

# Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch: *An English Name for a Scots Organization?*

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## **The Lack of Consensus in Scots Spelling**

One of the most obvious features of Scots writing since its revival in the eighteenth century has been its orthographical heterogeneity and lack of a standard written form. Reasons may include:

- the idiom's marginal status (cf. the national standards of American, British and Irish Sign Language);
- the conflict between native and English conventions;
- literary (synthetic) and phonemic (analytical) approaches to spelling;
- the degree to which a specific historical period is taken as a model;
- the question of whether an orthography is intended as mimetic of an individual variety or as a symbolic pandialectal standard;
- the bias towards creative rather than communicative writing;
- the temptation to reform the hybrid and etymological nature of Anglic orthography generally.

While personalities have always been a factor, macro-political attitudes influencing the written representation of the idiom may include on the one hand a populist, socialist or human rights discourse encouraging the recognition of borderline, dialectalized or English forms typical of urban, working-class speech as Scots and on the other a nationalist or minority languages discourse encouraging maximal differentiation from English. More recently, a further political factor has been the desire to develop the Ulster variety as an independent language, a project that has distanced the revived form from traditional writing originating not only in Scotland but in Ulster itself.

## **Northern Ireland**

The jurisdiction with the most advanced legislative framework for recognizing the rights of Scots-speakers is Northern Ireland. Ulster Scots is mentioned in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement without reference to its linguistic status and in the North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 as a 'variety of the Scots language'. The UK Government's signing of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages for Ulster Scots has created an outline for the idiom's promotion. The special circumstances of Northern Ireland are underlined by the fact that only the last-named document

also applies to Scots in Scotland and that the reference to ‘the Scots language’ in the statutory instrument quoted above was the first official acknowledgement anywhere of the existence of Scots. The legislation in question also established the Ulster-Scots Agency, or *Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch* as it has become known in ‘Ullans’, a modern coinage which, following the example of Görlach (2000), the present writers will use to denote the revived Northern Ireland variety rather than the traditional Ulster dialect.

The remainder of this article will examine the authenticity and satisfactoriness of the translation *Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch*.

## **Tha**

Perhaps the most distinctive marker of ‘Ullans’ writing to the casual reader, and one which has become remarkably common in revivalist Scots writing in Northern Ireland, is the respelling of the definite article as *tha*. While such strategies are often adopted in eye dialect and are equally valid in Scots and English<sup>1</sup>, the use of the spelling in revived Ulster Scots has the idiom-specific rationale of distinguishing it from *the*, used for unstressed ‘they’ in some dialect writing. Such use of *the* is open to criticism, since confusion in English writing between *you’re* and *your*, *there*, *their* and *they’re*, or *’ve* and *of* can be associated with illiteracy. Conversely, the semantic differentiation of homophones through spelling can be associated with an idiom’s historicity, intellectual standing and *Ausbau*.

Robinson (1997: 63) justifies the innovation as follows.

It should be re-emphasised that there is no historical precedent for the use of any spelling of the definite article other than *the* in traditional and *ye*<sup>2</sup> in older Ulster-Scots literature, although some modern writers have adopted these *thà* and *tha* spellings.

While the *schwa* in the unstressed form of the definite article [ðə] or [ə] could be spelt with any vowel, the specific spelling choice of *tha* is at odds with the history of the language, since it was used in Middle Scots for both ‘they’ and *thae* (‘those’), and by no means all writers of Ulster Scots respell ‘they’ as *the*. Based on statistical frequency, it would be more economic to retain the traditional spelling of the definite article, instead changing ‘they’ to *tha*. If spelt with an apostrophe, such an approach would also have the advantage of being pandialectal, since ‘they’ is often rendered *thai* or *thay* in mainstream Scots. If the apostrophe were used with the English spelling, the difference between

third person plural pronoun and definite article would be adequately marked, and there would be no need for any further reforms.

However, the rationale for such an accommodation is undermined by the fact that even native speakers of Ulster Scots use [ðe] as the stressed form of the pronoun, which one might expect to provide the spelling for most words. As Keller (1981: 75) points out, ‘Writers and scholars, if they reflect on the issue, realise that writing is always a kind of *Verfremdung* and requires a conscious step from the spoken to the written medium.’ McClure (1997: 181-182) is even more forthright in his opposition to respelling.

[...] since weak forms by their nature contain an obscure vowel, for which no letter of the Roman alphabet is self-evidently more appropriate than any other, it cannot be possible in all cases to produce an unambiguous spelling on the sound-to-symbol principle: the conventional spelling may be just as suitable, or unsuitable, as any alternative, thus removing any warrant for the change.

Robinson (1997: 63) also claims that ‘these forms may more accurately reflect the spoken language’, but that is the case only with the form *thà*, where the dropping of the initial voiced dental fricative is marked by the grave accent. Even there, the phenomenon in question could be summed up with the single sentence ‘As in English, in unpedantic speech the initial voiceless dental fricative of the definite article may be dropped, except following a vowel.’<sup>3</sup> One wonders why it is thought necessary to mark such changes in Scots when they are unmarked in transcriptions of English speech outside the realms of dialect writing and linguistics.

Showing the difference between voiced and voiceless dental fricatives by the reintroduction of the Anglo-Saxon character *eth* would be a more obvious reform to ‘more accurately reflect the spoken language’, since the difference is basic to the idiom and does not vary depending on accent, context or individual speaker.

## Boord

That the Ulster form *boord* [bʊ:rd] (‘board’, ‘table’) has its origins in English dialects is suggested by Harris (1985: 158-9).

The /ʊ/ in board, door, etc. is now a well-known rural stereotype that is specific to non-US [Ulster Scots] dialects in Ireland. It appears to be exclusively English in origin. There is no mention of this pronunciation in the descriptions of southern and central Scots (Wilson 1926, Wettstein 1942, Zai 1942), since ESc [Early Scots] /o:/ was fronted before /r/ as in other environments, showing up in modern Scots as /e:/, /ø:/ or some similar front vowel. Gregg’s phonological questionnaire, designed to establish the boundaries between US and MUE [Mid Ulster English], includes the items floor, board, door, poor, which regularly appear as /fle:r/ or /flë:r/ in CUS [Conservative Ulster Scots] areas but as /flʊ:r/ or /flo:r/ in MUE areas (1963: 35; 1972). [...]

Finally, to emphasise the English origins of this pronunciation, we may note that the Survey of English dialects records /u:/, /ʊə/, or some similar high round nucleus in door, (reference V.1.8) and floor (V.2.7) in parts of the north and southwest of England.

Grant and Dixon (1921: 46) describe the Scottish development of the vowel, which was to become known in the scheme devised by the late A. J. Aitken as vowel 7, as follows.

The original vowel in most of the words containing y or ø appears to have been a long o in O.E. and Scan. and u in Fr. [...] This o (or u) became fronted and became ø. ø remained before *voiced fricatives* and r and in final position, but in other cases it was generally raised and shortened to y. In many districts of the Mid. area, recent unrounding has taken place so that y becomes ɪ and ø becomes e.

According to the SND (Introduction §128), the regular development in northern Scots varieties is [i] and in some varieties, where a back stop consonant precedes the vowel, [wi]. However, in §§142, 146 and 157, the SND describes a development in some northern Scots varieties in which the outcome is [(j)u:] before [r], a circumstance that will be considered below.

Historical demography suggests that a south-west Scots realization of vowel 7 could be expected to prevail in Northern Ireland. Gregg (1972: 119) states that ‘the settlement history clearly points to south-west Scotland as the source of the overwhelming majority of Scottish settlers in seventeenth-century Ulster’. Elsewhere, Gregg (1958: 396, 398, 403) records one Ulster Scots realization of the word *buird* as [bë:rd], i.e. the south-west Scots form with typical Ulster lowering. However, the full picture is more complex, since the development was still under way in Scotland at the time of immigration into Ulster. The sets of values for vowel 7 in Ulster are much the same as in the Scottish dialects, but the variation is within a much smaller geographical area, making the province a microcosm of Scotland in that respect. Gregg (1964: 181) also records the Ulster Scots forms [bë:rd] and [dë:r] (‘door’) but [flë:r] (‘floor’)

and [bit] ('boot'), etc. for Glenoe. Detailing the 'urban' speech of the small town of Larne, i.e. English, Gregg (1964: 172) also gives [ø:] as a realization of [ü] before [r]. [ü] is found in other words from Anglo-Saxon *ō*, but those may simply be forms influenced by Mid Ulster English.

Figure 1: the Development of Vowel 7 in Ulster after Gregg (1972) and Harris (1985)

	ESc		CUS (Conservative Ulster Scots)
A	ø: —————	e:	North Antrim, North-east Derry
B	ø: —————	i	Donegal, Mid Down
C	ø: —————	ï	Mid Antrim, North Down
	—_# <sub>r,v</sub> —	e:	

If we take the development to be [ü/e: < e: < i], [i] is the oldest form, something supported by the fact that it is found in more peripheral areas. The situation in Scotland is similar, where it is typical for the northern dialect and residual in Wigtonshire in the extreme south-west; [e] is found in north-east Fife and Dundee and [ɪ/e:] in central Scotland, where it is thought to have developed in the south-east central variety. North Down and mid Antrim are the areas of Ulster closest to Scotland, and they seem to have taken up the shift first. Before the central system spread, [ø/y] was found in other peripheral parts of Scotland such as Perthshire, southern Angus and the Borders. Its absence in Ulster is no doubt because of the dynamic situation in south-west Scotland in the seventeenth century.

The range of vowel seven can be seen in the following list of realisations for *abuin* ('above') in Scotland, taken from the SND: [ə'byn em.Sc.(a), Bwk., Gall., s.Sc.; ɔ'bøn sn.Sc., I.Sc.; ə'bɪn em.Sc.(b), wm.Sc.; ə'bin mn. and nn.Sc.] Robinson (1997: 19) has the following to say for Ulster.

*Abune* ('above'), for example, is pronounced *abain* in north Antrim and Londonderry. However in mid and east Antrim, and in most of county Down, *abin* is also found. In Donegal and mid Down we hear (and read) *abeen*.

It is possible that the Ulster distribution shows historic settlement patterns, in which case the most recent numerous settlements would have been in north Down and mid Antrim. Another potential explanation is the fact that contact between the two areas in question and Scotland has always been strong, with the result that the shift followed in those places first through processes more subtle than large-scale population movement. However, it is notable that the

largest influx of Scots into Ulster was not, as is often thought, at the time of the Plantation of 1610 but in the 1690s, and Gregg (1972: 121) comes down in favour of staggered settlement at a time of relatively speedy change in the source dialects in Scotland as the reason for the geographical spread of the diverse realizations in Ulster.

The present distribution bears out this theory if we assume that /ʊ/ is an innovation spreading from the usual ports of entry in Antrim and Down for the incoming Scots, from the early seventeenth century onwards, completely replacing the /i/-forms unchanged in the Mid Ards and frequently west of Strangford Lough where the influx of new immigrants may have fallen off soon after the first settlement period. For the same reason the /i/-forms survive unaltered in the Laggan district of Donegal where the settlement of 1610 did not subsequently receive any notable reinforcement from Scotland. It should be observed that the change postulated here from /i/ to /ʊ/ was not a regular, internal, phonological change in the SI [Scotch-Irish] areas concerned, but rather the result of the spread of a set of new forms incorporating an innovation that may actually have had its origins somewhere in eastern Scotland [...]

While, according to Aitken (2002: 45), the north-east Scottish form has been [bju:rd] from the late fifteenth century at the latest, the fact that the number of settlers from that area was minimal in comparison with the total number of Scottish settlers means that it is unlikely that the form *boord* [bʊ:rd] is the outcome of their influence. If that were the case, one would expect the vowels in many more words to be similarly affected. Analogy with the General Scottish pronunciation of *muir* [mjur] is also unlikely, as this is probably due to the influence of spelling (SND *muir*) and the fact that it is also a common element in individual and place names. There is no doubt that genuine speakers of Ulster Scots use the [bʊ:rd] pronunciation, the reason almost certainly being dialect levelling with Hiberno-English, a process possibly aided by semantic differentiation in some subdialects *vis-à-vis* the local realization of English ‘beard’, like ‘board’ pronounced [bè:rd]<sup>4</sup>. However, it would be highly desirable to take account of the more conservative speakers of the Gregg survey by respelling *boord* as *buid*, the traditional pandialectal Scots form. Those who realize the word as [bʊ:rd] would not be greatly disadvantaged as a result, since many unfamiliar with Scots in any case pronounce the <ui> digraph in that way.

## O

*O*, or *o’* [o, e and unstressed ə] is a well-known characteristic of Scots but is also widespread in Hiberno-English (*top o’ the mornin’*) and not unknown in general English (*o’clock, man o’ war*), from which it may have been banished, except in a few set expressions, under the influence of prescriptive grammarians during the period of elaboration.

## Ulster

The spelling *Ulstèr* includes a grave è to represent a dental realization of [t]. Phonologically the feature is not peculiar to Ulster Scots, being panlectal in Ireland and perhaps ultimately of English origin. As Kirk (2000: 39) has pointed out, the use of the grave accent on a vowel to indicate the quality of a preceding dental runs counter to the reader's intuition, since analogy with other languages would encourage one to assume that it affected either the quality of the vowel or the general stress of the word. The present writers have encountered no neophyte readers capable of working out for themselves, for example, that the grave on the letter <a> in a word such as *tràictèr* ('tractor') refers to a linguistic phenomenon two letters before, though that is of course not to say that such people do not exist. In the 'Ullans' system, the grave can also refer to the pronunciation of <th> as [h] or Ø. Kallen (1999: 159) refers to 'the awkwardness of these proposals'. Since the grave is always placed on the first vowel after the letter that it modifies, there is no way in which the interdental quality of the final <t> in the word *get* in a phrase such as 'get real' can be marked. There are many such examples. Kirk (1998: 127) is withering in his criticism.

This orthographic double-take is opaque, counter-intuitive, and confusing. In attempting to replace conventional symbolism with something, in intention, mimetically realistic, it ends up offering only more — and worse — symbolism.

Many speakers of English in Ireland interdentalize certain letters, but without marking it in writing. In Ulster Scots it is in any case environmentally conditioned — and arguably adequately marked — by the following <r>. As Jim Fenton suggests in *The Hamely Tongue*, reported by Robinson (1997: 44), any native speaker of Ulster Scots or sympathetic linguist will interdentalize automatically, something that strongly suggests that such differences are at the level of accent within a single linguistic system. Given that many people have trouble with the simple apostrophe in English, it is hard to envisage the wider community taking on board such diacritics, more especially since, unlike the apostrophe, they add nothing to the meaning. One must therefore ask whether overloading texts such as job advertisements, which are primarily communicative rather than literary, with such minor phonetic information is entirely necessary. The orthography of any language represents a compromise between different dialects and sub-dialects, and the only cases where orthography completely tallies with speech are those of dead languages or the tongues of tiny isolated tribes who have had their spelling systems presented to them by outsiders. The 'Ullans' use of phonetics also seems at odds with the etymological approach implicit in its archaic elements.

Robinson (1997: 35) notes that the grave accent was first used in the 1960s by Robert Gregg and G. B. Adams, the latter a fluent Irish-speaker, a fact interesting when one considers the motivation of those who have widened the symbol's use beyond linguistic transcription; it is possible that the parity with Irish that activists wish to achieve has led them to emulate its diacritics, whether in transcription or literature.

While the widespread nature of the interdental realization in Ireland is incontestable, the feature is also recorded in England and Scotland, as Harris (1985: 216-7) reports.

There is evidence that phonologically conditioned dentality in HE [Hiberno-English] /t, d, n, l/ also has its origins in British English. Although this pronunciation never penetrated into SSE [Southern Standard English], it is found in some present-day nonstandard regional dialects in England. [...]

Whatever the exact manner-of-articulation features of dental /t, d/ in the dialects in question, one important point is beyond doubt. The distribution of dentals by phonetic environment in the northern English dialects recorded by Wright [1905] and the Survey [Survey of English Dialects] is identical to that in many types of HE, i.e. they are restricted to the context of following /r/ or /ər/, as in tree, street, better, drop, cinder. This clearly suggests that dental noncontinuants in HE stem at least in part from nonstandard British English sources.

As has already been pointed out, some types of HE have dental reflexes of /t, d, n, l/ in all phonetic environments. Here the case for a background in Irish interference may be stronger, although this pattern of distribution is also apparently to be found in some Scots and United States varieties.

A footnote links dental realizations of [t, d, n, l] in all phonetic contexts to Aberdeen and west coast Scottish varieties, a circumstance which leads Harris to admit the possibility of Gaelic influence. Adams (1986: 34) considers both a link to non-standard English, citing the dialects of north Cumberland and west Durham, and the influence of a Gaelic substratum.

## Scotch

The use of the English loan *Scotch* is, along with many others, widespread among Scots-speakers. At the same time, it is interesting that an organization wishing to promote Scots as a language should have chosen the imported English name for it rather than the native form.

**Scots.** This form of the adj. is the historical descendant of the O.Sc. *Scottis* (see etym. note), which survived in Scot. into the 19th c. esp. in certain locutions (see below) and has gradually re-established itself as a preferable alternative to the Eng. reduced form *Scotch* among Sc. speakers when speaking Eng. [...]

[A reduced form of O.Sc. *Scottis*, Scottish, 1375, the Scots language, 1494, North. Mid.Eng. *Skottis*, late O.E. *Scottisc*, earlier *Scyttisc*. For the form in -s (= Eng. -sh), cf. *dens-* in **DENSAXE**, **ERSE**, *n.*<sup>2</sup>, *Inglis*. The form *Scotch* does not appear in Scotland till the mid 17th c.] (SND)

**Scotch.** A late 16c contraction of *Scottish*, first in Early Modern English then in Older Scots. It ousted *Scottish* as the prevailing form in England. In Scotland, the native form *Scots* predominated until in the 18c Anglicizing vogue *Scotch* became fashionable in both countries. (Aitken 1992: 892)

However, the irony that the English and Scots terms for the local variety of Scots originate in each other is not wholly the result of contemporary revival or politicization. The divergence from Scotland can perhaps be traced to the lack of a Nationalist literary revival in Ulster at the beginning of the twentieth century, a time when Ulster Protestants were stressing their British identity in their campaign against home rule<sup>5</sup>. However, it may also be relevant that the Scottish literary revival was itself partly inspired by the Irish Nationalist example, something pointed out by Görlach (1997: 216).

In an interesting parallel Anglicism, in the Scots version of the name adopted by the Scottish Parliament Cross-Party Group on the Scots Language, Scottish Standard English usage is adhered to, whereby the parliament is ‘Scottish’ and the language ‘Scots’<sup>6</sup>.

### **Lexical Choices**

The advisability of using *boord* [bʊ:rd] as a translation of *agency* (Ulster-Scots Agency) is questionable, not only phonologically and semantically but pragmatically, owing to the many references to the board, or executive, of the agency itself in the legislation governing its functions. The SND definition of *buird* appears better suited to this second meaning: ‘the body of people meeting round a council-table, a council, committee’. One is tempted to see the choice of translation as an attempt to distance the Scots version from the English form.

### **Conclusion**

The above evidence suggests that, while employing novel orthographic devices serving to differentiate the revived variety from Standard English but not attested in the historical literature, *Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch* contains no elements unique to traditional Scots.

Elsewhere the present writers have argued that Ulster Scots would best be developed as a variety of the Scots language, citing the modest size of the user community in Ulster and the reduction in utility that would be effected by diverging from the existing shared literary tradition through unbridled innovation. The intelligibility for native users is also worthy of consideration;

for the uninitiated, the respelling of the definite article as *tha* and the use of the grave accent may lend ‘Ullans’ a casual similarity to Scottish Gaelic rather than traditional Lowland Scots. The investigation detailed in this article also raises the linguistic question of the extent to which the individual character of Ulster Scots can be ascribed to its being a contact variety subject to contemporary dialect levelling rather than to autonomous development. A further issue is the effect on the idiom’s intellectual vitality and the authenticity of its revived form if its study and development are undertaken in isolation from the full gamut of Anglic linguistic investigation and the more established edifice of Scots-language academia in Scotland.

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## NOTES

1. It appears in a humorous rendering of African-American Vernacular at <http://www.asksnoop.com>.
2. According to Smith (1902: xxviii-xxix), the use of <y> for [ð] was at first limited to printed works and originated in the lack of a thorn character in imported continental typesets. Robinson introduces <z> and <y> for the yogh and thorn characters respectively into the speech of older Ulster Scots-speakers in his novel *Wake the Tribe o' Dan*. Symbolizing stronger dialect in such a manner is problematic, since there would be no actual difference in pronunciation, and Robinson's intent may have been satirical.
3. In some Scots varieties, for example, Buchan, the fricative may be dropped in all positions, but this is not true of Ulster.
4. Of course, 'beard' has almost the same realization in Scotland itself, as evidenced by the surname Baird, but in Scotland there would not have been such close contact with English forms.
5. The dearth of written Ulster Scots in the middle part of the twentieth century is probably also behind the great discontinuity in its written form.
6. Minutes of the meeting held on June 19, 2003.

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