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Johann Wolfgang Unger: *The Discursive Construction of the Scots Language*.
Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2013; xvi + 178 pp. EUR 95.00/US\$143.00 (hbk)
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Scotland.

*Skaldit skaitbird and commoun skamelar,
Wanfukkit funling that Natour maid ane yrle*

Over half of the words in this short quote from a poem in Scots by William Dunbar (1459-1520) are unknown to me – a speaker of Scottish Standard English (SSE), which differs from other English varieties through a variable uptake of regional, contemporary, and historical lexis, syntax, and pronunciation. I do not consider myself to be a Scots speaker. Yes, I use several Scots words and a few markedly Scottish grammatical constructions, and can understand a bit more of a Dunbar poem than can my Australian friends. But I will still need to refer to the glossary just as when reading a poem in a foreign language. I believe that I am like most people on the SSE–Scots spectrum in thinking that a smattering of Scots does not a speaker make. Unger’s book challenges this position.

Unger writes in the Introduction, that three initial observations persuaded him of the need to research the state and status of Scots in contemporary Scotland: i) a lack of awareness that Scots can be regarded as a language; ii) a widespread reputation of its low prestige; iii) a high level of discrimination against Scots speakers, now as in the past (p.2). Unger does an admirable job of establishing these three points, which frame the book’s political purpose: to expose the ‘plight’ of Scots speakers ‘as a struggle against hegemony’ (p.3). His writing is not ‘dry but interesting’, as such books tend to be, but warm, engaged, and readable – no mean feat. It is also, for this SSE/Scots speaker, challenging, frustrating, and thought-provoking, and this too deserves praise.

Chapter Two, starts with a quote on what Scots *is not*. As Unger explains, the status of Scots is not settled, and its settling is a political venture. His account of the roots of Scots, and the timeline of its usage in Scotland, is good for its brevity, although I

missed a more detailed discussion of its history, especially the pivotal role of poetry and other literature.

In Chapter Three, Unger locates his study methodologically, introducing ‘critical approaches to language theory’ (CALP), Critical Discourse Analysis, and the Discourse Historical Approach. This covers ground that will be useful for many students, if less interesting for the general reader. There follow excellent short discussions of what Unger takes from Bourdieu, and of genre and the importance of ‘intergenericity’ (p.49). He explains his use of focus groups well, though including an urban-based focus group along with the rural ones would have strengthened the research.

Chapter Four investigates how Scots is constructed in what Unger calls ‘top-down’ texts (‘i.e. texts produced by powerful elites, in different social fields’, p.71):

- the *National Guidelines 5-14* on the English language aimed at teachers;
- a website pertaining to the *5-14 Curriculum*, focusing on Scots;
- an official record from the Scottish Parliament debate on whether the 2001 census should contain a question concerning Scots;
- a draft version of a language policy document.

Early on in the chapter, Unger points to the fact that he brings his own ‘biases and ideological position’ (p.72) to the analysis which led him, as he says, to ‘at times describe a “worst-case scenario”’ (p.72).

Unger notes that ‘what makes a text significant is not how often Scots is explicitly mentioned, but how rarely’ – just twice in the National Curriculum, for example, which prefers ‘ambiguous terms like *dialect*, *accent* and *language*’ (p.73). This seems like an implicit denigration. However, only a few pages earlier, discussing his own focus groups, Unger writes: ‘A particular challenge in moderation and question-formulation related to the term *Scots* itself. As discussed in Chapter 2, this term carries a lot of “baggage” and cannot be used without further explanation. For this reason, I decided to avoid using it at all until the participants came up with it themselves. This meant the rather awkward term “language or language variety” was

used [...]’ (p.67). We are left to wonder why the rationale behind his own choice should not also be deemed valid for those writing the guidelines.

Unger is similarly uncharitable as a reader when it comes to the *National Guidelines*’ advice to teachers that a ‘pupil’s own dialect’ should have ‘attention given to enriching it’ (p.99). Unger sees this as indicating that Scots is being presented as ‘impoverished’. One could however argue that children are at school to enrich all aspects of their knowledge, and the fact that the guidelines identify dialects is a sign of increased prestige.

Chapter Five looks at the construction of Scots from the bottom up, and offers the reader a careful and sensitive analysis of the focus group texts -- a model of how to do such analysis. Chapter Six takes account of developments after the main body of the research took place. It looks at the growing political profile of Scots, and briefly mentions a number of projects, publications, and campaigns which Unger believes have impacted upon the status of Scots.

Languages are political constructs that have massive consequences for people’s sense of identity, in which notions of authenticity, oppression, and ownership combine. Unger is aware of this and yet does not adequately address the full implications of his argument. Personally, I have felt the acceptance of my variety of English – SSE with more or less Scots words peppered throughout – rise, its prestige grow, over the last three decades. I do not now wish to be dispossessed of that, and be encouraged, instead, to view myself as a speaker of Scots, or rather, Scots-lite; and I see and hear few if any signs that those around me, either in urban Edinburgh or in the rural north where my parents live, feel differently. But one has to admire a book that nails its colours to the mast and can intelligently provoke, as well as inform, those whose experience contrasts with its conclusions.