celtic English’; nor is it a ‘colonial variety’ of that language. I must in the first place make plain that I do *not* disagree with her views; what follows is, instead, an attempt to distinguish different levels of Gaelic influence in different parts of the Scots-speaking community.

If an outsider were to predict where geographically Gaelic influence was strongest, the obvious answer would be: on the edge of the historical *Gaidheal-teachd*, the Gaelic-speaking region. This of course makes sense. Along a long (and relatively static) line in Scotland, Scots and Gaelic came into contact for at least 300 years (after what is assumed to have been a catastrophic decline in numbers and a geographical retreat from the Lowlands in the Middle Ages, as discussed, for instance, in Withers 1988).

It is difficult to disagree with this view. In each of the counties along the old line – Argyll, Stirling and Perth in central Scotland, for instance – the local Scots dialects often demonstrate considerable lexical influence from the former (or in a few cases still existing) local dialects (a discussion of these and similar features can be found in Millar 2007: Chapters 4 and 5).

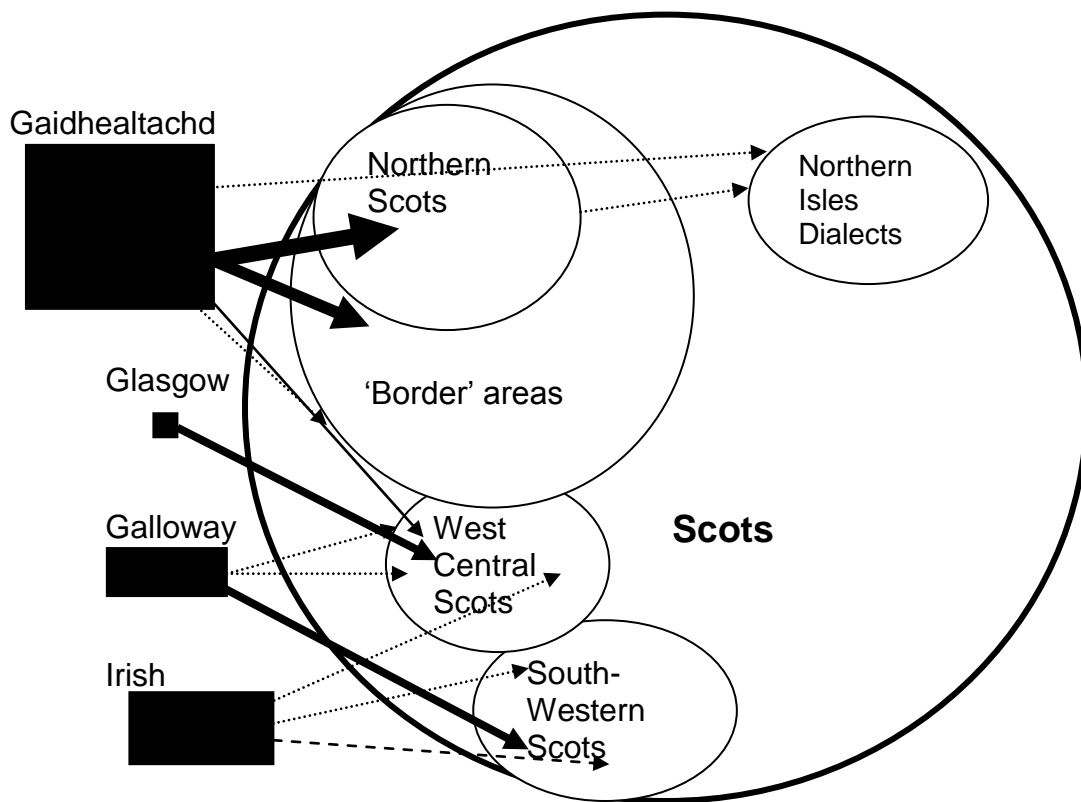


Fig.1 Levels of Gaelic lexical influence upon the dialects of Scots

But there are issues with such a straightforward interpretation of the concept *marginal*. Given the economic and political relationships between the Highlands and Lowlands over the last 500 years (and particularly since the inception of the Highland Clearances at the end of the eighteenth century), contact between Gaelic and Scots could take place far inside Scots-speaking territory, such as the farming districts of Ayrshire, the coal fields of Fife or, foremost of all, the Clydeside Conurbation, centred on Glasgow. Again, this influence was largely lexical (according to Thomason 2001, the least invasive level of contact), although it is entirely possible that elements of Glaswegian phonology (the replacement of /ð/ by /r/ and of /θ/ by /h/ representing one set of possibilities) if a certain leeway is permitted with the idea that contact must be equated with direct transfer of material.

This type of contact is by its nature different from that found on the geographical margin. Primarily this is due to the fact that a city like Glasgow would have had Gaelic-speaking inhabitants from all over the Gaidhealteachd (and beyond also: speakers of Irish, in particular, but not exclusively, of Donegal and other Ulster varieties, and probably also of Manx, resided in Glasgow in considerable numbers). This broad-based influence would inevitably have inspired different results to those where only one essential variety of each language was in contact.

Moreover, the conurbation provided a place where Gaelic and Scots speakers lived in close proximity for lengthy periods, rather than in distinct, but geographically contiguous regions. Of course towns like Callander, Crieff or Blairgowrie on the geographical frontier had housed just such bilingual communities for centuries; the scale and numbers of the Glasgow contact were of a new and significantly greater order. That is not to say, of course, that these contacts were always friendly or equal. Elements of the cultural background of many Gaelic-speakers – not least their religious traditions – bred a sense of exclusivity; by the same token, the use of *Hielan* ‘Highland’ to describe contemptuously perceived nonsensical activity carried with it a covert sense of superiority. Despite this, however, contact was inevitable and regular, particularly, perhaps, as Gaelic speaker numbers dropped and intermarriage became increasingly prevalent.

We can go beyond this well-known contact zone, however. There is at least one example of a Scots-speaking community outside the boundary of the eighteenth century Gaidhealteachd – Galloway (in the south-west) – where considerable Gaelic influence, particularly on the lexis, is felt in the local Scots dialects. It is undoubtedly the case that language shift from Gaelic to Scots took place considerably later there than anywhere else in southern Scotland; this may explain why Gaelic influence appeared more widespread there when the major surveys of modern Scots usage, such as those that produced the *Linguistic Survey of Scotland* or the *Scottish National Dictionary*, took place in the middle of the twentieth century, much later than was the case elsewhere. Equally, however, the relative isolation which allowed the persistence and perpetuation of Gaelic in upland Galloway would also have allowed the persistence of ‘peculiarities’ in the local dialects of Scots in relation to the more homogenised dialects of the Lowlands to their north. This uniqueness includes the Gaelic influence phenomena, however.

There is also a small amount of evidence for there being Scots-influence Gaelic varieties, in particular in the burghs of southern Argyll – Campbelltown, Lochgilphead and Inveraray, as ongoing work by Ó Maolalaigh demonstrates. It is certainly true that these communities were particularly open to Scots influence because the opposite shore of the Firth of Clyde is Scots-speaking. In the case of Campbelltown this connection was amplified by the near proximity of, and close contacts with, speakers of Ulster Scots. But it is very likely that similar ‘pockets’ throughout the Highlands and Islands – such as Oban, Portree and Stornoway, among others, to a lesser or greater extent – produced similar language phenomena. The Firth of Clyde area also appears to have developed a Gaelic-influenced Scots variety (or varieties), perhaps best illustrated in Neil Munro’s comic *Para Handy* stories (Munro 2002), concerned, appropriately enough, with the adventures of the crew of a ‘puffer’ serving the needs of the coastal communities of the Firth. Elements of this type of contact dialects may have influenced the dialects of communities such as Greenock, geographically in the Lowlands but with a particularly large Highland (and also Irish) population, in regular contact with Gaelic-speaking communities just a few kilometres away across the Clyde.

3.1 Northern Scotland

It is to northern Scotland that I would like to place particular emphasis, however, because the level and nature of contact was considerably greater and of a particular type.

In earlier work (Millar 2007; Millar 2009) I have suggested that the late medieval and early modern development of the Scots-speaking parts of northern Scotland – essentially the North-East, Caithness and (on a small scale) Cromarty and Avoch on the Black Isle – was strikingly different from the Central Belt.

There are, for instance, a number of features of northern Scots which indicate a strong Gaelic influence on the lexis. I believe that this runs deeper, however. In northern Scotland the medieval financial and social revolution which made the burghs so effective a broadcaster of Scots did not run as smoothly. Well into the early modern period many of the northern burghs were almost abjectly poor; with the exception of Aberdeen, Inverness and possibly Elgin, they were rarely able to acquire a surplus except in the best years. Unusually for a burgh council, there is evidence which suggests that some of

Inverurie's baillies were illiterate well into the seventeenth century, for instance (Milne 1947). The burgh dominance over its hinterland so manifest in central Scotland was barely present if at all in the north. Long-term bilingualism which was not entirely unequal must have been commonplace.

Elsewhere (Millar 2009) I have suggested that, prior to the 'improvement' movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in the more fertile and urbanised (if that is not overstating the point somewhat) parts of the north, the middle classes spoke something like a mainstream, more centralised, variety of Scots, although there is some evidence for the existence of typically Northern features, such as /f/ for <wh> as a minority variant in the late medieval Aberdeen burgh records. Initially this variety was shared with the aristocracy and the landed interested in general. In the course of the seventeenth and, in particular, eighteenth century, the upper echelons of society gradually shifted to a Standard English with a Scottish accent and, eventually with the nobility, the use of prestigious English accents.

It is my belief, however, that the 'lower orders' in northern Scotland spoke a marginal variety of Scots which exhibited considerable influence from Gaelic on its phonology in particular but also on its lexis (it is likely that the major typological differences between the Celtic and Germanic languages made structural influence less straightforward; even so, some progressive usages abnormal in most varieties of English are quite mainstream in Scots and may be Gaelic in origin). The peasantry of the old order would have used this variety among themselves, employing it alongside Gaelic where that language continued to be used, but also where Gaelic had ceased to have any currency. There is very little evidence for this variety, primarily, I would imagine, because the group which used it was almost entirely illiterate and were generally unlikely to be quoted or discussed by those who had more than the functional literacy widespread in the artisan classes. Small pieces of evidence do exist, however. In an essay of 1996 I discussed a text which purports to be a letter home from Maryland, written by a man originally from the neighbourhood of Fyvie (an area which would not normally be associated with Gaelic speakers at this time). This is not the North East Scots of the present day; instead, it is one of its sources, a source which was significantly more Gaelic-influenced than any variety now spoken.

During the 'improvement' movement's heyday, the north-east, along with a large part of Scotland, altered in appearance, culture and economic

potential. Most feudal obligations were phased out; land was drained and enclosed. Many short-term small-scale tenants found themselves forced out of the use of land on their own terms and instead landless and in danger of being assimilated to the landless underclass speaking this heavily Gaelic-influenced Scots. Many of both groupings were drawn in to the expanding urban areas of Scotland; those with most resources regularly emigrated. But a new working class was created whose linguistic identity had two sources: the mainstream Scots of the ‘middling sort’ and the highly Gaelic-influenced varieties of the peasantry. North-East Scots, it could be argued, remains a descendant of this koineisation of previously separate but similar varieties.

Caithness provides a particularly interesting set of variations on this basic theme. Until very recently, Gaelic speakers were an everyday presence in the experience of local Scots speakers. Although in theory the Scots-speaking (largely formerly Norse) areas and the Gaelic were delineated, this could not always have been the case. At the height of Wick’s fishing and whaling boom in the late nineteenth century, for instance, many Gaelic speakers were residents of the burgh; particularly in the fishertown of Pulteney (see, for instance, Sutherland 1983: 29-30). The economic advantages which the coastal parts of the county have had throughout most of its history – illustrated by the language split already mentioned – probably always led to (Gaelic-speaking) inhabitants of the interior moving to the coasts and becoming, eventually, Scots speakers. Modern economic patterns would only have encouraged this movement. Yet when Gaelic-speaking numbers rose above a certain proportion, the language being abandoned would inevitably have had influence on the target language; even the language of the original native speakers of Scots.

Although evidence is scant, it does seem likely that Caithness Scots went through a similar set of developments, with the proviso that it was, for a while, in primary contact with Norse as well. Gaelic vocabulary is commonplace in Caithness, dealing with a range of everyday situations which suggest a lengthy and probably friendly and intimate connection. While, again, there seems little if any influence from Gaelic upon the syntax and morphology of Caithness Scots, that is not true for its phonology. Along with the /m/ to /f/ change, the /tʃ/ to /ʃ/ change in words like *shill* ‘chill’ represents a close approximation to the way that Gaelic speakers with little or no knowledge of Scots or English approached an affricate which they did not have in their own phonemic inventory. Even the characteristic Caithness voicing of final plosives,

particularly common with /t/, so that *it* is often /hɪd/, might be seen as an example of Scots-Gaelic bilinguals hypercorrecting to voiced forms because Gaelic speakers regularly devoice.

3.2 Discussion

In a sense, therefore, the geographical marginality of the northern Scots dialects in relation to the Gaelic dialects is related to a social marginality. While it is true that the general sociolinguistic tendency throughout Scotland after the early middle ages was for Gaelic to retreat before Scots at least in those areas where a market- (and cash-) based economy became fully integrated into local life (a tendency which would have eventually been paralleled – and in some places replaced – by the imposition of Standard English and the ‘dialectalisation’ of Scots). At ground level, however, in specific places and at particular times, this tendency may not always have been obvious. Bilingualism – not always one-sided on the part of the Gaelic-speakers – must often have been the norm.

4. Comparison: Irish English and Scots as Gaelic-contact dialects

If we compare the Scottish situation with the other marginal region on the north-west edge of the West Germanic world – Ireland – it is possible to find both assonances and dissonances. The history and development of Irish English is still fraught with problems – there is little evidence for a ‘grand narrative’ equivalent to that of, say, Macafee (2002), although Hickey (2007) may come close. What is certain, however, is that the primary contact between Irish and English was registered almost everywhere in Ireland (apart, perhaps, from the Norse-speaking towns on the marine fringes of the island, although even here, given that the towns were intended as emporia, knowledge of Gaelic must have been commonplace among the population). There are gradations in this, naturally, with relic areas like Forth and Bargy, within the English Pale, having exhibited, perhaps, rather limited – although still measurable – Gaelic-contact phenomena, such as the apparent pronunciation /f/ for original /m/ (Hickey 2007: 53-4), in comparison with the manifest evidence of contact-induced change from varieties recorded in areas where language shift was recent or even where speakers were bilingual. Nevertheless, the extent to which southern Irish English at least was of a piece linguistically, with, at least in recent years and likely for some time, social distinctions and the urban/rural split being more

central than place, is striking. Indeed, with the exception of Connacht, English-speaking settlers were planted in all parts of Ireland. As was the case in northern Scotland, knowledge of, and influence from, Irish must have been commonplace; influence at all linguistics levels must have been the norm. Unlike in northern Scotland, however, this ubiquity was spread over a larger area where norms could, perhaps, be diffused. It may also have helped that the sources for most varieties of English in Ireland are mainstream. Even though there was considerable Irish influence, the base upon which this worked was not as foreign to the speaker of the spreading Standard English as were the northern Scots dialects.

Practically the same ecological patterns applied in the northern Irish English dialects, with Irish being an everyday presence for most English speakers well into the nineteenth century. The striking difference is that one set of dialects found in the north – Ulster Scots – was strikingly different from Standard English and associated (although not entirely or perpetually) with Protestant dissidence from the Anglican establishment (and also, at times, the Catholic majority). One of the many interesting features in the language use in Ulster is the coming together of dialects spoken on the ‘mainland’ some distance apart which were now lying cheek by jowl. The new dialect features which sprang from this new contiguity in many senses is not dissimilar to that found in new dialect creation found elsewhere, including, perhaps, the Scots of Shetland (Millar 2008).

5. Conclusion

It is probably misleading at a variety of different levels to describe the Northern Scots dialects as ‘Celtic Englishes’. Nevertheless, their histories have made them much more susceptible to Gaelic influence than were more southerly dialects. The present mainstream dialects of the north may, it has been suggested, have assimilated material from, but replaced, much more Gaelic-influenced varieties for which we have only a limited amount of evidence. The margin, it might be argued, can often lie between discrete social groupings as well as on a map.

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