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Scots as a cultural marker of belonging on forums

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Résumé

Dans cet article, j'examine la façon dont le Scots est utilisé en tant que marqueur identitaire sur un forum de discussion sur l'Écosse. Le sentiment d'appartenance est complexe pour des membres en situation d'hétérotopie : Écossais expatriés, Canadiens ayant des racines écossaises... Le Scots y devient donc une langue-patrie, et son utilisation est une preuve d'appartenance écossaise. L'apprentissage, l'enseignement et la traduction du Scots sont très valorisés, et participent activement à la cohésion des membres de cette communauté, surtout entre les apprenants et les locuteurs natifs. Ces derniers mettent un accent tout particulier à la géographie des mots, et donc leur indexicalité. Localiser un mot, c'est justifier de sa légitimité. Ils passent aussi facilement de l'anglais standard au Scots, les deux langues ont donc des valeurs différentes : prescription pour la première, valeur affective pour la seconde. Le Scots, langue minoritaire hors-ligne, est utilisé ici comme langue communautaire, qui soude les membres de la plateforme ensemble et assure la cohésion culturelle du groupe.

Abstract

In this paper, I examine the role of Scots as an important marker of identity, on an internet forum focused on all things Scottish. The sense of belonging may be complex for people living in heterotopia: Scotsmen abroad, or Canadians with a Scottish heritage... Scots becomes a *homelanguage*, and its use is a proof of belonging to Scotland. Teaching and translating into and from Scots is highly praised, and help create cooperation between the members, especially between learners, who are eager, and fluent speakers who try and spread the knowledge of the language. These fluent speakers also stress on the importance of the localization of words, that is their enregisterment, and indexical value. Giving a word's origin is justifying one's legitimacy and proficiency. They switch back and forth between Scots and English, with different scopes: Scots is an affective language, whereas English mainly conveys reasoning and prescription. Scots, a minority language offline, becomes a community discourse bringing members together culturally.

Mots-clefs : alternance codique, communauté virtuelle, indexicalité, langue minoritaire, Scots

Keywords: Code switching, enregisterment, minority language, online community, Scots

Introduction

*Scotster*¹ is a niche forum for people interested in all things Scottish: the sections and subsections of the online community tackle various issues, such as politics, sports, Scottish languages and history... Many users of *Scotster* actually come from Canada, and it boasts about 7,500 members as of July 2016. It does not have a big population and high-volume posters know each other, sometimes offline². According to Alexa, its main group of users is

¹ URL: <<http://www.scottishsocial.com/>>. Last accessed on Jul 31, 2016.

² Going as far as organizing Meetups or gathering at cultural events, such as the reenactment of the Bannockburn battle (Bannockburn Live).

between 45 and 54 years old. After being mostly a forum from 2008 to 2012, it switched to being a social network aiming at connecting people through their profile page.

This Scottish community acts as a “virtual tribe” of people attracted by the same cultural interests (Wenger, 1998). Instead of meeting because of their geographical area, they aggregate around their knowledge and love of Scotland. The corpus extracted from this site is made of personal presentations and profiles, as well as threads from the “Language” section of the forum. Information about the users are anonymized to preserve their privacy.

In this article, I will address various research questions. First, the scope of a minority language use, which conveys a sense of belonging to a given culture. This culture can be almost out of touch for second- or third-generation immigrants, but they keep in touch with their roots through this forum. I will use the concept of *communalect* to address all the linguistic practices of a given community, which guarantees its identity. It is very close to *ecrilect*, but it encompasses netspeak and the cohesive function of such uses.

Scotland is envisioned as the *ojczyzna*, that is, the fatherland of these people (Wierzbicka, 1997). In her 1997 study of the subtleties between the feelings attached to the concepts of “home”, “homeland” and “fatherland”, Wierzbicka (1997) defined “fatherland” using the following criteria:

- A country.
- I am like a part of this country.
- When I think about this country, I feel something good.
- This country is not like any other country.
- Many other people think the same way when they think about this country.

This list coincides with the way people consider their bond to Scotland, especially when they were not born in this country. The criterion “I am *like* a part of this country” is crucial. All users resort to English as their *lingua franca*. Scots has a very important part in identification, and the link between culture and language is prevalent in understanding the sometimes touchy relationship between Scotland and England: “English I’m not. As language, though, you’re mine” (Dunn, 2012).

Scots has lexical, grammatical, phonological and spelling differences with standard English, or even Scottish English. It is a full-fledged language, recognized by the 2001 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. It is quite widely used, although some users only resort to code switching between standard Scottish English and Scots (Costa 2010). The more people speak it, the more they consider Scots as a language in itself, according to a 2010 survey: it is an integral part of identity, as long as it is incorporated into one’s practices (The Scottish Government, 2010).

In this article, I will first address the sense of belonging itself, in a community of practice. I position my work in a post dualist stance, where the boundaries between the on—and offline world blend into a continuum. Belonging to “E-Scotland” and this site also means evoking the geographic landmarks. Scots and Gaelic do not have the same status on the forum (or even in Scotland), and they will be discussed too.

The second part of this study will focus on Scots as a tool for learning and teaching, as well as translating. These endeavors always attract valorization, and are integral to creating a

close-knit community. Finally, I will analyze how the indexicality of words points at geographic hints, as much for the users as for the words themselves. Code switching between standard English and Scots is commonly done here, and the goal of such an activity will also be investigated. Unless stated otherwise, the quotations from the forum are transcribed verbatim, with their alternative spellings and mistakes (double spaces, no capitalization of “I” or proper nouns...).

1. Community of practice

Online communities create a sense of belonging which stems from the commonly accepted practices arising when members interact. Cooperating to the usages of the group, whether these are linguistic, stylistic or ecological is important to the unity of the group as a whole. Influential members (those who contribute the most, quantity— or quality-wise...) impact on the practices of the community.

1.1 Belonging and heterotopia

Since *Scotster* is a site devoted to a geographical space, the places people belong are important. Their love of Scotland is their least common denominator, but it is not the only theme evoked on the pages. These members are very often in a heterotopia as they gather on a digital space, and project images of themselves as part of a geographical region they may not belong to, but culturally or affectively.

The word cloud of themes and tags on the forum (Figure 1) is generated by the platform itself, and it gives precious hints as to what is important to forum members. The size of each word depends on how frequent it is.



Figure 1: Word cloud on *Scotster* (July 27, 2016)

Interests are focused around several poles: culture, hobbies and places are over-represented in these keywords. Common hobbies unite members of the forum around their outside activities, but what is at stake here is how physical *topoi* are integrated in these users' preferred topics.

Scottish places are explicitly mentioned whether they are towns or regions. Edinburgh and Glasgow are the two biggest cities, but counties such as Fife and the Highlands are integral to Scottish culture. Other countries are only broadly mentioned, by their name (USA and Canada). These are the countries of origin of users of *Scotster*, and they oppose their actual home with Scotland. Examples 1–3 are extracts of their profiles:

1. US American but a misplaced Scots
2. Born in Canada but i feel like Scotland is my home.

3. I live in the US, but Scotland is my favorite place on earth!

These are always composed of an initial, descriptive statement, and an apodosis where they add an affective comment about Scotland. This reaffirms their legitimacy on the forum, while giving information about them. The protasis is brief and objective.

Many people express their preference for Scotland, although they do not live there—or even never lived there, in some cases. They tend to use vocabulary they would not naturally resort to, especially for North Americans (example 4):

4. Convener fur Canada: Me Dad's Clan HOPE (Weir); nee Mum's Clan LOGAN (MacLennan). [...] Own & operate me business noo. Proud tae sae, Canada is part of thee British Commonwealth! Cheers, chansman Big Bren & me wee westie guard doggie Bentley.

The Scots he uses here is quite accurate, except for “fur” (*from*) which would actually be spelled <fae, frae>, “sae” (*say*) which is the spelling of “so” and not the intended word, and “me” (*my*), written <mae> or <ma> (Eagle, 2002). “Me” could actually be the transcription of the British pronunciation [mi]. Other Scotticisms, such as “tae” (*to*), “noo” (*now*), “wee” and “doggie” are authentic, and prove how much this member is bound to his Scottish identity. These are easily accessible Scotticisms, that are known by most English speakers as part of the conventional image surrounding Scottish people.

“Se Alba mo chridhe” is the translation in Gaelic of the sentence “Scotland is my heart”. Gaelic is considered as the stereotypical minority language, and although few people do speak it regularly, it is very often used on the website as a way to convey affective messages addressed to the country as a whole. Languages are ingredient parts of identifying oneself, and they will be tackled in the next subsection.

1.2 Languages on the forum

The actual location of many users of the site is not always Scotland: Canada is overrepresented in the connections (Alexa). As such, Scots bears an important symbolic weight, recognized by some members of *Scotster*: “[Scots is] so interesting because I feel that it is a way to learn some of my heritage that has been lost between a generation”. Derrida’s words, “I have but one language—yet that language is not mine” could apply to this need to know about one’s ancestry, although they may be far, geographically and culturally (“lost between [sic] a generation”).

Questions revolving around languages abound here: “Gaelic” and “Scottish Gaelic” are important elements in the word cloud (Figure 1). Some messages are entirely composed in Gaelic, but that is very uncommon on the forum. There are only 932 occurrences of “failte” (*welcome*), even though this greeting is integral to Scottish folklore. Users of *Scotster* do not resort to stereotypes, and rather ask for translations in Gaelic, especially for tattoos. Some threads prompt members to use Gaelic, such as “Practise your Gaelic here! Beginners welcome too!”, but the messages are very often in English. Some 17 messages out of the first 100 were actually written in Gaelic only, and all come from the same three users out of the 13 people who interact on this thread. These three members are very fluent in the language,

which allows them to take up most of the discursive space: they wrote 87 out of 100 messages thanks to their knowledge.

These languages are conceptualized as a homeland in themselves. I resort to the term “homelanguage” to evoke this use of languages and identifying spellings and code switching, especially for people who do not reside in Scotland. Belonging to a homeland is of the utmost importance, and the mastery of a homelanguage or not is crucial:

5. I mus [sic] admit I'm no a speaker of Scots. Nope. I'm born an raised Canadian, livin in Nova Scotia now. But I'm a Graham an a Ferguson (lowlanders both) an a verra proud Scot in my heart.

The spellings tend to become more stylized after the initial confession of not being Scottish, and not knowing Scots. She contradicts herself, as she adapts her spelling to Scots: <no> ('not') and <verra> ('very') are recognized spellings, in the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* (DSL) (Skretkowicz et al., 2001). Her exposure to the language on the forum may be enough to teach her how to use Scots. Once again, the difference between stative sentences about her Canadianness and more affective comments about her ancestors and Scotland coexist in her short presentation. She also adapts her writing to non-standard forms closer oral productions, with cluster reductions: <and> becomes <an>, <must> is spelled <mus>, and the delevelarization in <livin> is expressed by the dropping of the final <g>. This gives her text a more relaxed and oral style, along with “nope”, and her lack of formality contributes to her integration in the community.

Although the members of the forum live far from Scotland, they gather on this online community, and use it as a gateway to their *fatherland*. It elicits far more positive reactions from them than their country of residence (or even of birth), and Scots, more than Gaelic, is taken as the symbol of being Scottish, or trying to get as close to the culture of this country as possible. The adaptation of spellings to Scots, which is mainly a spoken language, forges a communalect that is less formal than Standard English. That creates a sense of camaraderie between the users, as well as helps them assert their Scottishness.

Some members complain about the evolution of Scots through the forum: “It is a shame that [Scots] is being ‘modernized’ and ‘electronically’ altered by the use of computerized cell phones, instant messages etc.”. Actually, quite a unique technophobia is crushed by many threads whose goals are to teach and learn Scots, as well as broaden others’ knowledge of Scots. This exchange of expertise that will be the subject of the second section of this article.

2. Teaching and learning Scots

The users of the forum negotiate the use of Scots according to their proficiency and the scope of such a use: learners test their grasp on Scots, and informants help them acquire new vocabulary. Sharing Scots knowledge is also the goal when asking and delivering translations, which will be the subject of the second subpart.

2.1 Asking for help

Users’ proficiency in Scots depends on many factors. Since the language does not have a fixed orthography for each word, but several acceptable transcriptions, as well as dialects

(Doric, Northern and Insular varieties...), learning Scots is complicated for outsiders. In Scottish schools, activities revolve around understanding the differences between Scots and English, and they do not prescribe any language uses to children. The same can be said on *Scotster*, where any discussion about language can potentially turn into a digital classroom. Prestige members (speakers of Scots and champions of the language in general) spread vocabulary, while learners ask questions on the words, and congratulate these influential users.

Here, I will analyze a thread which started as a reminder that Scots is endangered, “Loss of our Language” (150 messages by July 2016). The original poster advocated the use of Scots as much as possible (example 6). He writes in quite a stylized version of it, which is also a reflection of his strong feelings about it:

6. Ooor language needs mair than a tourist Tshirt ae keep it alive so be proud of the wirds ye learned when ye were a bairn and spread them and use them whenever ye kin. (*Our language needs more than a tourist tshirt to keep it alive, so be proud of the words you learnt when you were a child and spread them whenever you can.* Message 1)

His point of view about the language is common among many Scots speakers, who also resort to it to convey their ideas. There is an opposition between three generations. First, grandparents of these users (who, as already stated, are often in their forties to fifties), with indications such as “b[orn] 1890” when talking about the phrases they would use. Then, the users themselves, who are still using Scots and who remember older words, and younger people who do not know all the vocabulary (example 7). As they are at a pivotal moment, between the old and the young, *Scotster* members consider the fact of spreading the language as a duty.

7. try to keep all the old words going. The young folk nowadays speak scots but its the old words we heard from our grandparents that is being lost. [...] WE have got to keep them kind of words going. (Message 8)

What’s more, these messages also trigger metalinguistic discussions, as they give examples of words they grew up hearing. As they did not all hear the same words, they ask questions about this lexicon (example 8 is from a very proficient speaker of Scots).

8. Whit does shelpit and groozen mean? shelpit sound like skelpit as getting a skelp fer cheek dinny ken about groozen? (*What does [scrawny] and [shivering] mean? Scrawny sounds like [slapping] as getting a slap for being cheeky don’t know about [shivering]* Message 9).

His experience of the language allows him to associate two very close words, “shelpit” and “skelpit”, but both have very different meanings. The author of the message containing these lexemes gives him an immediate explanation. He then proceeds to thank her: the negotiation around lexical knowledge is very positive, and results in face-flattering acts through phatic forms.

Inquiries about words do not always revolve around their meaning: they can also ask for clarifications about their actual use (examples 9-10). Once a word is mastered, or, at least, once users know its meaning, follow-up questions are more precise, and show curiosity to the language, as well as a will to use it properly.

9. Do Scots still use “dinna fash”? (Message 24)
10. Would you use “slaister” as a derogative, or teasing? (Message 25)

The phrase “dinna fash” (*‘don’t fuss’*) is very stereotypical, that is the reason why non-Scottish people may ask if it is still used. Answers are quite oblique: a user says his grandmother used it, and another says she hears it “all the time.” As for the second question, Scots-speakers even provide examples: “‘You are a wee slaister’ means you are messy.”, almost like what some dictionaries would do. Once again, the response is not as direct as the question, but one can infer that it is not a derogative word.

These questions and answers show that the knowledge of the language is not only a matter of collecting new words, but more importantly, a real gateway to learning as much as possible about a speech community (Morgan 2014). The author of the following message adapts her spellings as much to Scots as she read it on the forum:

11. Its going tae tak me a wee whiley to learnt tae spell in scottish but am picking up understanding more of the written stuff. While I did nae get all of what you wrote above I did get the jist of it. Keep up the postings it is very amusing and I am learning lots of new words. (Message 52).

As a result to her exposure to the language, she picked up a few communalectal spellings, such as <tae> (*‘to’*) and <nae> for negations. Other forms are not frequent on the forum, such as <whiley>, a word made of “while” and the common Scottish suffix <-ie>, adapted into <y> to accomodate the end of the stem. Although she struggles to understand³, she adapts her spellings through analogy, and stylizes her messages to show that she is trying to spell in Scots. Obviously, she only mentions spelling, as opposed to speaking, because it is the means of communication in this community. A non-prescriptive spelling system may be more complex for people who are used to having a single orthography for most lexemes.

The evaluation of words is often very positive: “It is like learning a new language sometimes but it’s great and some of your words are lovely”. The word “lovely” is atypical to talk about a language as it is quite axiologically oriented, and is a proof that and cohesion is created through this common knowledge. Users who share the most are valorized by others, and this is the topic of the next section.

2.2 Valorization Through Translation

A quotation from the Declaration of Arbroath, ends with the following addition: “My own translation into Middle Scots. Hope you like it. Feel free to use it.” The user flatters himself and insists on the fact he can convert discourse into an older version of Scots with the “my

³ She is a North American who moved to Scotland, hence her presence on the forum, to learn more in an informal setting.

own”, and shares his text, in an almost Creative Commons way. He also points at the fact hopes others will like it, hence use it: the diffusion of his work would be a proof of its validation.

When translation demands are met, others are very thankful, and their messages contain many phatic forms. The translators are always praised for their knowledge, and sometimes, the requisitions are very precise. Examples 12 and 13 are about a user who writes a novel on 17th-century Scotland. As a non-speaker, she asks for translations of what her character, Dougal, might say:

12. Dougal finally remembers he has a message and he wants to say something like (I’ll use the English): “Oh! I don’t know what I’m doing, forgetting that! I mean, I do ... here we sit, talking on and on, and I almost forgot what I was supposed to tell you.”
13. Dougal might say “Ah dinnae ken whit am daein, foryet (forget) that! I a dae ken, here we sit talking but I’m havering, which drove oot a ma heid whit ah wis supposed tae tell ye.” Just an idea whit it might soond lie in Scots. Guid luck wi it aw.

The first answer to that demand is example 13, entirely composed in Scots, including the comments after the translation. Scots and English forms are not separated by punctuation, except for the translation of the requested sentences.

The writer, who does not speak a good Scots explicitly points to the fact she uses English, as she wants to convey her message as clearly as possible (in the *lingua franca* of all members). The answer contains both languages, including the interesting spelling <foryet>, the only word translated in English in the dialogue. It has probably a link with the fact that, although it is very close to its counterpart <foryet> is actually an adapted spelling for QWERTY keyboards. The older spelling of this word uses the yogh (<forzet>), and it may be perceived as more alien than other Scottish forms.

Throughout this dialogue, people congratulate one another: “guid luck”; “thanks a ton [M...] as usual”; “cheers for the info”; “thank you [J...] [...] thanks again.” They valorize one another, not only about their mastery of Scots, to the point where they extend their compliments to the thread itself: “definitely the best topic on scotster [sic]”; “I’m loving it.” Their congratulations are quite strong, as “thanks” is never used by itself, and this use of phatic forms along with vocatives reinforces their bond, and catalyzes their belonging to the community.

Cooperation is very important on the site, and creates a virtuous circle between members. Those who do not know Scots can freely ask various questions about the language, and speakers take heed of these, and help them, all the while sharing Scots literacy. They may be pressured into doing it by the fact that some feel it is an endangered language. The offer and demand of Scottish vocabulary is very high, and threads which did not start as lexical databases become so. “Weekly Scots Vocab List” (quite a popular thread for this forum, with 157 messages in July 2016) is devoted to sharing words, but “Loss of our Language” also grew into a way to spread knowledge about Scots. Such initiatives are always met with

unfettered enthusiasm, bringing all members together in the celebration of Scotland through its homelanguage.

3. Indexicality of words

In this section, I will tackle the notion of indexicality as being both indexical and deictic components of discourse, and as parts of the *enregisterment* (Agha, 2003). To take an American example, “a person who sums up a situation in which someone corrected her grammar by saying ‘that’s a Pittsburgh thing’ has clearly formed an indexical link between the non-standard form she used and her place of origin.” (Johnstone, 2011). Words in Scots often come with extra information about the location they are most prevalent in. The suggested geography is the topic of the first subpart. I will then move on to the importance of the code switching back and forth, especially when addressing non-Scots speakers.

3.1 Geography of Words

The geographical information given by members in their profiles is not as important as how they discuss about words. In this subsection, I will primarily address messages written by Scottish people who speak Scots. Geography is crucial for some of them, and even toponymy, or, rather the knowledge of Scottish etymology for place names is evoked (example 14):

14. I am not suggesting that we force anyone to learn Gaelic or Scots if they don't want to, but isn't it strange how many grow up in a country where so few know what the local place names mean?

That kind of argument about the language is uncommon, but the user links the issue of the origin of words, and older culture with geographical elements. This bond between topographical spaces and the online community is important as well. Learners and users of Scots are presented with a collage of words from various Scottish places, and periods as well—hence the question from example 9, “Do Scots still use “dinna fash”?”.

I will follow Silverstein's conception of indexical elements as “signs where the occurrence of the sign vehicle token bears a connection of understood spatio-temporal contiguity to the occurrence of the entity signaled” (Silverstein 1976). Deictic markers like “here” and phrases such as “where I live” are shifters, and their meaning depends entirely on the utterer and its audience. Users of *Scotster* employ these indexes very frequently in their messages, especially when two speakers of Scots oppose their views about vocabulary. Adding geographical elements is important for understanding Scots, which is split into five different dialectal areas. Examples 15-16 are answers to one another, where people contribute several words for “children”:

15. Bairns is an east of Scotland word fer child, and Weans is a west coast wan, dinny ken aboot Aberdeen and the North East (*[I] don't know about Aberdeen and the North East*)
16. in aberdeenshire where i am the[y] call the girls quines and the lads loons.

Several are synonymous: “bairn”, “wean”, “quine” and “loon” all refer to children or younger people, but they are not used in the same regions of the country. Their forms are very

different, but all are within the DSL. The nuances between the first two are indiscernible, but the last two refer to young men and women, and complete the first message. This is another example of cooperation between members of the site. These words belong to the vocabulary of familiar, basic elements of life (people, family, food), and they are always accompanied by their geographic origin.

Other threads evoke the same words (17), but categorize “wean” and “bairn” in the same Lowland Scots continuum. In this case, the words in Scots are separated from the English by punctuation marks. He also restricts the use of “marag” to the Isle of Lewis (the largest island of the Outer Hebrides). He puts it on the same level as “wean” and “bairn”, that is, he only conceptualizes it as being a word having the proprieties [—English word] and [+ spoken in Lewis].

17. Some of these are pretty local words too. “Wean” and “bairn” are Lowland Scots words, but tend to be used in different areas. [...] they’ve got different words in Lewis (marag = black pudding)
18. Marag = pudding (Gaelic). A black pudding is (strictly speaking in Gaelic) marag dhu.

The answer (18) nuances this contribution by broadening the scope of this lexeme to all the regions where Gaelic is spoken, since “marag” is actually a Gaelic word. With so little context, it is impossible to know if the author of example 17 knew it was a [+ Gaelic] word. The follow-up message provides the accurate translation of “black pudding⁴”. Although it gives more detail than the first, it only focuses on Gaelic. Both users still resort to standard English to remark about Scotticisms, and the full thread contains few words in Scots when the discussion is metalinguistic. English is *de facto* used as the neutral language to judge and comment on words used in Scotland. The Scottish element that is added to these discussions has to be either the name of the language (Scots or Gaelic), or the geographical identification of the word.

Some resent the presentation of lexemes by themselves, without a metalinguistic contextualization (example 19):

19. If you want to ‘speak like a native Scots’ perhaps this ‘Vocab List’ might be more useful if each word was accompanied by the Region(s) and/or city in which it is still commonly used.”

Thanks to geographical elements, people insist on the appropriateness of the vocabulary in contemporary everyday situations, even though they may not be Scottish. The fantasy of “speak[ing] like a native Scots” corresponds to the notion that this homelanguage is linked to a cultural heritage, and it is presented in this example as the most valorized state of being. Speaking Scots is close to being part of Scotland, and that further proves the fact that *Scotster* is a gateway to Scottish culture, and that the country is considered as the fatherland of all users, even the non-Scottish people.

⁴ A blood sausage.

The double notion of using not only Scots, but proper Scots like a native is confirmed by other messages during an argument starting when a member wrote, “these words [...] are no longer relevant [sic] to modern Scots”. The answers were composed in quite an alarmed tone, such as “Is it true that the words we have been posting are completely irrelevant? That would be disheartening.”; “the words we have been posting are NOT irrelevant [sic]!”. The affective strength of “disheartening” and the capital letters in the negation convey how intense these users are about Scots. Indexicality only holds if words are still pertinent.

Knowledge about Scotland and its vocabulary is a key component in Scottish identity, and that holds particularly true in times when Scottish independence and its complex relationship to England is at the forefront of the news (Hame, 2016). This accounts for the way users negotiate how they switch from the communalect—Scots—to standard English, as it is the language most likely to be understood. This is an integral part of their identity, and their relation to others.

3.2 Code Switching and Identity

Members tend to switch between Scots and English, sometimes using Scots in their profile descriptions only, in a personal manner. They only resort to standard English on the forum. This behavior is uncommon, as many tend to switch back and forth between the languages they speak. This is quite salient, especially in metalinguistic exchanges, where they discuss their attitudes towards languages.

20. “when yer talking tae somebody on the phone fae a different area ye hav to put a polite english accent on ive found, because they don’t understand what your saying.”

This user splits his sentence into two parts: first, Scots (“yer, tae, fae, ye”) when he talks about himself, to other Scottish people who share the same experience. He then switches to English when he evokes problems others (non-Scottish people) have when understanding him. It is highly possible for him not to realize he changes from one language to the other.

Most of the Scotticisms are graphic, except for <fae>, the Scottish form of “from”, which can be a little harder to understand for non-Scots speakers, because of the resemblance with “for” (same number of letters, no consonant cluster). The second part of this example contains spelling mistakes, such as <ive> for “I’ve” and <your> for “you’re”, but no Scotticism: it is thus closer to the “polite English accent” he evokes in his message. A certain laziness around the capitalization of words (<English>, <I>) may account for these, more than ignorance of standard English. In this case, his Scottish identity clashes with standard speech. The offline inability of speakers of other dialects to make sense of what he is saying is the main cause. This opposition between being understood and being oneself is prevalent when people switch between two languages: the more they are involved in their identity, the lesser intelligibility is important to them (example 21).

21. “I love using my own Glaswegian on here but usually write in English because that is what I was taught and that’s what most folks would rightly understand”.

English is selected above Scots in order to make his utterances comprehensible for the greatest number, although it is not envisioned with as much love as Scots. Intelligibility is important, and accounts for this linguistic choice. In this message, we also see the difference

between “what [I] was taught” and what is spoken: English is the language of school, and thus, of prescriptive discourse. The register is pivotal in these cases of code switching, as Trudgill remarked: “Native speakers of Lowland Scots dialects may switch, in relatively formal situations, to standard English (spoken with a Scots accent of course)” (1983). Although he talks about oral communication, the same can be said on online, written exchanges.

22. We all need English to communicate but that should be no detriment to Scots (or Gaelic) for that matter.
Sae lang as bot ane hunnert o’ us yet abide, ne’er sall we,
upon ony conditione, be subjecktit tae the dominoune o’ ye
Inglis.” (*As long as a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any condition be subjected to the lordship of the English*)

This member uses standard English to convey his point about the balance needed between Gaelic, Scots and English, and switches to an historical text, the Declaration of Arbroath (1320). In this context, it applies both to the past of Scotland (the English domination), and the domination of the English language in Scotland on minority languages. This text is well-known in Scotland, and prompts a patriotic response from readers. Here, English and Scots align in his message, and Scots is the communalect, as well as the reaffirmation of an act of defiance against the *Sassenach*⁵. The reasonable answer in English is completed by the quote in Scots. Code switching helps intelligibility of the greater number, and the collusion of members together, through Scots.

Conclusion

In this paper, I first showed that Scottishness (even from people who never lived in Scotland) is displayed through very expressive, and meliorative discourse towards the country, as well as the use of Scots to do so, in some cases. This language offers them a sense of belonging, first to the online community, and, by extension, to the nation itself.

In the second part, I showed that teaching and learning Scots (as well as translating to it) was a key component of discussions on the forum. Valorization and face-flattering acts are a little different on this platform: users can congratulate moderators because they created a subsection they enjoy, and they can also praise one another. Resorting to Scots (and any communalect) is discursively coded: when turning to a communalect or even a single word, members demand to be included in the community of practice, while displaying their integration to the social group. Those who understand the message without explanations are also validated within the group.

In the third section, I showed how important space was: being able to locate a word geographically is constitutive of its legitimacy, as well as being a display for one’s culture. It is a justification and a proof of its indexicality.

⁵ The Gaelic word describing the English, and English-speaking Lowlanders, originally. Scots and English are not differentiated in Gael (Source: DSL).

Lexical knowledge (as opposed to phonological or grammatical proficiency) is put at the forefront, and considered as the only difference between Scots and English by most users of *Scotster*. It is the tip of the iceberg, but vocabulary is so important in indexicality that it is the prime concern of learners of Scots. The mastery of the language is not only through this lexical knowledge, and learners ask precise questions as to the status of words, whether they live in Scotland or not. Geographical information, as well as the appropriateness of these tokens in contemporary speech are crucial for some, who strive to use as good a Scots as possible.

Many members seamlessly switch back and forth between Scots and English. On this forum, these languages have two implicit forces. English conveys reasoning (and prescription), whereas Scots, which is the communalect, is cohesive by essence. Members try and use as much as they can, whether they write in it, or share vocabulary. Scots is also a tool to prove legitimacy on the forum, through lexical, metalinguistic or historical knowledge. This homelanguage is undistinguishable from the fatherland. It may go as far as symbolically represent the only link to a country on another continent, thanks to one's ancestry.

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