

**Response to SEED Languages Strategy 2007
by the Researcher-Activist Network for Scots at Lancaster (RANSAL)¹**

We would like to begin by congratulating the SEED on drafting a languages strategy. We think this is a laudable and necessary achievement, which we hope will set a positive agenda for the role of languages in Scottish society for the future.

We will answer each question in turn. As the research interests of our network primarily centre around the Scots language, we will be focusing on this in our response.

1. Do you agree with the reasons given for promoting and learning languages on pages 4 and 5, and that these are the main reasons for supporting current language initiatives in Scotland? If not, why not?

Broadly, we agree with these rationales. However, the strategy as a whole frames the promotion of Scots mainly in terms of the first rationale ('Celebrating cultural diversity'), with some emphasis on the second ('Promoting respect and confidence') and sixth ('Enriching education') rationales. There is no indication that the fourth rationale ('Facilitating access and inclusion') is important with respect to Scots, which helps to maintain the status quo: regardless of their personal preference and language abilities, Scots speakers must use English to get access to information (e.g. information from local government, or most documents issued by the Scottish Parliament). In order to reduce the risk of discrimination against them on the grounds of their language (e.g. in job interviews, even when English is not essential for the job), they must use English. This situation sends mixed messages – on the one hand, Scots is held up as a fine example of 'diversity' and 'cultural heritage', on the other hand it is confined to the school and certain very narrowly defined aspects of daily life, predominantly in spoken form. Thus, we would recommend thinking more about how Scots can be conceptualised in terms of the fourth rationale – in other words, how can the communication needs of Scots speakers be addressed, especially those who might be considered not highly proficient at Scottish Standard English? We would suggest that the answer should not **only** be to try to improve their proficiency at Scottish Standard English.

2. Do you agree that the language initiatives described on pages 6 – 12 and elsewhere are the key areas for language promotion in Scotland? If not, why not?

The section on English contains an indication of just the kind of ambivalent attitude we have mentioned in our response to question 1: "Without adequate English language skills, people can neither fully participate in their local and national communities nor are they given the opportunity to meet their full potential". Although we acknowledge that it is simply not feasible to make all services available in every language, why is it so inconceivable that that

¹ RANSAL is a network of scholars and activists based at Lancaster University with an interest in researching and promoting the Scots language.

people might participate in at least their local communities in a language other than English, or that they might meet their full potential through the medium of another language? The term literacy is used seven times in the English section – what about literacy in other languages? Again, this contributes to the impression that English is the only **functional** language in Scotland, and that all other languages can add ‘diversity’ but do little else.

The section on Scots confirms this impression through its emphasis on ‘cultural heritage’. It is highly misleading to say that Scots is not an endangered language – although it (surprisingly) survived the ‘linguistic cleansing’ of the 18th century², today it is endangered by precisely the kinds of attitudes conveyed by this document. If Scots is consistently portrayed as ‘just’ an aspect of culture, it will lose its relevance and what little functionality it retains as a living language, and will be confined to poems, tea-towels and TV comedy.

The statement that Scots as a distinct and formerly prestigious language is excellent, but perhaps this could be further strengthened, e.g. by replacing ‘We should not assume...’ with ‘We must not assume...’. Furthermore, it is not entirely clear to whom the ‘we’ refers – of course it is laudable for the Scottish Executive to foster progressive attitudes to Scots within its own ranks, but there should also be indication that the SE will try to promote positive attitudes (and not just in terms of ‘diversity’) in all areas of Scottish society. It is rather ironic that you refer to Scots-speaking scientists, philosophers and economists, given that their ‘influence on the modern world’ has been carried out almost exclusively in the medium of English. In fact, some of the most prominent figures in these fields were also the most critical of the Scots language, or the keenest to remove all traces of Scots from their own language. One example is David Hume, who felt he had ‘the misfortune to write in the language of the most stupid and factious barbarians of the world’.³ With this in mind, it might be better to be more open about the suppression of Scots in the past, and use this dark period in the history of the Scots language as a justification for why the SE should promote Scots now and in the future, and try to reduce levels of discrimination against its speakers today.

In the third paragraph, the document again gives the impression that Scots is only useful for ‘enjoying culture’. What about encouraging non-Scots speakers to learn Scots so that they can communicate with real, living Scots speakers, rather than expecting Scots speakers to always accommodate to non-Scots speakers?

The document makes very misleading statements about the 5-14 guidelines. The English Language guidelines only contain two direct references to Scots, and in neither of these references is Scots clearly identified as a language.⁴ In fact, one of them is part of the statement that ‘There is no standard form of

² See JONES, C. (1995) *A Language Suppressed: The Pronunciation of the Scots Language in the 18th Century*, Edinburgh, John Donald.

³ http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/Hume0129/LettersToStrahan/HTMLs/1223_Pt02_Letters1.html#LF-BK1223lt02_ftnref6

⁴ <http://www.ltsotland.org.uk/5to14/htmlunrevisedguidelines/Pages/englang/main/elng6067.htm>,
<http://www.ltsotland.org.uk/5to14/htmlunrevisedguidelines/Pages/englang/main/elng4059.htm>

Scots'. While this is undoubtedly true, it then goes on to mention 'Standard English' and 'other dialects', giving the impression that any given variety of Scots is a dialect of English. The whole issue of the status of Scots as a language is thus avoided almost entirely in the guidelines through such vague and misleading formulations as 'the language and culture that children bring to school', or 'Standard English and dialects'. The inclusion of Scots literature is also not straightforwardly advocated by the guidelines – rather, it is the inclusion of 'languages and texts of a specifically Scottish character'. We do not wish to diminish the excellent work to promote Scots being done by individual schools and teachers, and any local or regional initiatives. However, to give the impression that there is currently any sort of co-ordinated, unambiguous top-down policy for the inclusion of Scots as a living language in the 5-14 curriculum is stretching the truth. Rather, those teachers who do **not** want to include Scots in anything but the most perfunctory way (e.g. reading Burns poems in the last week of January) are easily able to do so through selective interpretation of the guidelines.

Under the heading 'Language Learning', even if the main focus is on foreign languages, the document should mention Scots as well. Many young Scottish people **are**, in effect, bilingual because they speak some form of Scots and some form of English (although few people recognise this, just as few people recognise Scots as a language). The lack of specific and targeted initiatives to promote the teaching of Scots, not to mention training teachers in how to teach Scots, highlights how little importance the SE places on Scots as part of the curriculum. Although it will take time (and funding) to put such initiatives into place, this document should, as it suggests in the introduction, try to build 'a consensus around the outcomes which public policies should aim to secure'. One of these outcomes should be an increase in Scots language teaching, not just as an aspect of cultural heritage, not just at the end of January, and not just in the classrooms of individual, enthusiastic teachers, but regularly, in all Scottish schools. Without a clear commitment along these lines, it is hard to see how the SE will achieve its aim of 'Promoting respect and confidence' for and in Scots.

3. Do you agree that the key principles listed on pages 14 and 15 should shape language activity in Scotland? If not, why not?

Broadly we agree that these principles are appropriate, but again there should be a more explicit emphasis on the promotion of Scots not just as a cultural resource, but as a functional language. Thus, rather than calling for just the 'use' of Scots to be encouraged, the teaching of Scots should also be encouraged. The term 'Scots culture' is not particularly helpful in this section, as this is easily conflated with 'Scottish culture' (which need not have anything to do with the Scots language). The last point, about public bodies being encouraged to promote and develop the Scots language, is particularly important, but we suspect that its message is rather lost in the context of the rest of the document as it currently stands. One key principle that is missing is that more information should be gathered about Scots speakers, including such information as how many speakers there are, what kind of Scots they speak (i.e. where on the Scots-Scottish Standard English continuum the

variety/ies they use are located), what the current barriers to full participation in communities are, and what types of discrimination Scots speakers face in their daily lives.

4. Are there any other comments you would like to offer on this strategy in relation to the promotion of languages in Scotland?

The report on the implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, issued by from the Committee of Experts of the Council of Europe on March 14th 2007, contains a number of relevant comments which should be taken into account before issuing the final strategy document. A number of these support the suggestions we have made in our response. In particular, the following points are of note:

- the report calls for more data to be gathered on Scots, and with this in mind the strategy should contain a firm commitment to include a question on Scots in future censuses (§25)
- a number of the shortcomings of the current approach to Scots are mentioned (§49-53)
- the minimal role of Scots in broadcast and other media, and the lack of signage in the Scottish parliament are mentioned (§67-72)
- the report highlights the importance of education in Scots (not just about Scots), the scarcity of educational resources, the lack of a co-ordinated national educational policy, and the lack of teacher training for Scots (§95-105)

5. If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, how do you think you may be able to contribute to the success of the strategy?

The researchers and activists of RANSAL will continue to research various aspects of the Scots language, and will communicate their findings through appropriate channels such as academic papers and responses to public consultations. In addition, given enough time we are happy to respond to requests for information on any aspect of our research into Scots.

J W Unger, on behalf of RANSAL.
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