

Towards a Standard English 1600 – 1800

**Dieter Stein
Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade
(Editors)**

TiEL

Mouton de Gruyter

Topics in English Linguistics
12

Editors

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Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York

Towards a Standard English
1600–1800

Edited by

Dieter Stein
Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade

For Mrs. Frank,
in memory
of
Thomas Frank
Dieter Stein

Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York 1994

Mouton de Gruyter (formerly Mouton, The Hague)
is a Division of Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin.

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ANSI to ensure permanence and durability.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Towards a standard English, 1600–1800 / edited by Dieter Stein, Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade.
p. cm. — (Topics in English linguistics : 12)
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 3-11-013697-X
1. English language—Early modern, 1500-1700—History. 2. English language—18th century—History. 3. English language—Standardization. I. Stein, Dieter. II. Tiekens-Boon van Ostade, Ingrid. III. Series.
PE1083.T69 1994
420'.9'09032—dc20 93-36930
CIP

Die Deutsche Bibliothek — Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Towards a standard English : 1600–1800 / ed. by Dieter Stein ; Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade. — Berlin ; New York : Mouton de Gruyter, 1994
(Topics in English linguistics ; 12)
ISBN 3-11-013697-X
NE: Stein, Dieter [Hrsg.]; GT

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Typesetting: Lewis & Leins, Berlin.
Printing: Gerike GmbH, Berlin.
Binding: Lüderitz & Bauer, Berlin
Printed in Germany.

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Language standardization in eighteenth-century Scotland*

Thomas Frank

1. Introduction

The case of eighteenth-century Scotland, i.e., the speech of the urban middle classes of Scotland particularly during the second half of the century, can be looked upon as emblematic of a conscious attempt on the part of a community to bring its speech in line with that of a particular locality of the same linguistic area, namely the capital. This type of speech was held to be superior, "more polite", to use the contemporary terminology (see also Klein this volume; Wright this volume), than the local speech forms still widely used in the developing and emerging urban centres of Scotland, such as Edinburgh and Glasgow, and to some extent also Aberdeen. This is clearly not the place to trace the intricate history of the English language north of the border: we shall here be concerned with some, perhaps rather marginal aspects of its development during the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, these developments are of interest precisely because the rather restricted, but highly influential minority concerned made considerable efforts to adopt new speech models which would make its members indistinguishable from polite London and Court society of the time. To what extent these attempts were successful is of course another matter.

2. An age of renewal

Before pursuing these matters further it is probably appropriate to offer a brief sketch of the social-historical-cultural situation of eighteenth-century

* This may well be the last paper Thomas Frank wrote before his death during the summer following the Workshop. In editing the text of the paper, we are grateful to Peter Davidson for his comments and valuable suggestions.

ICEHL-6

HELSINKI 22-26 MAY 1990

Scotland. The seventeenth century in that country had been a particularly turbulent period of bitter internal religious and political strife. Though since 1603 England and Scotland were ruled by the same (Scottish) sovereign, the relations between the two countries were far from idyllic. The almost complete union of 1701 between the two countries – almost complete, because Scotland retained, among other things, its own church and a system of law – sought to iron out these differences, but there were large sections of Scottish society that did not accept the Union and wished to preserve a more marked separate Scottish identity in the political as well as in the cultural field. The concrete expression of this was of course Jacobitism, that is to say the political movement that worked for a Stuart restoration. The 1745 Jacobite rebellion was mainly an affair of the Highland clans and it is probably fair to say that it enjoyed only limited support in Edinburgh, where for a brief period Prince Charles Edward set up his court.

What is certainly true is that the so-called Scottish Enlightenment, which is associated particularly with Edinburgh but also with Glasgow and Aberdeen, was not firmly established until after the Scots had in the main abandoned the Jacobite cause, willingly or under coercion in the aftermath of the failure of the 1745 rebellion. Even so it must be said that some of the most significant achievements of the age, like David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, predate the rebellion. Be that as it may, it was only during the second half of the century that Edinburgh began to be hailed as the "Athens of the North", or, in the words of Tobias Smollett, as "a hotbed of genius". In this climate of intellectual renaissance the universities and the Church, as represented by the "moderates" within it, took a leading part. Many of the outstanding Scottish academics of the time, with the notable exception of Adam Smith, were also churchmen. The other profession that contributed significantly to this movement was the Law, though it should be pointed out that the second half of the eighteenth century was also a great age of Scottish science and engineering. Who can forget the magnificent contribution to British architecture of the Adam brothers, especially Robert, and what is probably still the most lasting attempt at urban renewal in Britain, that is, the Edinburgh New Town, which began to take shape towards the end of the century?

I have briefly listed these great achievements because they demonstrate that Scotland, and in particular Edinburgh, was no longer a remote corner of the British Empire, good for a sneering joke à la Samuel Johnson about the barbarous customs (and speech) of its inhabitants. In many ways Edinburgh was now at the centre of European culture, as witnessed by the enthusiastic welcome accorded to Hume during his stay in Paris in the years 1763–1766. Scotland had been firmly put on the European cultural map.

The exponents of this great cultural renaissance were moderate in matters concerning both the Kirk and politics. They supported the Hanoverian dynasty and all that this implied for British society; whereas in religion they did their best to tone down the asperities of the eighteenth-century heirs of the sternly Calvinist Covenanters. Progress was certainly welcomed in all fields, provided it was orderly and did not call into question the established social order: the eighteenth century in Scotland was an Age of Renewal, certainly not an Age of Revolution. In the light of all this, therefore, it is difficult to understand why many Scots tended to be ashamed of the language they spoke, and indeed of their origins, such as Boswell on his first meeting with Dr Johnson; nor, why they did their best to ape their southern cousins in accent as well as syntax.

3. A language contact situation

However, let us first return to the linguistic situation in Scotland. Most recent authors (McLure 1979; McArthur 1979; Aitken 1979; Aitken 1984a and Aitken 1984b) reject the idea of a neat diglossia situation for Scots, i.e., Lowland Scots – some form of Scotticised English. Instead, they prefer to think of the linguistic situation in present-day Scotland as representing a cline all the way from distinctly rural Scots (now very much in decline), via forms of standard English with an occasional sprinkling of typically Scottish lexis or syntax but with distinctly Scottish phonological features, all the way down to what is known as Scottish Standard English (SSE), and to forms of speech that are barely distinguishable from southern British received pronunciation. To this continuum, Aitken (1984a) adds a further refinement which he calls "educated Scottish Standard English". Scottish speakers therefore can draw on a wide range of styles, and Aitken (1979) talks of "style drifters", that is, speakers whose use of a particular variety of the language is fluctuating and essentially unpredictable, alongside more traditional "style switchers". All the authors cited here agree that modern Scots in any of the forms hypothesized is not a direct descendant of Middle Scots, which from the sixteenth century onwards was subject to the considerable anglicizing influences active during this period of great upheaval in Scottish history. These tendencies, which are attributed to literary and religious factors, led to a considerably diminished language loyalty, that is to older forms of Scots, so that the seventeenth century saw the rise of a mixed dialect (Aitken 1984b). McArthur (1979) discusses the question of what counts as the "same" and

what counts as “different” language as being to a large extent dependent on political and historical factors, and a similar point is made by Aitken (1984b): had older Scots preserved its autonomy from southern English we would today have a situation similar to that of Swedish-Danish or Catalan-Castilian.

Be that as it may, there certainly seems to have been a language or rather dialect contact situation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with a strong substratum (on the concept of substratum within the framework of recent theories of language contact, see Thomason – Kaufman 1988) of original Scottish phonological features, but with an essentially southern grammar as well as, to a considerable extent, lexis. In fact Aitken (1979) points out that the internal history of Scots, that is, Scots syntax, is very similar to that of southern British, giving as examples the development of *do*-support and of the progressive form even though the use of this latter construction in Scotland is not entirely identical with that of southern British Standard (I would hazard the guess that a sentence like *the school is still being built* does not come naturally to a Scottish speaker, but I may well be wrong in this). On the other hand certain divergent features within the verb phrase (such as the presence of two modals in the same verb phrase, as in *the manager will can tell you*, cf. Brown – Millar 1980) indicate that the convergence in the history of syntax between Scots and southern British is by no means complete. We shall have more to say on lexis and phraseology when we come to examine James Beattie’s pamphlet on Scotticisms (see section 5 below).

What is certain is that practically all Scotsmen preserved a distinctive Scottish pronunciation, although as we shall argue below members of the upper classes began to look upon this as a distinct disability and as a sign of inferiority. For this reason they made conscious efforts to “correct” their pronunciation and bring it in line with a form of speech closer to the London standard. Indeed, it would be difficult to conceive how the majority of the Scots in the eighteenth century could use anything but a Scottish accent – which I think it is fair to assume must have been pretty similar to present-day Scottish Standard English; probably, however, there was greater variety of local speech forms than today. Before the days of the mass media it would have been difficult for most Scots actually to hear an English “voice”. Communications between Scotland and London were slow and at times hazardous, and though there were a number of Scotsmen, like Boswell or Lord Monboddo, who made a regular habit of visiting London, most members even of the Scottish Enlightenment remained firmly rooted in their home ground, especially since, as we have seen, the reset of the world began to take notice of Scotland and its culture. David Hume, who is said never to have “lost”

his Scottish form of speech throughout his life, writes in a letter to Gilbert Elliot of Minto on 2 July 1757:

Is it not strange that, at a time when we have lost our Princes, our Parliaments, our independent Government, even the Presence of our Chief Nobility, are unhappy, in our Accent & Pronunciation, speak a very corrupt Dialect of the Tongue which we make use of; is it not strange, I say, that, in these Circumstances, we shou’d really be the People most distinguish’d for Literature in Europe? (Greig 1932: 255)

It would obviously be senseless to rebut in any way Hume’s contention that Scots was a “corrupt Dialect”; what is important is that it was perceived to be such and that therefore the Scottish upper classes, and especially the Edinburgh *literati*, made frantic efforts to rid themselves of the taint of provincialism.

McElroy (1969) records a number of episodes that purport to show that it was not merely a question of a reputedly harsh Scottish accent, but that there were cases of downright failure to communicate between Scots and Englishmen, though it is to be doubted that this was the main motivation for the fashion for acquiring a “polite” accent that swept Edinburgh society during the early sixties. In the summer of 1761 Thomas Sheridan visited Edinburgh and set out to teach the Scots “correct” English. Sheridan was of course a well-known teacher of elocution, though it is difficult to know at this stage whether his speech preserved traces of his Irish origin. His lectures were an enormous success and were attended by more than 300 gentlemen, “the most eminent in the country”. In August 1761 the Select Society, an intellectual society gathering together the *crème de la crème* of the Edinburgh *intelligentsia*, set up a “Select Society for Promoting the Reading and Speaking of the English Language in Scotland”, stating in an advertisement in the *Scots Magazine* that the Scots were acutely aware in their intercourse with the English of the “disadvantage under which they labour, from their imperfect knowledge of the English tongue, and the impropriety with which they speak it”. They proposed to set up a school and engage teachers to instruct both adults and children in the correct use of the language. Among the directors of the Society were some of the most eminent Scotsmen of the time, but nothing came of these early enthusiasms, and the Society achieved no tangible results: by 1764 it had petered out.

What is interesting about this episode is the motivation behind it, the frantic desire of the Edinburgh establishment, in spite of its awareness of the superiority of Scotland in many fields over the English, to ape fashionable London society in its forms of speech, convinced as it was that this was the

only valid kind of English. Even in the eyes of the anglicized Edinburgh *literati* Scotland continued to be a nation separate from the English (if anything they looked upon themselves as North Britons), with its own proud traditions, history and institutions (like the Kirk), and with the unquestionable intellectual eminence it had achieved vis-à-vis the rest of Europe. Yet none of this justified a distinctly *Scottish* form of speech: Scots was a mere dialect and a pretty rough one at that, unworthy of being spoken by men of culture. When some years later Burns began to publish his poems in Scots, this was considered to be fine in so far as he was just a simple ploughman, and he was soon turned into one of the myths of Scottishness, together with a phoney tartan and bagpipe culture – phoney, of course, because they are expressions of the culture of the Highlands and have nothing to do with Lowland Scots, the language in which Burns wrote. All this has to do with a view of a “romantic” Scotland that developed as the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment gradually began to wane. However, fascinating though all this is, it is a subject well beyond our brief in the present paper, so that it is time to return to more strictly linguistic matters.

4. Scotticisms as sociolinguistic markers

It is perhaps worth pointing out that most sociolinguistic varieties are characterized by a limited number of typical features which have a very strong indexical value. Even the presence of only two or three such features is enough to “classify” a speaker in a sociolinguistic sense. For example, the consistent use of forms like *he ain't*, *you was* or *they gone* is enough to identify the speaker concerned as “uneducated, non-standard”, whether or not these features are accompanied by a particular type of pronunciation, as in fact they usually are. The same applies undoubtedly to “Scotticisms”. Obviously, the greater the number of such features in the speech of a particular individual, the more specifically Scots his or her speech will be along a cline that goes all the way from traditional rural Scots to “educated Scottish Standard English”. Even so, a sprinkling of them is usually sufficient to identify the speaker as a Scot. These remarks should be borne in mind when considering to what degree dialect levelling or standardization, in this case anglicization, has taken place.

5. Beattie's list of Scotticisms

In 1779 James Beattie published, anonymously, *A list of Two Hundred Scotticisms*. This was reissued in Edinburgh (the original edition appeared in Aberdeen) in 1787 in a greatly enlarged and more systematic form under the title of *Scotticisms [sic], Arranged in Alphabetical Order, Designed to Correct Improperities of Speech and Writing*; in 1797 another edition was published, likewise in Edinburgh. The 1797 edition is preceded by a lecture on elocution by Hugh Blair, in which the author recommends such things as clear and careful enunciation, and correct voice modulation. On the face of it, the lecture seems to be directed mainly at preachers, advocates and such others as have occasion to speak in public. From our point of view, what is more interesting is the list of Scotticisms drawn up by Beattie, their nature and classification, and it is to these that the remainder of this article will be devoted.

The words and expressions stigmatized as Scotticisms can roughly be divided into the following categories:

- a. lexical items considered as Scots for which other (English) lexical items are suggested. English in this context is to be understood as a form typical of the southern standard;
- b. lexical items with the same meaning which exist in variant forms in Scots and in English;
- c. lexical items which are used (“misused”) in a different sense in Scots and in English;
- d. variants in grammatical usage.

According to David Daiches (in a public lecture; I have not come across this or a similar statement in any of his published writings) most of these Scotticisms have become part of the standard language. While “most” is obviously an exaggeration, this is certainly true of a number of the items and expressions listed by Beattie. What is perhaps chiefly remarkable about his long list is that none of his Scotticisms are of the “wee bairn” type. Many of them represent either more latinate forms than the standard ones, or a meaning closer to the Latin than is current in English. In other cases the Scotticisms are simply technical terms in Scottish jurisprudence, which, as is well known, is in many ways closer to Roman Law than to English Common Law. In all these cases we are dealing with a learned and not with a popular form of Scots. In other cases the forms cited are part of the general non-standard language of the period and are in no sense peculiarly Scots, as Beattie himself recognizes. Perhaps the most typically Scots items are

the grammatical variants (uses of adverbs and conjunctions, verb forms and phraseology in general). Let us now look at some of the items in Beattie's list following the classification suggested above. (The equals sign, =, means "glossed as".)

a. *anent* = 'concerning': this is widely recognized as being a typical Scottish usage.

corn the horses = 'feed ...'.

to ken = 'to know': this is clearly a generally northern rather than a peculiarly Scottish form.

Among typically learned forms we find:

to abort = 'to miscarry',

to adduce evidence = 'to bring ...',

to detract used like Latin *detrahere* = 'to subtract from',

dure = 'hard, difficult',

to evite = 'to shun, to avoid',

to incarcerate = 'to imprison'.

Somewhat curiously, *to liberate* is given as a Scotticism for 'to set at liberty'.

Other clearly latinate forms include: *to subsist* in the sense of 'to support', e.g., *her son subsists her*, and *vocable* = 'word, term'.

Among the terms that have become part of the standard language (though it is not certain whether they ever really were Scotticisms in the true sense) we find *to militate against*, *to narrate*, *onerous* and *to succumb*.

b. Among variant Scottish forms of the same word we might mention:

baxter, *brewster*, *dyster*, *webster* for *baker*, *brewer*, *dyer*, *weaver*. Note that at least two of these have become common surnames.

Among the many other items listed I choose the following:

dubiety = 'doubt',

debitor = 'debtor',

timeous = 'timely',

wrongeous = 'wrongful'.

Of particular interest is the backformation *greed* (< OE *grædig*), the gloss being 'greediness'. The *Oxford English Dictionary* confirms that the original backformation was of Scottish origin and the *Scottish National Dictionary* gives it as part of general English (i.e., a standard form) from the nineteenth century onwards.

The verb *roves* in *he roves in a fever* is given as 'roam, wander'. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives this as Scottish dialect (first quotation 1720),

as does the *Scottish National Dictionary*. It would appear to derive from a rare Old Norse form *räfa* meaning 'to wander' and has nothing to do with *to rave*, which derives from Old French and first appears in Chaucer.

c. This group comprises a large number of items and is something of a hotchpotch of variant expressions ("misuses") in eighteenth-century Scots. The impression is that in many cases there is a good deal of pedantry about the so-called Scots expressions or words stigmatized. Thus, for example, *altogether about fifty pound* is glossed as 'in all', since *altogether* is given as 'completely', and *funeral* is preferred to *burial*, which is said to indicate *the act of burying*. Whereas *dull*, meaning 'deaf', *coarse* applied to the weather and *foot of the table* (to which is preferred the non-metaphorical *lower end*) may be peculiarly Scottish usages, it is difficult to understand the author's objection to *close* rather than *shut the door*. *Mind* in the sense of 'remember' will generally be recognized as typically Scots and so will *water* in the sense of 'river' (the Water of Dee). One would probably hesitate to classify *roar* = 'cry' of a baby or *stay* = 'live, lodge' as distinctly Scots, and in some cases the purportedly Scots expression is simply an older usage which Standard English has largely abandoned, as for example *meat* for *food* in general. My impression is that where Beattie is not giving way to personal idiosyncracies, he is out to make the language of the readers of his booklet more genteel and polite according to what he feels are the accepted canons of his age, and that genuine Scotticisms really have very little to do with this.

d. The last of the categories distinguished above, however, does seem to me to register genuine Scottish variants, chiefly in the use of adverbs and conjunctions. Some examples are:

as = 'than': *more as that, I would rather go as stay*,

out = 'off': *cut out your hair*,

that = 'as, because': *I am the more impatient of pain, that I have long enjoyed good health*,

without = 'unless': *I will not go without I am paid*.

The use of *whenever* in the sense of 'when, as soon as' (*I rose whenever I heard the clock strike eight*) will I think be generally recognized as a peculiarly Scottish expression.

As regards verbs we may note for certain strong verb forms which still had variant forms during the earlier part of the eighteenth century (see Lass this volume) that some of these have since become decidedly non-standard, such as *drunk* and *run* as past tense forms (see Cheshire this volume) or *broke* as a past participle. Beattie decidedly prefers the verbal forms that

have since become standard. He recognizes that forms like *seed* and *you was* are really what he calls “vulgar English” and are common in England as well as in Scotland. From this we may deduce that part of the purpose of the pamphlet was to eliminate not only genuine Scots forms, of which, as I think I have shown, there are not really a great many, but also to impose certain standard usages preferred by polite London society. In this his strictures are not very different from those of normative grammarians like Lowth (1762 and Leonard 1929). In other cases some older English verbal constructions like *I would have you to know* are condemned as incorrect, and not unexpectedly the author animadverts on the absence of *shall* in Scots, or, as he puts it, “the Scots are more apt to misapply *will* than *shall*, especially in the first persons singular and plural.” [Beattie 1797]

An insight that I have certainly found borne out by my reading of eighteenth-century Scottish writers is the concordance of impersonal *one* with the possessive *his*. One example is from Blair: “*when one arrives at the end of such a puzzled sentence, he is surprised*”; other examples might be cited from William Leechman, Professor of Divinity at the University of Glasgow, and other Scottish writers. Though the *Oxford English Dictionary* says that “*his, him, himself* were formerly usual, and are still sometimes used” with *one* (s.v. *one*) there is no indication that this does appear to be a genuine Scottish usage at least in the eighteenth century. Whether or not the analogous present-day American usage is due to Scottish influence is of course difficult to say.

6. Conclusion

To conclude our observations on Beattie’s pamphlet: it is certainly true that its contents form part of the general tendency to bring Scottish writing in line with standard southern usage, to make it more polite and genteel. The question is, however, to what extent his long list of Scotticisms can all be regarded as genuine examples of Scottish speech. If anything, they represent certain traces of earlier Scottish forms in educated Scottish writing, and are thus a testimony to the desire of members of the Scottish Enlightenment proudly to preserve their separate identity in everything but their speech, in which they cravenly sought to imitate their “betters” south of the border.

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Prestige norms in stage plays, 1600–1800

Carey McIntosh

An analysis of thirty-seven plays published in the periods 1600–1630 and 1770–1800 uncovers five groups of speakers for whom there is a strong correlation between language and social class. Certainly one and possibly three of these groups illustrate a change in (or displacement of) prestige norms during these two centuries.

The groups discussed here are not defined primarily in socio-economic terms. Although Britain had begun to develop a wage economy in 1600, neither income nor education played as dominant a role in the determination of social class as they do now – the world in which these stage plays were performed was still feudal in many respects, and people were differentiated as much by “station” as by wealth. Richard H. Tawney puts it nicely for the earlier period:

The England of Shakespeare and Bacon was still largely medieval in its economic organization and social outlook, more interested in maintaining customary standards of consumption than in accumulating capital for future production, with an aristocracy contemptuous of the economic virtues, a peasantry farming for subsistence amid the organized confusion of the open-field village, and a small, if growing, body of jealously conservative craftsmen (1926).

Let me sketch out the makeup of these five groups:

1. Characters representing the lowest strata of society, both in 1600 and in 1800, are uneducated rustics and working-class townfolk; they speak more or less the same informal, colloquial, sometimes dialectal English in the eighteenth century as they did in the seventeenth, an English studded with proverbs, catchphrases, slang, vulgar (not fashionable) swearwords, and physical (not abstract) nouns.
2. In 1600 the highest social ranks – kings and heroes – speak in poetry or in poetic prose, stately and complex, given to complex metaphor and hyperbole.
3. By 1800 a new cultural elite has emerged, “truly polite” not heroic. Their language, usually prose not poetry, is courtly-genteel and periphrastic,