

Re-acquainting with the language of childhood and grandparents...and much more

*A conversation with the author of the book
"Scots Language Learner"*

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If you are ever in doubt about what to say, it is probably best to say nothing, or as Scottish grannies used to put it "Haud yer wheesht". However, sometimes speaking out is even more important and for a language to be maintained in all its beauty and vitality - needless to say - much more than speaking out should be done.

"Scots Language Learner" is an introduction to contemporary spoken Scots and it is the first-ever Scots language course. It is lively and interesting, informative and motivating as well as systematic and efficient. In addition to instructions, explanations and exercises, the course contains useful background information about life in Scotland and about Scottish culture. The language of the texts, vocabulary, grammar and idiom are based on Central Scots with a slight emphasis on the North-East.

The author of the book, L. Colin Wilson was born in Aberdeen, of Aberdonian parents and grandparents. He grew up in Culter, a large Scots-speaking community at the time. After spending ten years in London and

¹ *The character of Anna in the book.* I would like to thank those of my friends in Scotland, who first evoked my interest in the Scots language and gave me every reason to treat it with the appreciation and respect the language deserves.

eleven years in Glasgow, he again lives in the beautiful and hospitable North-East of Scotland.

As a language enthusiast, Colin has been active since he returned to live in Scotland in 1989. He has done different things: he has been on the Scots Language Society's National Committee, and was its Press Officer in the early 1990s, as well as secretary of its Glasgow Branch. Colin also helped to run a less formal group that met more often, in Glasgow, from the mid to late 90s. Currently (after the publication of the book "Scots Language Learner" in autumn 2002) he has not been involved in language activism except for some occasional letters to newspapers. As the author, Colin gave an interview to BBC Radio Scotland in December 2003, although it was not used at all in the programme for which it was meant.

Colin says he would not describe himself as an expert, only an enthusiast. In everyday life he uses Scots or English depending on the situation in which he finds himself. He uses English with his family, because they do not favour Scots. With friends, it varies according to who they are. With strangers (e.g. in shops) Colin uses Scots or English depending on how likely he thinks it is that the other person also will use it. With work colleagues, he uses English unless it becomes apparent that a particular colleague is a fellow speaker.²

I met Colin and many others several years ago and at different occasions attended meetings of the Scots Speikers Curn in Glasgow, the AUSLQ in Aberdeen and the Scots Language Society. Colin had started writing the book at that time and the process of writing took seven years. Now, almost two years after its publication I asked him questions concerning the book, its reception and the past and current situation of the Scots language.

Where did the idea for writing the book come from?

I got this in late 1994, when the Curn was trying to find new members. Occasionally, we'd get someone who would say something such as "I don't know Scots, but I'd like to learn it. What resources are there?" There were dictionaries and grammar books, but nothing that could actually be called a language course. Not long before, "Teach Yourself Doric" had been published but, as the author himself admitted, it was a book whose main aim

² Colin is also connected to Finland in many ways – among other things he has been visiting Finland regularly and has an excellent knowledge of the Finnish language and other aspects of Finland's culture.

is "to entertain". There was no serious learner's course available, and as I'd used quite a few such books myself for other languages, I decided I'd try to write one for Scots.

You were born and grew up in the north-east of Scotland. How does the Scots language of your area differ from the Scots language in other areas?

It's difficult to say how well Scots in the north-east crosses over to other areas. I'm very seldom in any rural area outside the north-east, and I don't think the language in Scotland's other cities can really be described as Scots. In Glasgow, particularly, the language has moved towards English beyond the point where it can really be called Scots. I do know that, if I try using Scots in Glasgow, people find it odd: they don't always say so (a few do say so!) but it shows in their facial expression. I never get that reaction in Aberdeen, even from people who answer in English.

Where did you learn the language and where have you been using it? (in your childhood, at school, with family and friends, etc)

My personal knowledge of Scots comes mainly from two sources: my grandparents' generation, and school. As a young child, up to the age of five, I was often at my grandparents' without my parents being there. My maternal grandmother lived across the close from her sister, and they were often in each other's flat, and their talk was all in Scots. My other grandmother (who was a country woman, a farm worker's daughter) had a lodger who was also a close personal friend, and a similar situation existed.

When I was seven years old we moved from Aberdeen to Culter, to the country. The residents of our street were mostly "professional" people who came from outside the local area, and who commuted to Aberdeen for work. However, this was exceptional: at school, the other children were mostly local: some of them even lived on farms, and of the others some had parents who were former farm workers. The result was that I came into contact with a rural version of Scots that was better-preserved than what I'd have known if we'd remained in the city.

At the age of twelve I went to secondary school, which was located in Aberdeen's richest suburb. The country children were a minority, and most of them were placed in classes for less able pupils; and I don't think I

used Scots actively between that time and the age of thirty or so, when I was in London, when I made a deliberate choice to start using it again.

Who or what were the most important people or things which influenced your attitude towards the language and your own use of Scots?

More than anyone, the biggest influence on my attitude has been Billy Kay, with his book "Scots: the Mither Tongue". My family had a (negative) influence for a time, as did my formal education, but I learned to see past it in the end.

How would you describe the aims of the book and its importance abroad and in Scotland itself?

The book's main aim is to help people to learn Scots. In Scotland itself I see that as part of a broader reaction to cultural oppression by the UK. As well as people approaching the subject as actual learners, I hope that it will be of value to people who know Scots already: the very fact that it's in a book as a subject that can be learned, can give Scots a dignity that the UK has tried to deny. For people outside Scotland, that consideration doesn't really apply, but there are many (especially in e.g. the USA, Canada and Australia) whose forebears came from Scotland, and are looking for insights into their forebears' culture.

What did the writing of the book involve?

Writing the book involved a considerable sacrifice over a period of years, in terms of personal time, relationships, money, and my other interests. I don't regret this, but I'm glad it's all over.

What kind of difficulties did you confront in the process of writing?

There were two main difficulties. One was to distinguish what was generic to all varieties of Scots, from what was specific to my own, and present this appropriately in the book. Still, with this I got help from a good number of people. The other was to decide on the most appropriate written form and keep to it consistently. In the end, that was a matter of thinking and exercising judgement.

It wasn't especially hard to decide what points (grammatical, etc) needed to be covered, as I had models to base my work on, in the other examples of such books that I had already.

Your book is the first Scots language course ever. What was the reception of the book in Scotland and abroad?

The reception has been mostly positive. The only reviews I know of from outside the UK, were both by the same Polish academic from the University of Lodz, Piotr Stalmaszczyk. One (in English) was for the International Internet Journal of Culture and Society, the other (in Polish) was for an academic journal. Here in Scotland, the reviews have been good, with exceptions: Lallans magazine commented that, since the spoken Scots on the CDs is from the north-east, the book should have been written in a north-eastern spelling system ("fit?" for "whit?", etc). The Sunday Times commented, on a similar basis, that I was teaching a language that no-one speaks(!)

How would you describe the current situation of Scots?

Scots is still in decline as a spoken tongue, and the ultimate outcome remains to be seen. Possibly as a direct consequence, interest in it is increasing, as is so often the way with many things. When things are commonplace, people see no value in them, and only when they start to become scarce do people's attitudes start to change.

I do think Scots could still be saved, but it depends on the right political will to create the right conditions.

I had several great opportunities to follow closely the developments connected to the Scots language during the years 1996–2002.

Which events were in your opinion the most significant achievements of the Scots language movement?

There are two significant developments that come immediately to mind. One was the creation of the new Scottish Parliament, and the other is the UK's ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Many people had high expectations of the Scottish Parliament, but I wasn't one of them, and (five years later) it looks as if I was right to be pessimistic. In the days of the Soviet Union, the Baltic states each had their own autonomous legislature, but that didn't prevent the oppression of their indigenous languages and cultures; and the same is turning out to be true for Scotland. The Scottish Parliament has a "cross-party group" for Scots, and a few MSPs take part in it, but in terms of practical consequences nothing has changed.

The UK's ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (in 2001) contained a lot of apparent good intentions, even if only Part 2 was intended to apply to Scots. However, again, this has made no difference at all, and to my knowledge nothing has happened for Scots in Scotland as a result of ratification.

In my perception, the only event that will make a significant difference to the fortune of Scots in the long term, is our withdrawal from the UK and the restoration of normal governance.