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“Not Just English Badly Spelled”: Dialect and Basilect in Modern Scottish Writing

Robert Gibson

Introduction: A Particular Sense of ‘Vernacular’

In this short paper I look at Scottish literature over the last fifty years or so, with emphasis on a particular kind of local vernacular and how it is applied in modern Scottish literature.

In its dictionary sense, a vernacular is

> *the language or dialect spoken by the ordinary people in a particular country or region*

Thus a German author writing in German is writing in her vernacular, just as a French writer works in her vernacular French. Here, however, I want to take up the idea of vernacular writing as a kind of *oppositional* writing, consciously deviating from a literary-linguistic norm. In this meaning, vernacular writing may be close to the notion of *writing-in-dialect* but, as we shall see, this term does not fully encompass the literary or political intent of all authors using it.

Many, if not most, language norms have their vernaculars, in this sense. German authors may write in the linguistically ‘normal’ Hochdeutsch, or in variants such as ‘Platt’, ‘Kölsch’ or even Yiddish. French writers have a similar choice among standard French and dialects such as Occitan, Gascon, or Walloon[1]. In Britain, one can find a few contemporary (though hardly well-known) authors working largely in Kernewek, the archaic Brythonic language of Cornwall, and many more writing in Welsh, or in Scots Gaelic. There appears even to be fledgling, semi-underground literatures produced within UK communities whose first languages (Urdu, Panjabi, Hindi, etc) are South Asian in origin.

The role or function of the above-mentioned literary media is complex. While they are genuinely vernacular insofar as they embody an intention to write for a ‘local’ or non-mainstream audience, their use can also be seen as an attempt to renew or extend the literatures of what were once themselves independent language norms. Scots Gaelic, for example, was until the early 18th century. a flourishing cultural and literary medium; when a 20th century. writer like the late Sorley MacLean wrote in Gaelic, he was to some degree making a political statement in defence and celebration of that declining language, and not merely opting to write in his mother tongue.

The situation is different for those writing today in ‘Scots’[2]. Scots was itself at one time a self-sufficient literary medium, spoken by kings and courtiers as well as the common folk, and (with appropriate seasonings of French and the classical languages) the near-universal medium of the poets and playwrights of the day: Dunbar, Henryson, and even the Stuart kings themselves. Scots began to decline as an independent literary language with the removal of the Scottish royal court to London in 1603, and by the time of

the Union of the Scottish and English Parliaments in 1707 it was essentially moribund – surviving marginally in legal contexts. The 'common-speech' poetic language of Robert Fergusson and Robert Burns, it should be noted, differs markedly from the older Scots of the 16th and early 17th centuries, and reflects the growing Anglicization of Scotland following the Jacobite rebellions of the early 18th century[3)].

The Language of the People?

But if Scots was at that time a vernacular in the dictionary sense, in its modern form(s) it is very much an oppositional vernacular, the conscious political choice of a 'deviant' literary medium. Modern demotic Scottish prose writing, moreover, makes extensive and deliberate use of *basilect*, the language of the lower classes of Scottish society, and this for two reasons. The first is that Scots of higher social classes use what is essentially standard English. As the writer A.L. Kennedy (quoted in MacDougall 2004:181) puts it:

> *People like me, we were educated not to sound Scottish. So you have slightly Scottish grammar, and slightly Scottish concerns, but the language is standard English.*

Leaving aside the fact that it is the lexicon of Scots that separates it from standard English rather than the minimal grammatical differences, this is an accurate summary of the 'educated' Scots' condition. There is of course a cline of 'non-standardness', and it is only beyond a certain point that one can distinguish a given writer's language as identifiably 'Scottish'; Kennedy is one of several contemporary writers – perhaps not coincidentally, often female – who seldom reach that point, except perhaps to the most sensitive

ear.

The second reason for using basilect forms is linked directly to the first. The ‘educated Scots’ of the administrative classes (The actual ruling class of Scotland is thoroughly Anglicized.) has long been an accepted medium. A scattering of (often rather dated) dialect words and phrases within a matrix of standard English is the norm in middle-class Scottish speech for even educated Scots still tend to see themselves as Scottish rather than English, and require some means of expressing or confirming that identity. As far as literature is concerned, this ‘flavoured English’ has long been a standard trope used to great success by the likes of Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson, and J.M. Barrie. While this form of ‘Scots’ is now sometimes seen as contrived, or a cynical compromise between local flavour and a non-local readership, it must be remembered that it is the authentic voice not only of Scotland’s educated classes – for whom urban demotic speech is coarse and vulgar – but also of the vast Scottish diaspora populations of England, North America, Australia and New Zealand – for whom a few Scots dialect terms and stock phrases are all that remains of their ancestral tongue.

The Language of the Gutter?

Only in the latter half of the 20th century have we seen a wider reaction against the dominance of ‘educated Scots’ as a norm, and the rise of the idea that Scottish writers are entitled to a literary language that reflects their class and ethnic backgrounds rather than merely a single ‘Scottish’ identity. Due in large part to the huge expansion of British higher education in the 1960s, many such writers stem from working-class backgrounds, while others at least identify with the ‘common people’. These factors, combined perhaps

with Scotland’s romantic image of itself as the cradle of self-made men of humble origin, have created a literary culture in which it can almost seem deviant *not* to write about the lives and concerns of ordinary people – sparing the reader none of the often grim ‘authentic’ detail[4)].

Perhaps also relevant to this orientation is the fact that the early 20th century had seen a revived nationalism take root in Scotland. Mainly but not solely among poets – some politically of the right, or at least nostalgic for a wholly imaginary bucolic past – there developed an urge to create a sort of agreed pan-Scottish poetic vocabulary known as *Lallans* (Lowlands). This linguistic construction involved taking local dialect words and phrases from all parts of rural Scotland, resuscitating archaic terms as required, or even creating new ones. Not surprisingly, the language of the urban working-class was largely ignored, along with its specific concerns: the acceptable ‘Scots’ (i.e. Lallans) substitute for ‘child’ was the older ‘bairn’, or its diminutive ‘bairnie’, but not the more urban ‘wean’.

I met ayont the cairnie
A lass wi toosie hair
Singin till a bairnie
That was nae langer there

(from *Empty Vessel*, Hugh McDiarmid)

This synthetic Scots (of which the above is far from an extreme example) was controversial from the start, and given the alternative meaning of ‘synthetic’, it has inevitably been dubbed ‘plastic Scots’. Based on conversations with a number of Scottish writers, I have a sense that this

movement was perceived as reactionary, and something to be consciously fought against through a focus on the reality of contemporary urban life and the language used therein.

But it was also a poet, albeit a very different one, who can be said to have "forced the issue" (MacDougall 2004:194) of literary language in Scotland in the 1960s. Tom Leonard's '*Glasgow Poems*' of 1964 were seen by one reviewer at the time as 'epoch-making', and there is a real sense in which the uncompromising language and subject matter of the collection did indeed push Scottish writers and critics to take sides on the question of just what could be expressed in Scottish writing – and how.

Leonard's work employs an idiosyncratic, phonetically-rendered "language of the heart" (in Carl MacDougall's (*ibid.*) perhaps misguided phrase) that seems to this reader/hearer to replicate very precisely the sound of working-class west-of-Scotland speech. Leonard's verse is, in this paper's terms, as vernacular as it could be, for it can be readily accessible only to a limited, local audience.[5)]

it's the lang-
wig a thi
guhtr thaht hi
said its thi
langwij a
thi guhtr awright fur
funny stuff
ur
Stanley Bax

ter ur but
luv n science
n thaht naw

thi langwij
a thi
intellect hi
said thi lang-
a thi till-
ects Inglish

(from *Unrelated Incidents* 1969*)*

Gloss:
It's the language of the gutter that is, he said. It's the language of the gutter – alright for funny stuff or Stanley Baxter [a popular stage and television comedian] but love and science and the like, no.
The language of the intellect he said, the language of the intellect is English.

Even a reader who grew up hearing and speaking – or, rather, being able to speak when appropriate – this Scottish basilect may experience a peculiar disorientation when confronted with a poem like the above; a frisson of something between discomfort and delight at seeing 'literature' presented in this illicit medium, conventionally reserved for informal speech among members of the lower classes.

What is also striking about the poem above is that if it were read aloud to a local audience, it would sound exactly like the kind of utterance that

they might hear on any street in the west of Scotland. It would have nothing of ‘poetry’ as we usually understand it unless it were to be read rather than *heard* being read aloud. Only then, perhaps, can the piece acquire its curious and unstable status of ‘poetry’, with its modern convention of apparently haphazard line-breaks combined with an obviously deliberate and ‘meaningful’ phonetic rendering of its words.

Why an Oppositional Vernacular?

Motivations for writing in what we may loosely term a basilect are various: a straightforward sense of class identity, along with an urge for ‘authenticity’ perhaps combined (as is clearly true of Tom Leonard) a rejection of the imposed ‘educated’ standard; an overt ‘socialist-realist’ artistic orientation; a reaction against the constructed pseudo-Scots of Lallans; some combination of the factors above. While a writer such as James Kelman (see below) would not be alone in admitting to essentially political motives for his choice of demotic urban dialect as a medium, it can be argued that for others authenticity blends as a rationale with simple aesthetic and emotional pleasure.

One of the earliest novels to make extensive use of urban basilect to authenticate its description of lower-class Scottish life was Alexander McArthur’s 1935 novel “No Mean City”[6], a realistic to the point of outrage study of the rise of its anti-hero Johnny Stark from teenage hoodlum to violent crime lord of the Glasgow slums. In “No Mean City”, however, dialect is largely confined to dialogue, for like other writers working in a vernacular McArthur (who seems to have been aiming as much at social-reportage as at a novel *per se*) faced the challenge of structuring his story – previewing upcoming events, explicating a character’s motives or

background and so on – without bewildering his readership. These authorial tasks may or may not be plausibly achievable in a vernacular, and different Scots writers have approached them in different ways.

The language medium in which a writer presents his or her authorial voice is to some degree a reflection of his overall approach to the written medium. What we might term the traditional or default position is, as with McArthur and many others before and after, to confine demotic language to dialogue and monologue, but to 'author' the book in something closer to the linguistic norm. At one extreme, perhaps, among modern Scots writers we have William McIlvanney, author of several acclaimed 'social-realist' novels of working-class life as well as a series of 'hard-boiled' detective stories. Here is an extract from his prize-winning 1975 novel 'Docherty', set in a small mining town. In this scene a father and son have fallen out to the extent that they are about to come to blows in the street:

> *Anxious to catch the decisive moment that must come, the [onlookers] stared till everything else went out of focus, and only those crossed arms remained with the clarity of an emblem, cabbalistic handshake, reducing everything else to a setting for themselves. They assumed the stasis of sculpture, making it seem silly to expect a resolution.*

High style, indeed; McIlvanney's authorial persona might seem to have, in the Scots phrase, "swallowed a dictionary for breakfast" – although ('cabbalistic handshake?') perhaps not to have entirely digested it. There are many of these convoluted descriptions in McIlvanney's novels, virtually of which contain a clear admiration and respect for the working-class into which the author himself was born. Much as I think Robert Burns tried to do

for the landless peasantry of his time in "*The Cottar's Saturday Night*", many of his novels and stories attempt to articulate and to dignify the harsh lives of the working poor. In 'speaking for' the downtrodden masses, McIlvanney continually juxtaposes the raw and direct speech of his characters with his own erudite but – to this reader's ear at least – sometimes pretentious authorial voice.[7)]

(On a side note, it may well be this 'poetic' and rather grand tone of some, though by no means all, of McIlvanney's writing that has put him in line for the job of turning the dry bureaucratic prose of the Scottish government's 2013 White Paper on Independence into something that the public might want to actually read.)

But an intrusively distinct authorial voice is by no means the only option available. Two more recently published writers, James Kelman and Irvine Welsh, employ more subtle devices. James Kelman's 'breakthrough' novel was his 1994 Booker prize-winning *'How late it was, how late'*, which one reviewer (Robert Winder, *The Independ*ent October 13th, 1994) called

> *[A] boisterous riot of four-letter words which many readers - those who resent the intrusive appearance of a true-to-life vocabulary in novels - will find hard to admire.*

"How late it was, how late' tells the story of Sammy, an unemployed Glaswegian who has suddenly gone blind. The story is told almost entirely through dialogue, with much of the necessary elaboration presented through what could plausibly be read as the protagonist's internal voice, with minimal 'authorial' intrusion. Kelman also succeeds in reproducing the

west-of-Scotland basilect quite precisely without resorting to the device of phonetic spelling.

Heh gony put me to the end of the queue?
Right in front of ye.
He poked the stick and felt for the end of the bench; he sat down. Fucking life man. He sighed. He had noticed the pong; auld sweat; the usual.
Ach well, fuck knows how long would it take. Nay point worrying about it.

Any knowing ear would recognize this as authentic working-class Scottish speech; if Kelman's rendering of that speech does not try to exactly mirror its sound, it catches perfectly its syntax and rhythm, as well as the fractured thought-processes of the protagonist. In a 1994 interview with *The Independent* newspaper Kelman made clear his motives for writing in this way, denouncing the suppression of working-class dialect as a literary medium and insisting on his right to write in a voice which he recognized as his own. *'The real issue is to do with suppression'* he argued *'the standard English literary voice won't allow it.'* In his Booker acceptance speech he was no less direct:

'My culture and my language have the right to exist, and no one has the authority to dismiss that.'

Kelman has claimed that the furor over his winning of the Booker Prize made publishers less, rather than more, enthusiastic about his later work. There can be little doubt, however, that it was this event that put demotic

Scottish writing on the literary map, and there is anecdotal evidence that the short-listing for the Booker Prize of his 1989 novel ‘A Disaffection’ eased the path to publication of younger writers like Irvine Welsh.

Welsh’s 1993 first novel *Trainspotting* – more accurately, a collection of stories about the same set of characters – became an international success following the 1996 release of the film version of the same name. As with Kelman. ‘authorial’ intervention is minimal in Welsh’s writing, and he makes extensive and agile use of his protagonist, Renton, as a scene-setter and overall explicator.

Although writers typically deny that their characters can be identified with ‘any persons living or dead’, there are parallels between Welsh life and that of his character Renton. Both were born to working-class parents in relatively deprived parts of Edinburgh; both grew up in a culture in which alcohol, drug abuse and casual violence were rife; although neither excelled at school both were able, in the end, to attend university – at least for a time. Renton is easily Welsh’s most developed character, and it is difficult *not* to think that he is one in whom the author has invested a fair part of himself.

As the better-educated and thus more articulate peer of the other characters in Welsh’s linked novels (*Trainspotting* 1993; *Porno* 2002; *Skagboys* 2012), Renton is an ideal authorial stand-in, a vehicle for explication and other literary tasks. For anyone who grew up surrounded by the basilect of Welsh’s novels, a large part of their enjoyment of his novels is that the author’s ear for speech is simply not perfect; there is hardly a point at which his characters’ dialogues and internal monologues seem anything but exactly ‘right’ to a knowing ear. Even Renton’s at times ironically

articulated utterances precisely reflect what we might call the tactical bi-dialecticism of the working-class-but-educated Scot as he negotiates (to his own advantage) the pitfalls of the British class divide. Here Renton and his friend Spud, both drug addicts, have been brought to court on a charge of shoplifting books.

> *The magistrate's expression seems tae oscillate between pity n loathing, as he looks doon at me n Spud in the dock.*
> *You stole the books from Waterstone's bookshop with the intention of selling them, he said. Sell fuckin books. Ma fuckin erse.*
> *No, as sais.*
> *Aye, Spud sais at the same time. We turn roond tae look at each other. Aw the time we spent gittin oor story straight n it takes the doss cunt two minutes tae blow it.*

(from *Trainspotting*:165–6)

Here Renton's command of vocabulary shows through ('oscillate between pity n loathing' rather than the more demotic 'swing atween pity n disgust') but his casual use of 'obscene' language — which is in this dialect no more than what the Oxford English Dictionary calls an 'empty intensifier' — and fractured grammar ('ah sais') is robustly true to his class origins.

The protagonists of many of James Kelman's stories (as in his novel '*The Bus Conductor Hines*') are largely self-educated working class males with bookish pretentions, and – as with Irvine Welsh and Renton – it is tempting to see these characters (who can appear remarkable similar across different works) as having something of the author in them. One of the ways

in which both Kelman's and Welsh's characters are 'authenticated' is through their 'patter', the kind of deliberately amusing or ironic repartee that is so highly valued in working-class Scottish culture, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the authors themselves derive enjoyment from having their characters indulge in this sort of banter. This, of course, can *only* be done in a written form of the very basilect that they and their characters share[8)].

Conclusion

While Irvine Welsh has made far less play of a political motivation for writing in an oppositional vernacular than people like James Kelman and Tom Leonard have done, there is a sense in which these and other older writers had already fought and partially won the battle over Scotland's literary language, leaving the way clear for their successors to write in whatever 'lect' they choose. Despite their overt cultural-political motivations for writing in their own basilect, on the other hand, I do not think that authors like James Kelman would deny an element of pleasure their employment of that medium. Even though younger, non-prize-winning vernacular writers inevitably lack the public stage on which to discuss their motivations, it is plausible that Scotland's squabble over what kinds of literary language is allowable is winding down, and writers own essentially free use whatever 'lect' they feel suits their purposes. Scottish writers of the future may find it hard to believe that there ever was a single acceptable standard literary language for 'serious' work, with vernacular writing "awright for funny stuff" but nothing more.

Notes:

1) Most of these 'lects' were educated almost out of existence before their 20th century revival. Yiddish is a rather special case, however.
2) *Pace* Norman McCaig (in his prefatory notes to Hugh McDiarmid's *Scottish Eccentrics* (1972) this writer regards 'old Scots' as essentially an Anglian dialect of what became English (albeit one of the oldest dialects) but wuld argue that more modern Scots has taken on too much of English to be classed as a separate language. Tom Leonard is one writer who has critiqued the idea that the distinct lexicon of Scots qualifies it as a separate tongue.
3) This suppression of demotic Scots was already gathering pace by the end of the 18th century, so that even Scotland's national poet Robert Burns initially had to make excuses for his choice of "the Scotch dialect" as a literary medium. By the end of the 19th century the process was almost complete, and reading demotic literature had become something of a guilty pleasure.
4) The years of Margaret Thatcher's government – widely perceived as reactionary and hostile to local interests – saw a rise in leftist as well as nationalist feeling in Scotland; this is reflected in the literary temper of the time.
5) That said, the international success of, say, Irvine Welsh's work suggests that many readers are willing to make the effort to decipher his vernacular speech.
6) MacArthur was a Glasgow baker, often unemployed, and at the pulisher's instruction his manuscript was extensiveky re-written by his 'co-author', the journalist H. Kingsley Long.
7) It should be noted, in fairness, that McIlvanney is capable of a stripped-down, minimal style, as in his crime novels and short stories.
8) I have not cited examples of 'patter' from Kelman and Welsh's works, as each would require extensive socio-linguistic commentary in order to be appreciated. To the extent that they were anticipating a wider readership, this may be further evidence of these authors' writing in a vernacular in part for their own pleasure.

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(Tom Leonard can be seen and heard reading the poem quoted above at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMo5cxzLdR4)

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