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Chapter 1: Language Attrition and Lexical Variation and Change

1. Introduction

In late September 2012, Mr Bobby Hogg, the last survivor of the final generation who spoke the traditional dialect of the fishing population of Cromarty, a small Scots-speaking enclave to the north-east of Inverness, died at the age of 92. The story appeared to resonate with people around the world. It was picked up by the international media and discussed as far from Scotland as Fiji. The Scots dialects with which this book is concerned are also almost all in danger of being ‘swamped’ by larger-scale linguistic units. While, in contrast to Cromarty, it is unlikely we will ever be able to talk about a ‘last speaker’ for most of these communities (population levels are too high), the dialects’ autonomous status appears rapidly to be being broken down. In the following pages we will be focussing on mapping and analysing these changes. In this initial chapter the theoretical bases for the research will be introduced and critiqued.

This book is centred in observing and evaluating two discrete but inevitably connected subjects: the study of lexical variation and change and the study of lexical attrition. The first could be described as concentrating on the changes in use, meaning and form natural to all living language varieties. Words change meaning and use, new words are introduced, people from different backgrounds use different lexis on occasion, but the dialect itself continues its passage through time. The study of lexical attrition, however, concerns itself in the main with those occasions where, with some personification, we can say that a dialect is being ‘stripped’ of the lexis which helps define it as a discrete unit; which may, indeed, be its primary distinguishing feature. In the most extreme situations, inhabitants of a particular place cease to maintain the local dialect in its full lexical form. Bugge (2007) may actually represent evidence for both processes at work on Shetland dialect, This chapter will concern itself with the theoretical and, to a degree, methodological concepts necessary to provide a grounding to the study as a whole, although methodological discussion related to the creation of the research instruments employed in the study will be presented in greater detail in Chapter 3.

1.1 Lexical variation and change

Since practically the beginning of the modern study of dialects (itself integral to the early breakthroughs associated with historical linguistics), interest has been taken in the ways in which lexical use varies and changes within communities, across space and time, particularly since this is the feature of linguistic change of which laypeople are very aware. From the very beginning of scholarly work on these issues it became the norm to employ a questionnaire (or a cognate device) in order to record lexical knowledge and use, rather than more ‘natural’ elicitation techniques. We will discuss these issues in greater depth in Chapter 3. Here, however, it is necessary to enumerate the issues and problems involved, since these are vital to our understanding of why these studies have generally been downplayed in sociolinguistic investigations

Any dialect of any language has a highly finite set of sounds, for instance. It is (and was) straightforward to record and analyse these sounds (even before mechanical or electronic recording became possible) with a comparatively brief sample (although it might take longer to record distribution of sounds according to use). Morphological use is also generally straightforward to observe, since even in languages, such as Finnish, with a relatively large inventory of inflectional morphemes as well as agglutinative tendencies, word formation processes are circumscribed. Syntactic use is more difficult to collect and analyse through direct observation, because some – particularly complex – structures may not be terribly common, but nonetheless form a central part of the language’s nature. Nevertheless, in comparison with lexical use, there are easily definable boundaries over what structures any language can produce.1

It is also true, of course, that the lexis of a language has limits. There is considerable dissent over how many words (or, underlying them, free and bound morphemes) a native speaker of a language knows (for a discussion of how problematical this is even for one language – English – see Anderson and Freebody 1981), but there can be little doubt that the number of words over which he or she has command, while numbered in the thousands (and probably in the tens of thousands), is also finite. Unlike any of the other linguistic levels, however, *which* tokens any given native speaker knows are likely to be different in relation to the knowledge base of any other native speaker. If their backgrounds, life trajectories and ages are similar, there is a good chance that their vocabularies will also be similar; even then, they will never be exactly the same. When social, economic and cultural differences between speakers are greater – as they often are – the lexical tokens known may, beyond words to do with elementary human existence and function words, naturally, differ considerably. Linguists, of course, have a considerable knowledge of the vocabulary – indeed, often the jargon – of linguistics and actively produce the same when discussing their specialist fields. Their knowledge of the equivalent ‘craft’ terminology in nuclear physics is, inevitably, circumscribed; it is also likely that the physics vocabulary linguists employ may not be used correctly in relation to the norms of that field. Because of these vagaries and because of the fact that lexis is much more context-dependent than any other level of language, it is fair to say that even common words may not occur frequently in certain conversations. You would be unlikely to use any kind of automobile manufacture-specific lexis when discussing early Scottish history, for instance (unless through a probably rather contrived analogy). But the problems that attempting to observe lexical use can produce go further than this. Finding out which words a person knows, but rarely if ever uses, is, of course, very difficult to elicit ‘naturally’ (indeed the very term *naturally* is problematical).

A further feature which is inevitably problematical is that many literate speakers have native speaker competence in the vocabulary of the written standard language of their polity and that of at least one other dialect. Naturally, closely related dialects often use the same words in the same way. Sometimes, however, they do not. In Standard English, for instance, *starvation* refers, in origin, to death by hunger, later being bleached to reference towards a feeling of great hunger (and, eventually, to a very mild sense of want); in Scots, the same word refers to extreme cold. Speakers of a somewhat divergent dialect may carry around and largely keep separate two (or more) meanings derived from standard and dialect (the fact that near-synonyms are also possible within one dialect is also noteworthy). They may also confuse or even blend their meanings, however. Some speakers may be highly aware of what constitutes one dialect or the other; others may not. Personal experience may mean that particular semantic fields are better represented than others in one variety than in another. Someone from a Scots-speaking background who has never studied zoology or botany is more likely to know the names of birds and wild flowers in Scots than in Standard English, for instance, since he or she was introduced to them in the former variety and has no reason to know their ‘Sunday’ names.

For all of these reasons (and probably for a number more), recording and analysing lexical use is fraught with problems; studying lexical variation and change is even more problematical, primarily because, like all essentially sociolinguistic projects, it does not truly anticipate a ‘system within which everything holds’, or at least not a circumscribed, relatively limited, one.2 Rather, a three-dimensional set of usage patterns, partly different for each speaker, is traced. More of these methodological issues will be discussed in Chapter 3. What needs to be pointed out in this chapter is that the study of lexical variation and change, while possible and highly rewarding, is highly problematised. As the next section will demonstrate, the study of lexical attrition, which underlies this book, is particularly so, since recording on-going change involving loss of lexis with no apparent compensation from within that variety’s word formation processes is confused, confusing and inherently incomplete.

1.2 Language attrition

1.2.1 First language attrition

In recent years a major research agenda has grown out of the scholarly analysis of second language acquisition: the study of first language attrition. As Schmid (2011) has ably demonstrated, a considerable scholarly literature bears witness to a striking truth: with some individuals at least, the taking on of a new language (often due to migration) as the primary – often the only – language of everyday use has a deleterious effect on that person’s command of her first language. This can be termed *language attrition*. Structures may no longer be adhered to – German speakers living in an English-speaking environment, for instance, may, when speaking their first language, not always observe the *Satzklamme*, the ‘sentence brace’ construction (*ich* ***habe*** *das* ***getan***, literally ‘I **have** that **done**’), preferring instead to reproduce the structural norm in English *(ich* ***habe getan*** *das* ‘I **have done** that’); phonological systems may not be entirely water-tight (so that, for instance, a speaker of a language with phonologised nasalised vowels might replace them with vowel plus nasal constructions which echo the phonological system of the dominant language of the place she is living, even when speaking her native language). Lexical use may represent the apparent (or, indeed, actual) loss of vocabulary items by individuals, their place being taken by words borrowed directly from the dominant language (to use one of Schmid’s most striking examples (2011: 2 and elsewhere), Gertrud U., a German Jewish refugee to – and long-term resident of – the United States, uses *refrigerator*, rather than *Kühlschrank*, in her German).

In a very real sense, therefore, the phenomena associated with first language attrition mirror those connected to second language acquisition, with the difference that the clines of development run in opposite directions for the two phenomena – increasing loss of competence rather than increasing competence, to simplify somewhat. In this school of thought language attrition is normally portrayed as an essentially individual phenomenon (although obviously a mass of people in the same situation are likely to present similar – as a broad brush – features). People from similar backgrounds who have gone through similar experiences (which include the change in dominant language in their everyday lives) will probably all demonstrate similar phenomena in their use of their first language. But the extent to which attrition takes place is inevitably different from person to person. It can at the very least be surmised that factors such as treatment from speakers of their first language when emigrants lived in their original environment (whether, for instance, your experience of Germany, Germans and the German Nazi regime was only a matter of a few unpleasant but not life-threatening months before emigration or involved years of increasing persecution culminating in *Reichskristallnacht*, the government-instigated pogrom of November 1938), length of stay in the new environment and your attitudes towards your new country and its language, whether you settled down with a speaker of that language and had children, and so on, should all in some way or another affect your use of the new language and your old one. Moreover, your general linguistic ability must affect both your retention of your old language and acquisition of the new. It must be accepted, we believe, that this apparently individualistic, perhaps even atomistic, vision of attrition can probably be generalised in such a way as to portray how whole populations may face these changes.3

Beyond this, we need to recognise that the form of *attrition* which concerns Schmid and others is primarily related to the language of emigrants from the mother tongue area, a point which further emphasises the individual results and reactions mentioned above. This particular research trend has – at least at first glance – rather less to say about attrition in the ‘home’ environment, where a dominant language affects the use of an autochthonous language, the sense that what is being described is largely individual rather than collective in nature must also be borne in mind. In order to overcome these issues we need to turn to a discussion of the linguistic effects of *language death* (otherwise, *language* *shift*).

1.2.2 Theories of language death (language shift) and their value in the study of linguistic attrition

Since practically the very earliest times in which our ancestors had the ability to use language, there has probably never been a period when speakers of some languages have not dominated the speakers of others to the extent that the latter groups have switched across to the former language. Indeed, as Dixon (1997) points out, if there had not been a steady attrition of native languages over the centuries, the number of languages now spoken would run into at least the millions. The 6,000 or so discrete languages now spoken stand as living testimony to on-going language shift. On a grand scale, Dixon suggests that occasionally – but regularly – one language (or set of languages) will become associated with a group, event or idea of considerable historical, economic and social force. Languages without these associations rapidly contract, often eventually disappearing altogether. This ‘new force’ could be a major change in agricultural methods – the Scottish Highland Clearances, for instance, where Gaelic retreated in response to the spread of English, was essentially a matter of change in land ownership conceptualisation and land use patterns – or a natural disaster (including famine), as with, for instance, the effects on the vitality of the Irish language in the aftermath of the Potato Famine of the late 1840s. But language shift is also innately associated with political or religious change, as with the collapse of spoken Hebrew as a result of the destruction of the kingdoms of first Israel and then Judah and the ‘Babylonian captivity’ which followed, with the acquisition by the exiles of Aramaic, the regional lingua franca, or the replacement of all the native languages of continental Western Europe (with the exception of Basque) by Latin, in response to the spread of Roman power. How this all happened at ground level to individuals and groups of speakers (whether, for instance, the change was perceived as cataclysmic or was barely noticed) is not central to Dixon’s model, naturally.

 Underlying, however, and acting in a complementary manner, is a research thread with its basis in an ethnographic, indeed anthropological, survey of language use, the most striking early example of which being Dorian (1981), dealing with the ‘death’ of Scottish Gaelic in eastern Sutherland, based on fieldwork she carried out there in the 1960s and 1970s. Leading on from what was said above, the decline and loss of Gaelic in many areas of the northern Scottish mainland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was due to a large extent to the economic and social effects caused by the spread of a new agricultural norm – large-scale capitalist exploitation of sheepherding rather than the pre-existent subsistence level blend of cow-rearing and cultivation of a limited number of crops, all carried out by kinship groups – in the wake of the suppression of the Rebellion of 1745-6, leading to major population movements, of which Sutherland formed a centre. But in the coastal settlements of eastern Sutherland, the changes involved were rather more nuanced. Prior to the influx of people ‘cleared’ from central Sutherland, the inhabitants of the towns were generally speakers of Scots (but writers of English), as was the case in most of Scotland at the time, while the local peasantry spoke the local Gaelic dialects; some bilingualism would naturally have been the norm. With the advent of the new, largely indigent, population, instructed by the Sutherland estate to become fishing communities in order to exploit the potential wealth of the herring fishery during the Napoleonic wars, a new ‘pecking order’ developed. Over the course of the nineteenth century the native peasantry moved from Gaelic to English (perhaps to demonstrate their ‘nativeness’). People native to the coast also developed prejudices against the new fishing population. These prejudices lessened the amount of contact between communities; it practically prohibited intermarriage. Gaelic therefore became a marker of the fishing communities, a separateness enforced by the outside and willed from the inside. When the fishing contracted in the wake of the Great War, the language itself gradually lost speakers: its status (and purpose) as an identity marker had gone. By the time Dorian was carrying out her fieldwork, knowledge of Gaelic was confined to older people. Most interestingly from our point of view, the kind of Gaelic Dorian’s informants produced was of a very variable type: some forms were close to native speakers models; others made ‘mistakes’ which could almost be interpreted as ‘non-native’.

 Dorian developed the concept of *semi-speaker* for this type of language use. Semi-speakers were normally able to understand spoken Gaelic without any real difficulty. When they were asked to produce Gaelic, however, they demonstrated avoidance – or lack of knowledge – of some of the features which mark off Gaelic from English – in particular elements of the case system expressed through initial consonant mutations but also Gaelic’s dominant VSO element order. These semi-speakers did not all behave in exactly the same way, naturally. Rather, a continuum existed between speakers who made occasional ‘errors’ in their Gaelic and others who may have had a relatively broad lexical knowledge (although this need not necessarily follow) but found it difficult to put together even quite simple utterances. What is striking about all of these speakers is that they are not second language learners of Gaelic. Instead they could be seen as first language users of the language, at least to begin with. What can be suggested therefore is that life experience has led many of these speakers to cease using the language in certain (or indeed all) linguistic domains for an extended period, thus ‘stunting’ their ability in their native language. It should be noted, however, that speakers of rather different abilities often lived side by side with each other, quite probably largely using English in communication with each other.

 This continuum is not fully theorised by Dorian; it is considered at that level by Sasse (1992), however. Sasse presents (in a two dimensional medium) a three-dimensional view of language shift, including both sociolinguistic and linguistic features (and the features which bind them to each other). Essentially, he suggests, loss of social prestige as much as loss of native speakers can lead to language shift. Socially aspirational members of the A community (those who speak the language which will eventually be abandoned) will tend themselves to begin avoiding using their native language, particularly around their children, who may grow up using T (the target language) as their main use language. At the same time education policy and general literacy norms may mean that A is, as it were, ‘beheaded’. It may be very difficult, if not impossible, to speak about abstract concepts, have discussions of politics, and so on, in any other language than T because A’s lexical richness has been curtailed in semantic fields related to prestigious and/or abstract concepts in particular. This will further erode its social cachet. The fact that the middle classes of the A community are moving towards T means that it becomes a primarily working-class code, with even less status in a middle-class dominated society. Eventually these forces will produce an outcome where no native speakers remain. Sasse suggests, however, that languages can often have an ‘afterlife’, with words, phrases and rhymes being retained in memory and often used as expression of identity. Sometimes this is semi-jocular; at other times it represents a serious attempt to express central features of a person’s and a group’s view of its discrete nature.

 In tandem with this sociolinguistic discussion Sasse interweaves a linguistic analysis. As A lowers in prestige, it is likely to lose a great many lexical items, often in highly prestigious fields, meaning, as we have already seen, that speakers nearly always use T vocabulary – and, quite often, T structures – in these contexts. This phenomenon has been termed *stylistic shrinkage* (Campbell and Muntzel 1989: 195). The decision by aspirational parents *not* to use A with their children is unlikely to mean that these children will not actually learn A. It does mean, however, that they are likely to learn the language mainly from their peers rather than directly from their parents. Inevitably this means that these speakers will learn A rather later than T and may never gain full control of A’s structure (something seen in the major ‘simplification’ of the grammatical gender system of Dyirbal, an Australian language, in the course of the twentieth century;4 despite evidence of this type, Myers-Scotton (2002) denies that phenomena along these lines exist). This ‘simplified’ variety may actually be taken up by their peers as a marker of identity. To elders, this new variety may appear ‘corrupt’; this will mean that A’s prestige will drop a great deal. When we accept that these processes are unlikely to happen once but are much more likely to happen repeatedly, a vicious circle can be said to have been created.5 Naturally, many of the features mentioned here are similar if not identical to those put forward by Schmid and others for linguistic attrition in the language use of immigrants, although the sense of linguistic community is central to its analysis.

1.2.3 Dialect attrition

The loss of originally central linguistic features as a process of attrition is not confined to languages; it is also present with dialects of all types and sizes (if a true linguistic distinction can be made between *language* and *dialect*: see Millar 2005: Chapter 2). As with languages, dialect shift or loss has probably always been a feature of human life (although its more limited nature means that it is likely to have been commented upon rather less). In ancient Greece, for instance, there were a number of quite different varieties of Greek – Attic, Ionian, Doric, Arcado-Cypriot, and a number of others – spoken and to some extent written. Mutual comprehension and tolerance was widespread even during periods of tension and war. With one exception, that of Tsakonian, spoken in the central Peloponnese, which is at least in part of Doric descent, *all* modern Greek dialects are descended from the Attic-Ionian *koine glossa* ‘common language’, spread in the first instance by the armies of Alexander the Great and his successors and associated with the highly successful and long-lived Hellenistic civilisation which followed. It was the form of Greek which non-Greeks learned. Eventually all other dialects declined in use and prestige until they were wholly replaced, even on their native soil (for a range of references to this phenomenon, see Millar 2010b: Chapter 4).

 As we might expect, therefore, the fundamental underlying sources for dialect attrition can be found in change triggered by sociolinguistic processes. In the last two hundred years when, impressionistically, the process appears to have become more common – particularly in Europe, perhaps – than was previously the case. Urbanisation, agricultural change, cheaper and easier short-, medium- and long-distance transport and mass education appear to be the chief causes for the acceleration of the process. While it would be wrong to say that people did not move around before the advent of modern transport or that social mobility was unknown, most people did stay very close to where they were born and also had normally essentially the same occupations and rank as their forebears. They did not come into contact to the same extent with outsiders and had no abstract sense of a *language*, and therefore no sense of ‘incorrect usage’, which the prescriptive learning of a national standard brings. Since the nineteenth century at least there has been an on-going complaint literature about the imminent threat of the death of traditional dialects (often compared favourably with the new, ‘corrupt’, urban dialects).6While their demise has been somewhat exaggerated, there can be no doubt that much that was highly localised in people’s speech patterns is passing, or has passed, away.

 In recent years discussion of these matters has become quite widespread, in particular in Europe, as summations such as Britain (2009), Goeman and Jongenburger (2009), Røyneland (2009) and Vandekerckhove (2009), all derived from a special issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, demonstrate.7 While there are contraindications at work and two processes, apparently contradictory, may combine to encourage the same outcome, certain features appear to be present in many cases. In the first instance – as seen in the dialects of central Italy (Ferrari-Bridgers 2010), the Maastricht area of the southern Netherlands (Hinskens 1996) and the north-east of England (Watt 2002), new regional varieties (termed in Dutch *tussentaal* ‘between language’) have developed, often falling somewhere between the standard and the local dialect, but with local phonological features in particular maintained and even spread across prior boundaries. On the other hand, studies such as Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1995) and Soukup (2007) demonstrate how previously geographically and to a degree culturally discrete varieties can gradually (or not so gradually) merge with larger-scale varieties.8

 What is striking about many of these studies is that phonological and structural patterns are often given precedence over lexical analysis. Indeed, in the excellent Britain (2009) lexical erosion is only briefly discussed (pp.124-5); Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1995: 702) also touch upon this phenomenon. While a number of reasons could be put forward for this lack – many of them the methodological explanations which will be returned to in the following section and, in particular, Chapter 3, it needs to be recognised that the apparently daunting nature of the process has not put off researchers in Scotland, perhaps because it is lexical erosion which has been the most generally marked feature in change to the dialects of Scots in relation to (Scottish) Standard English.9 What is it about the historical linguistic ecology of Scotland which encourages this interest?

1.3 Lexical change and attrition in Scots

1.3.1 The historical background

This concentration on lexical change away from traditional usage derives from a series of historical events and tendencies which, while not peculiar to Scotland, are certainly unusual within the English-speaking world.10 As is well known, Scots, the Germanic vernacular of Scotland, was the only dialect of ‘English’ which maintained its literary and literate status into the age of print, producing, in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a literature as impressive as any written in Europe at the time. It is quite possible to imagine an alternative history where a standard Scots would have been given the same status internationally as modern Norwegian has today. That this did not happen can be attributed to, among other things, the use of the English Bible in Scotland during the Protestant Reformation and the Union of the Crowns of 1603, which led to the movement of the royal family and elements within the upper nobility south to England. These events removed the patronage so necessary to writers using Scots at that time, particularly due to the unavoidable truth that, for writers, the economic and other rewards associated with the use of English were considerably greater than was the case for Scots, in particular since Scotland had to wait until well into the sixteenth century before a permanent printing press was established in the country.

 That is not to say, of course, that many literate Scots speakers changed their written (never mind spoken) language to Standard English overnight. On the contrary, as scholars such as Meurman-Solin (1993) have demonstrated, a gradual shift from Scots to English practice in orthography, morphological representation, and so on, lasted something like a century for the whole group (although the usage of individuals can appear considerably more chaotic in relation to any tendency towards Scots or Scottish Standard English norms). It should be borne in mind, however, that while, by the end of the seventeenth century, writing Scots had become a rather solitary and eccentric pastime, most non-Gaelic Scots continued to speak their local dialects as default code, employing, if literate, a rather uncomfortable Standard English when this became necessary.

 With the Union of the Parliaments of 1707, only the Law and the Scottish Presbyterian Church Settlement remained as specifically Scottish entities. Both often jealously preserved their terminological Scotticisms, such as, in the language of the law, *propone* instead of *propose* (although on both occasions – especially with the law – decision making was actually carried out in London, with a Scottish face maintained). In such a climate, the educated professional classes of Edinburgh in particular began to move towards Standard English as the model for not only their writing but also their speech. Since so much that made Scots *Scots* was lexical, ‘improvers’ of Scottish language use were primarily concerned with sensitising their audience to words and phrases which were considered *Scotticisms* to be avoided (see, for instance, Dossena 2005). It is difficult to tell how effective this type of ‘therapy’ was either in the short or the long term, but it would be fair to say that the attitudes held by many Scots about the vernacular were solidified around this type of initiative by the end of the eighteenth century. While most middle-class Scots would have continued to use the vernacular as their primary code well into the nineteenth century (and, in ‘provincial’ towns, well into the twentieth century), control of (Scottish) Standard English was a central feature of their self image.

 Contrary tendencies began to be felt in the eighteenth century. As we have seen, writing in Scots had become practically moribund in the seventeenth century; in the next century, however, poetry began to appear in the vernacular, often written in an orthography which gave occasional nods to the Middle Scots conventions but was primarily based on contemporary English models. Many of those who wrote in Scots would have been associated with a range of political beliefs which were definitely in opposition to the prevailing orthodoxies and could be analysed as ‘radical’ (despite their Jacobite connections). Part of this opposition might be seen as being oriented around a linguistic expression of Scottish identity in the face of unionist hegemony (for a discussion, see Freeman 1981). Considerable irony is present in the fact that writers of the calibre and fame of Robert Burns were celebrated in essentially the same middle class circles which were also keen on removing Scotticisms from their own speech and writing. As McClure (1985) points out, there is no reason to expect that admiration for a language in writing implies admiration for the spoken language – the opposite to this is defined by him as the *Pinkerton Syndrome*, after a late eighteenth century commentator who considered spoken Scots to be corrupt and ‘ugly’ while at the same time praising the written literary form. But it is certainly evidence for a possibly confused (and definitely complex) set of associations for Scots and, in particular, perhaps, its lexis (for further discussion of these issues, see Dossena 2005 and Millar 2000, 2004 and 2005).

 As Aitken (1979 and 1992) pointed out and Dossena (2005) has developed, these connections and apparent inconsistencies have led to a situation where some elements of Scots lexis are used as overt and highly conscious markers of Scottish identity, even among people who naturally speak a variety much closer to the Scottish Standard English end of the continuum and would never use a variety which could be classified as an example of a discrete Scots (a set of usages described by Aitken as *overt Scotticisms*). At the same time, many Scottish people may use a considerable number of words and turns of phrase which they consider to be English, but which are in fact purely or almost completely Scottish (termed *covert Scotticisms* by Aitken), albeit on occasion with an Anglicisation of forms. Many middle class Scots also appear to have a considerable command of Scots lexis, but seem only capable of using it when impersonating someone – often elderly or working class (Macaulay 1991: 185-6). For whatever reason, therefore, knowledge of specifically Scots lexis is rather more widespread than might otherwise have been expected, possibly acting as an identity marker (albeit of a complicated and contradictory type: Millar 2010a).

1.3.2 Lexical attrition in the Scots dialects

Yet evidence suggests that the Scots dialects, while retaining many of their phonological and structural features, are gradually losing their specific lexis, with its replacement on occasion by colloquial English and ‘slang’ terms (indeed many younger speakers in particular often do not make a distinction between local dialect usage and ‘slang’, the ephemeral use of language in an eccentric way, involving the use of neologisms and unpredictable semantic uses). In the first instance, unusually for studies of linguistic change in the English-speaking world, there can be little doubt that interest in, and concern about, apparent lexical attrition have been and are promoted formally and informally by native speakers rather than researchers, perhaps because, as we saw earlier in this chapter and will return to on a number of occasions in this book, methodological concerns and issues with a quantitative treatment of the material involved in lexical variation and change have encouraged fewer scholars from embarking on major research in this field than is true for the study of phonological and even morphosyntactic variation in Scotland. Nevertheless some work – often of a high standard – has been carried out in the last fifty years for that country, in particular, perhaps, Macafee (1994; a Scotland-wide discussion can be found in Macafee 1997). These studies include research on lexical change in urban areas (Macafee 1994; Pollner 1985; Agutter and Cowan 1981) and rural (Lawrie 1991; Middleton 2001), knowledge of what were once central Scots words has become gradually at best patchy and often non-existent, largely along a continuum based upon age, with Hendry (1997) and Richard (2003) concentrating on the vocabulary knowledge of children.

Particularly interesting for this book are those studies dealing with lexical knowledge and change in coastal communities. McGarrity (1998) presents similar findings of primary attrition for the (former) fishing settlement of Torry in Aberdeen in relation to weather vocabulary, while Schlötterer (1996) investigated the knowledge of shipbuilding, maintenance and fishing technology terms among older members of communities stretching from the East Neuk of Fife to the present border with England. Downie (1983) also covered lexical knowledge and use within communities along the southern coast of the Moray Firth, taking a much more semantically general approach to what could be termed local vocabulary than either McGarrity or Schlötterer.11 Of course situations such as these do not necessarily illustrate total collapse for local lexis. As studies such as Downie (1983) and Richard (2003) demonstrate, some local lexis does survive, particularly when it marks local identity. The methodologies these studies employed will be discussed in Chapter 3.

The research described in this book takes the debate on lexical attrition in Scotland rather further than was previously the case by locating the research in communities which were previously quite separate from the surrounding areas and which had, through the common experience of a common occupation and heritage, a generally acknowledged dialect with considerable lexical difference from mainstream local dialects. Moreover, the study attempts to compare usage along a wide swath of the Scottish coast, including both smaller and larger communities, the inhabitants of some of which remain actively involved in fishing, while in others the fishing trade has become essentially moribund. While many of these words and phrases were connected directly with fishing and its ancillary trades, words for the local environment and for traditions were also central, as we will see in our discussion of our Corpus in Chapters 3 and 4. Given that most of the Scottish fishing communities have become separated from this work heritage, a fundamental question needs to be asked: to what extent can we say that these local vocabulary traditions, so closely connected, it can be assumed, to local identity, have survived? For the first time, a survey of this type will be informed by all of the theoretical positions discussed above, whether they relate to *language* or *dialect*.

1.4 Concluding thoughts

Linguistic attrition appears to be at the heart of much lexical change in traditional (and, indeed, non-traditional) dialects in the industrialised and post-industrial worlds. Given the speed with which a discrete language with a limited speaker base can cease to be ‘living’ in any meaningful sense, it is not surprising that attrition of the central natures of traditional dialects can be equally brutal and rapid. This has been generally well established in relation to the structure and phonology of these dialects. As we have seen, however, the same amount of analysis cannot be said to have taken place for lexical attrition; this book is intended to right this problem, at least in part. In the next chapter we will turn to a discussion of the history and culture of the Scottish fishing industry, paying particular attention to the communities considered in the research. The question of methodology will be reconsidered in Chapter 3.

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