The Scots Syntax Atlas
Mapping the diversity of dialect

The Scots Syntax Atlas is an online resource which maps the diversity of Scots dialects. **Jennifer Smith**, on behalf of the project team, introduces the various elements of the atlas, including an interactive resource for schools, currently in development.

Scotland is a small country, but it packs a punch in terms of linguistic diversity, as demonstrated in these examples from speakers in Shetland in the north, to Stranraer in the south:

- All that drama, driving in the snow for *they passport pictures*.
- The cat *needs fed*. That's when he's into the algae wafers, he *needs fed*.
- *Gonnae no* do that.
- There's nobody *wanting* them. You're *no wanting* them, are you?
- No matter how early you go to it the *floors is* always sticky.
- *I didnae* witness it. I got *telt* about it.
- You say I *used to could* do all this and I *used to could* do that but you're too busy now
- I like to read in *my bed*.
- Are *yous* finished now are *yous*?
- Such a muppet, *so I am*.

The Scots Syntax Atlas (**https://scotssyntaxatlas.ac.uk**), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, is a new digital resource which sets out to map that diversity, providing a resource for the study of Scots across time and space in the 21st century.

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What we wanted to find out

As with other varieties of spoken language, Scots has many different words (*lexis*) – such as *aye* for *yes* and *ken* for *know* – and also many sound differences (*phonology*) – such as *hoose* for *house*, *mare* for *more*. In this project, we were particularly interested in the different ways that sentences are built up in these different areas, the *dialect syntax* of Scots. We also wanted to provide an archive of Scots: language is constantly changing, thus the Scots Syntax Atlas provides a snapshot of Scots in the here and now for future research. Finally, as linguists, we're interested not so much in *prescribing* language use (The floors is sticky? But that's just wrong!) but in *describing* what speakers actually do – and why.

How we collected the data

We wanted to target as many areas as possible throughout Scotland so that we had the broad sweep of north to south, east to west in our atlas. Figure 1 shows the places we eventually collected data from: 146 in total.

Note that there are a lot of dots around the Central Belt of Scotland, the area at the 'waist' of Scotland, and very few in the middle of Scotland and further north west. This correlates with population density, where most Scots live in Glasgow, Edinburgh and surrounding areas. In each of the locations, we targeted four speakers from two generations: two 18–25 year-olds and two 65+ year-olds.
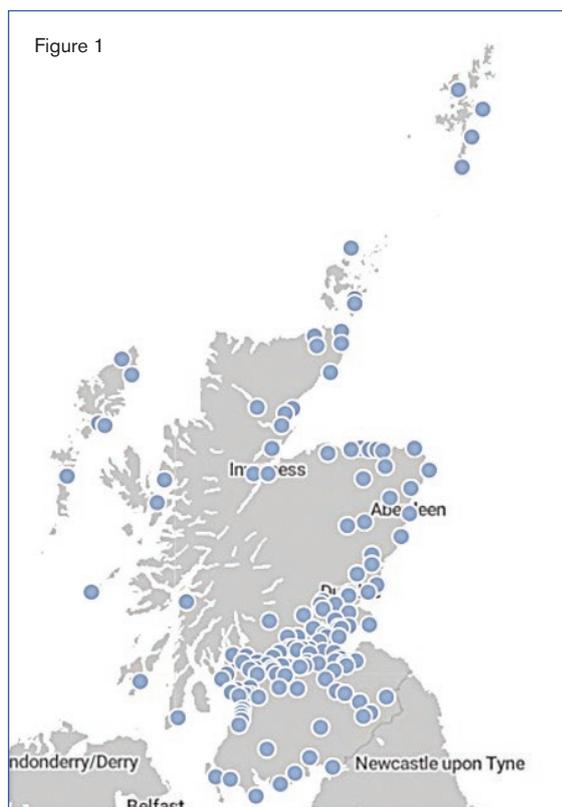

Figure 1

This would allow us not only to view the different types of Scots used throughout Scotland, but also what might be changing. We know that languages are constantly on the move, so we wanted to see if some forms are only used by older speakers (obsolescing forms) and some only by younger speakers (innovative forms): more on that below.

Given that we're interested in dialect forms, it was important that the fieldworkers were local to the communities being researched. Very simply put, they needed to sound like the speakers from that area. We recruited and trained over 100 fieldworkers: a large number of these were University of Glasgow students. Also crucial was the type of speaker we recruited to participate in the study. The *Scots Linguistic Continuum* goes from what is known as *Standard Scottish English* on the one side (think here perhaps Ewan Macgregor) to *Broad Scots* on the other (Kevin Bridges). Given that our interest lies in dialect syntax, we targeted speakers that fell into the Broad Scots end of the continuum.
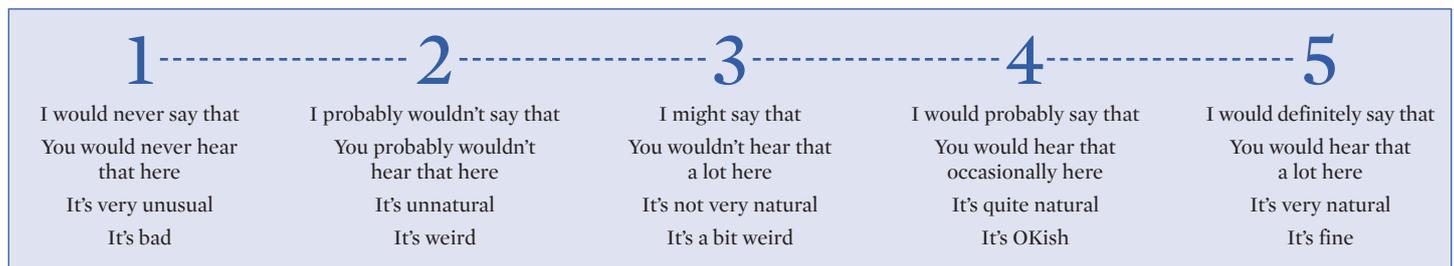
We collected two types of data:

1. speaker pairs recorded in conversation with each other

2. an *acceptability judgement* questionnaire.

The first type of data is fairly obvious: prompted by the fieldworker, we asked pairs of speakers in each of the locations to simply talk to each other about, well, anything. We have over 300 hours and three million words of spontaneous speech, including topics such as schooling in the past, favourite holiday destinations and even the latest gossip! You can hear extracts from all the locations visited in the atlas, providing an excellent snapshot of what people sound like from Wick to Hawick, and everywhere in between.

However, although the recorded corpus is pretty big, some of the dialect syntax forms that we're interested in mapping just simply don't turn up enough in spoken data. For this reason, we needed to use another methodology for getting information on the types of forms we were after. *Acceptability judgements* are a tried and tested methodology in linguistic research for working out what is possible and not possible in a particular language or dialect. Simply put, we ask speakers if they would use a form or not. For example, consider the Standard English use of the plural distal demonstrative *those*: '*I've got **those** shoes as well.*' In some parts of Scotland, *they* can be used in place of *those*: 'I've got **they** shoes as well.'

To find out exactly where this form is used, participants in our study were provided with a scenario and then asked if they would say such a thing: '*I'm showing you the new pair of shoes I bought. You say: I've got **they** shoes as well.*' These sentence structures are then rated on a Likert Scale, from I would never say that to I would definitely say that, as in Figure 2.

Figure 2

1	2	3	4	5
I would never say that	I probably wouldn't say that	I might say that	I would probably say that	I would definitely say that
You would never hear that here	You probably wouldn't hear that here	You wouldn't hear that a lot here	You would hear that occasionally here	You would hear that a lot here
It's very unusual	It's unnatural	It's not very natural	It's quite natural	It's very natural
It's bad	It's weird	It's a bit weird	It's OKish	It's fine

As we are working with dialect syntax forms, all sorts of prescriptive pressures come into play if a speaker sees such forms written down. We wanted to get beyond that, to tap into what they really do say, not what they think they should say. Setting up a scenario as per above helps in getting beyond prescriptive norms. In addition, the participants didn't read these test sentences but instead heard them spoken in the most natural way possible.

What we found

We then used these scores to map the dialect syntax form across the country, where darker dots means that the syntactic form is likely used there and lighter dots mean that it is not. Figure 3 shows the results for *they* demonstratives, where use is confined to the Central Belt, up into Dundee and down into the Borders. Further north, speakers said they wouldn't use this form.

We included around 200 forms in a questionnaire, gathering acceptability judgements on each from our speakers, and the Scots Syntax Atlas provides results for all of these.

In addition to geography, such acceptability judgements also provide window on change. This is demonstrated in the use of *youse*, a plural form of *you*. When we looked at this form across the two different age groups, we found something very exciting: compare Figure 4 (older speakers) and Figure 5 (younger speakers).

Note that there are far more darker dots for the younger speakers, showing that those speakers accepted *youse* more. This snapshot across the generations shows that this form is in the process of change. It can also show us where the form may have originated: from the patterning in the older speakers, we can see that it probably originated around Glasgow and the Central Belt and has since spread eastward and upward over the past few decades. Shetland is having none of it though! You can check out the 'stories' in our atlas to see why this might be the case.

One last wee point here: we tend to think of dialects as being illogical/unsystematic, but here we have a perfect example of how a dialect form exhibits a very useful distinction between singular and plural *you* that doesn't exist in Standard English. More generally, just like Standard English, non-standard varieties such as the ones we've been discussing here have rules of use – they just happen to be different rules to the standard ones. Let's loop back to the example *The floors is sticky* in the introduction: in some varieties of Scots you can use a 'singular' verb with a plural noun as in the example here. But you can't use a singular form if the subject is a pronoun: you will never hear in these varieties *They is sticky*. So there's a rule in these varieties that distinguishes nouns from pronouns in governing what form of the verb you use. Different rules from Standard English, but still rules. And this is true of Scots, Geordie and in fact every single variety of a language worldwide.

What we'll do next

Although it was a monumental effort to put together this atlas, the team very much think of it as a basic foundation from which to build other projects. There's still so much more we want to learn about Scots. This is especially true in the context of the classroom, where the Scottish Government, in conjunction with Education Scotland, launched their *Scots Language Policy* in 2015. This policy aims '*to promote a coherent*
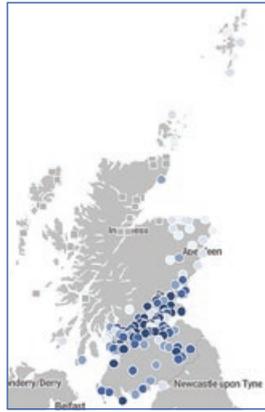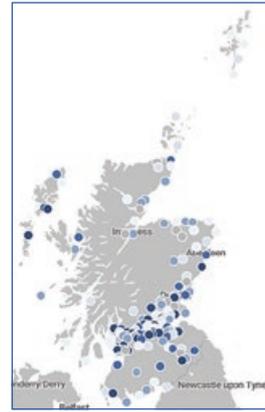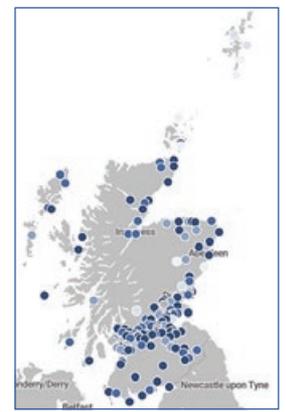
Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

approach to the planning, learning, teaching and assessment of Scots within...the National Curriculum for Excellence'. It was with this aim in mind that we devised the project *Speak for Yersel: Mapping Scots in the 21st Century Classroom*. In this project we will create a dynamic, digital resource of online interactive activities for secondary school pupils. We will replicate what we did in the original atlas in terms of acceptability judgement data, but we'll go beyond this through a series of tasks which investigate the words, sounds and sentences used in Scots throughout Scotland, and the social attitudes which arise from these.

One such activity will centre on lexical variation: someone walks on a *pavement* in the UK but a *sidewalk* in the States: someone might be a *right mardy bum* in Sheffield but *affa dour* in Aberdeen. Pupils are asked to select the word they would use for a particular item pictured. The output from this activity is loaded onto a heat map to show which lexical items are used where, as you can see in Figure 6. Follow up worksheets require students to find out about these lexical items through using resources such as Dictionaries of the Scots Language (**https://dsl.ac.uk**). (See Figure 6 for an example).

Another activity centres on speaker attitudes to their own and others' speech. They hear extracts of speech from different areas around Scotland which were collected in the original Scots Syntax Atlas project. They then have to rate each of the speakers across a number of attributes such as friendly, wealthy, educated. These evaluations are then mapped through a word cloud, providing a dynamic resource on attitudes towards different dialects across Scotland. The follow-on worksheet asks pupils to reflect on language attitudes: what are they based on; why are some speech communities more negatively valued than others? Ultimately, this activity aims to expose pupils to the often covert prejudices that exist in language use and why they might arise.

We hope that the *Speak for Yersel* project will significantly extend the depth and reach of provision to schools who wish to further develop their teaching and learning of Scots. More broadly, we hope it will provide young learners with a fuller understanding of that most crucial of human abilities, language.

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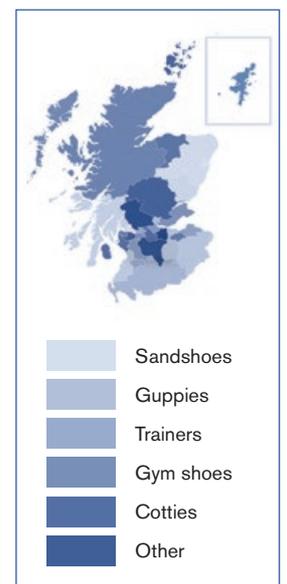
Sandshoes
Guppies
Trainers
Gym shoes
Cotties
Other

Figure 6