Language, ideologies, and the 'Scottish voice'

James Costa

Occasional Paper: Language, Ideology and the 'Scottish Voice'[1]

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In this Occasional Paper, I would like to emphasise one way in which language ideological issues permeate literary discourse in Scotland. Focusing on issues related to Scots, I will analyse two (in my view complementary) introductions to anthologies of texts in Scots published over the past twenty years, and show how they participate in a wider ideological debate on language and society in Scotland.

A Tongue in Yer Heid is a collection of short stories in Scots, published in 1994.[2] The second anthology, *New Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, is a collection of contemporary poetry in Scots, published in 2009.[3] Both editors – James Robertson in the first case, Robert Crawford in the second – are highly respected on Scotland's contemporary literary and academic scene; both use their introductions to outline their conception of Scots. This paper considers how these introductions relate to narratives of language revitalisation. Both works will be shown to participate in an ongoing ideological debate on the status of Scots and on the modalities of its graphic representation. In so doing both editors not only contribute to this debate (advancing specific arguments defining a 'legitimate' Scots voice), but attempt to shape and influence reality through the creation and the promotion of a particular 'stance' for speakers and writers of Scots nationally, which will ultimately influence the way a 'Scottish voice' is articulated and perceived internationally.

The Revitalisation of Scots

The texts I propose to examine are enmeshed in a wider debate, the background to which could be called the Scots language revitalisation movement. While language revitalisation is usually defined as a backward-looking movement aimed at reinstating a language in its former usages, the way I will use this term is rather different.[4] Revitalisation movements should, on the contrary, be seen as forward-looking movements in which the dynamics between minority and majority

groups are redefined. Such movements rely particularly heavily on discourse, and more specifically on the 'invention' of what I call a 'narrative of revitalisation' to further their cause. A narrative of revitalisation will seek to discursively give the impression of continuity where the dominant impression might be that of a number of discontinuous events. For example, in the case of Scots, it is important for the revitalisation movement to convince its audience that there is continuity between selected important events, such as between the writing of prestigious literature in the Middle Ages and contemporary Scottish speech.[5] Such a narrative constitutes in fact a (charter) myth, the objective of which will be to explain why the present is the way it is, and how former glorious times can become real again. In examining those myths, one is able to look into the (very contemporary) ideological motivations of the various types of social actors involved. Myth is then, as Lincoln puts it, 'ideology in narrative form'.[6]

In the case of Scots, imposing such a narrative is particularly problematic given the pre-existing circulation of competing narratives, those of English and Gaelic. In a way, Scots is the half-blood Prince, the shameful cousin of English whose legitimacy constantly needs to be proven or reasserted. Hence the tension within the revitalisation movements between those promoting a view of Scots as a language on the same level as English or Gaelic, and those in favour of alternative solutions. While the first group of activists basically adopt the traditional ideological view of language prevalent in modern European nation-States – viewing language as an independent, bounded entity in need of standardisation and normally functioning within a monolingual framework – others seek alternative solutions that see language in terms of complementary repertoires that can co-exist both within individuals and throughout a given territory. Interestingly, in Scotland both parties function with the same historical 'myth of revitalisation', but it is the question of norms (particularly the issue of orthographic standardisation) that reveals ideological positioning. To take a very simplified example in literature, one may refer to Robert Burns as an 'Ancestor figure' if one believes that Scots should be written freely, and with generous latitude regarding issues of code-mixing (English and Scots) and orthography. Conversely, others might follow MacDiarmid's stance regarding the necessity of a more uniform, standardised and normalised language.

An Alternative to Language Standardisation

Let us consider the texts themselves. I will look first at *A Tongue in Yer Heid* (1994), and then *New Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (2009).

In *A Tongue in Yer Heid*, James Robertson develops a full sociolinguistic manifesto for Scots, dealing both with what it stands for as 'a language' and with how it should be graphically represented. In claiming to represent the full reality of Scottish speech, he is promoting a

particular view on language in society, one which values diversity and representativeness of several geographic and/or social sectors of society.

With regard to language, Robertson writes: 'If on turning through these pages some readers are surprised, affronted or confused to find language which, in their view, is not "true" or "proper" Scots, or perhaps not even Scots at all, I make no apology for that' (p. vii). The debate is framed in terms of legitimacy and Robertson claims enough authority to impose a vision of 'language' at variance with the anticipated views of his readership, a vision validating a particular segmentation of Scottish speech possibly unusual in literary circles.

With regard to spelling, Robertson states:

> There is a wide variety of approaches in these stories to problems of Scots orthography, and I have not sought to eliminate these. One argument against a standardisation of Scots spelling is that one of the language's very strengths lies in its flexibility and its less-than-respectable status: writers turn to it because it offers a refuge for linguistic individualism, anarchism, nomadism and hedonism. What has often been perceived as a fatal weakness may in fact be the secret of its resilience and survival against four hundred years of creeping Anglicisation. If there are inconsistencies – to adapt Walt Whitman – very well then, there are inconsistencies: the language contains multitudes.

> (p. xiv)

This point of view contrasts sharply with dominant ideologies of language in modern European nation-states, which tend to emphasise monolingual and monocultural dynamics, and usually strongly promote the adoption of one written standard by all, in the name of efficiency. What Robertson's attitude does reveal is a very different approach to the social dynamics of Scottish society. We know how language standards have tended to reinforce the power of small cultural and economic elites. Such a position towards the 'multitudes' is socially innovative – it denies any one group full control over the language and focuses on the social dynamics of Scots as a living vernacular. It challenges the claim of any group to establish itself as a centre of power.

It is also worth noting that the editor justifies his position through arguments potentially connected to national characteristics. Individualism, anarchism, nomadism, and even hedonism are all traits associated with the Scots in popular mythology. In other words, Robertson creates a discourse of language and identity in which the obvious link is not just between 'language' and 'nation' as abstract categories, but between speech and deeper national characteristics, however stereotypical they may be. A lot more could (and should) be said about this text, but most important to this article is the idea that language need not be standardised, and that it can be

connected with the nation in deeper ways than usually put forward. Robertson's attempt in a way creates new indexical links between speech and (national) identity.

In his Preface to the *New Poems…*, Robert Crawford explains the basis of his own project:

> Each poet was invited to submit about five pages of poetry that might suit an early twenty-first-century book called *New Poems in the Scottish Dialect*. Poets have travelled with Burns's title in different directions, and their poems have been published as they were submitted, without any attempt to regularise their attitudes to the Scots tongue.

(p. 11)

The weight of Burns within the circle of Scots language writers is still paramount. Interestingly, the idea of language revitalisation needing the collective creation of a myth here meets the cult of an Ancestor figure. In this collection the editor implicitly asks the authors what Burns means to them today, and this includes the choice of language and orthography.

The freedom of the author of each contribution is the principle underpinning this collection. There is a strong intertextual link with the wider debate on language in Scotland, or else the question of individual freedom and collective regularisation would not have been raised. Ideological issues that involve attitudes to the written medium are clearly at stake here. Whereas Robertson invoked diversity and the real sociolinguistic state of Scots today as the legitimising principle for his enterprise (and his coolness toward standardisation), Crawford refers to what Burns did to language to justify his own stance. This highlights an important difference in both approaches, and is an indication that the debate on language in Scotland is more complex than a simple duality of points of view focused on issues of spelling.

The possible alternative stances Crawford sets out for himself as an editor are either 'the regulator' or 'the liberal'. He clearly adopts the latter, which is a way to acknowledge other possible options while not discussing them. The editor presents the poems as disengaged from the constraints of orthography or standardisation, and uses vocabulary evoking images of freedom and unconstrained motion ('travelled', 'directions'). In doing so, he avoids questioning the authors' (or his own) ideological or political motivations, which are reduced to 'attitudes' rather than 'choices'. Yet, what 'Burns did to language', he did in a very different ideological context, one in which mixing English and Scots did not mean what it means today, and one in which having a single orthographic code was probably not viewed as terribly important. At play in both texts are questions of how to voice modernity, pre-modernity and post-modernity, and both ('liberal') editors choose to let all contributors play in their own way. They do however choose very different

public representations of language and of Scotland: in Robertson's case, 'the people', everyday speakers of what is now Scots; for Crawford, a mythical and ambiguous figure.

Scottish Voice(s)

At the heart of the debate lies a tremendously important question. If, as Robertson puts it, 'the language contains multitudes', then not only should speakers be free to do whatever they wish with language, the editor also redefines what a speaker of Scots is. The main issue in contemporary Scotland as far as language is concerned is to determine who has the right to impose their own linguistic taxonomy.

As a consequence, this debate has considerable implications in terms of defining what counts as the legitimate 'Scottish voice', understood both as political representation and as epistemological stance on what constitutes 'identity, experience and point of view'.[7]

Robertson does put the issue of a 'Scottish voice' at the centre of his argument: 'These stories offer no simple answer to the question, how does one transcribe the Scottish voice? In my view there is no such thing as *the* Scottish voice' (p. viii). The question of voice is in fact recurrent in Robertson's introduction, and linked with Scottish identity. In one instance, the notion 'Scottish voices' equates with 'Scottish accent, syntax and vocabulary' (p. xii). In another, it is framed in terms of an opposition between a cultural elite's 'individual cultural neuroses' and 'a genuine voice of Scotland', the former running the risk of being mistaken for the latter.

However, Robertson's definition of voice remains on a narrow level limited to the representational dimension of self, particularly through the written medium. I would argue that what is at stake in the two texts analysed here is not the question of *transcribing* the Scottish voice, i.e. of writing down various expressions of Scottishness, but of *negotiating* and *establishing* whose voice is legitimate as the expression of Scottishness — and thus what Scottishness *is*. Ultimately what is at stake is the way in which language and speech contribute to the construction of individuals as 'Scottish', and on the collective level, the construction of Scotland as a nation.

Conclusion

In this brief paper, taking as my starting point two introductions to collections of poems and short stories in Scots, I have outlined certain sociolinguistic questions which currently occupy the floor in terms of ideological debate: 'what is legitimate Scots?'; 'how should it be written down?' The texts I chose suggest solutions that are not in line with traditional measures of language policy in Western Europe, where standardisation is considered the most efficient way to 'save a language'. Scots activists opposed to standardisation are now powerful enough to make their arguments

visible, giving the ideological debate a very unusual turn. This might possibly be caused by the disconnection of language and identity in traditional Scottish nationalist discourse, and the ambivalent effect of defining Scots as a declining language or, conversely, as one brimming with vitality (whether or not its own speakers share this perception).

The two texts I draw upon present similar options regarding standardisation, yet they rely on very different arguments and cannot be said to represent a unified point of view. The debate and the issues addressed in this Occasional Paper also raise a number of questions that go beyond those of language, and show how the latter becomes invested with social meaning within a language revitalisation movement. Language and speech are used in this context to discuss issues of legitimacy and authority: who is entitled to voice Scottishness, and Scotland? Who does language represent? And how does a voice (or a combination of several voices) come to index what is and is not Scottish in the twenty-first century?

The question is as yet unresolved, and the answer to the question 'Who speaks Scots?' might well be a question of ideological choices only. But the unique way in which the debate is framed makes Scotland a tremendously important place to study for scholars of language ideology, in a globalised context where issues of standardisation and legitimate 'voice' emerge in minority settings throughout the world.

NOTES

[1] I wish to thank Dr Karyn Wilson and Dr Scott Hames for their useful advice on this paper. Any remaining omissions, misinterpretations or mistakes are solely my own responsibility.
[2] James Robertson, *A Tongue in Yer Heid* (Edinburgh: B&W Publishing, 1994).
[3] Robert Crawford (ed.), *New Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2009).
[4] See for instance Leena Huss, *Reversing Language Shift in the Far North: Linguistic Revitalization in Northern Scandinavia and Finland* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1999).
[5] See also James Costa, 'Language History as Charter Myth? Scots and the (Re)Invention of Scotland', *Scottish Language*, 28 (2009), 1-25.
[6] Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
[7] Webb Keane, 'Voice', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 9 (1999), 271-73 (p. 271).