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**TÍTOL:**

**Literary Translation and the Revitalisation of Minority Languages: The  
Case of Scots**

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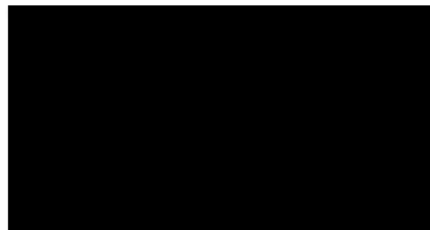


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I would like to thank my tutor, Dr. Rosanna Rion, for inspiring the topic and the direction of this research.

My gratitude also goes to all the professors that have guided me throughout this degree.

To Tommy and May

## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the role of literary translation in the revitalisation of minoritised languages, using Scots—one of Scotland’s official languages alongside Gaelic and English—as a case study. Drawing on theoretical perspectives both supporting and critiquing translation into minoritised languages, the paper positions it as a form of cultural resistance, renewal, and a means of enhancing the perceived status and social recognition of the language. This study traces the historical development of Scots and questions its contested status as either a language or dialect. Through the analysis of translations from English and other languages into Scots, the study highlights the language’s expressive capacity and its ability to engage with global literary traditions. Ultimately, the paper argues that literary translation not only fosters linguistic innovation and enriches the literary corpus of minoritised languages, but also increases their social prestige, reaffirming their legitimacy and vitality within the collective identity.

**Keywords:** literary translation, language revitalisation, minoritised languages, Scots, cultural legitimacy

## **Resum**

Aquest treball investiga el paper de la traducció literària en la revitalització de les llengües minoritzades, prenent com a cas d’estudi l’*scots*—una de les llengües oficials d’Escòcia, juntament amb el gaèlic i l’anglès. A partir de perspectives teòriques tant favorables com crítiques envers la traducció en llengües minoritzades, el treball la presenta com una forma de resistència cultural, de renovació i com un mitjà per augmentar el valor i el reconeixement social de la llengua. S’hi perfila el desenvolupament històric de l’*scots* i s’examina la seva condició controvertida com a llengua o dialecte. Mitjançant l’anàlisi de traduccions de l’anglès i d’altres llengües a l’*scots*, l’estudi posa en relleu la capacitat expressiva de la llengua i la seva aptitud per dialogar amb tradicions literàries globals. Finalment, el treball sosté que la traducció literària no tant sols fomenta la innovació lingüística i enriqueix el corpus literari de les llengües

minoritzades, si no que també n'incrementa el prestigi social, reafirmant la seva legitimitat i la seva vitalitat dins la identitat col·lectiva.

***Paraules clau:*** traducció literària, revitalització del llenguatge, llengües minoritzades, *scots*, legitimitat cultural

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The terms ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ when applied to languages, clearly do not refer to any inherent linguistic characteristic of the languages as communication codes. Rather, they reflect asymmetrical relations of social, political or economic power. This asymmetry could be purely statistical. For example, a language spoken by a small number of speakers is a ‘minority language’. However, when asymmetry leads to a situation of subordination relative to the ‘majority’ group, whether in cultural, social, political, or economic terms, it seems more appropriate to refer to the ‘minority’ group as a ‘minoritised language’:

When two groups interact under unequal conditions, one language becomes dominant and the other becomes subordinate. Using the term “minoritised” rather than “minority” emphasizes that this subordinate status is the result of relational processes, not an intrinsic flaw of the language (Bastardas-Boada, 2017, p. 2).

The Scots language, for example, is in a situation of subordination in relation to English. Scotland has three national languages: English, Scottish Gaelic and Scots. While English dominates public life and Gaelic enjoys widespread recognition beyond Scotland, general awareness of Scots—particularly among those outside Scotland—is comparatively limited, despite its historical significance and continued use by a substantial part of the population. The term *Scots* is not widely used in academic or non-academic literature beyond the English-speaking world. Its translation into other languages—for instance, Romance languages such as French (*écossaise*), Italian (*scozzese*) or Catalan (*escocès*)—often introduces ambiguity, as Gaelic and English are also Scottish languages. However, even within the English-speaking world, the precise meaning of the term *Scots* is unclear. These are some dictionary definitions of the noun *Scots*:

- “The English language of Scotland” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).
- “A variety of English used in (esp. lowland) Scotland; the variety of this used in parts of the north of Ireland. Frequently also viewed as a distinct language” (Oxford University Press, n.d.).
- “A language spoken mainly in Scotland that is related to English, but has some important differences” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.)
- “The Scots language, the speech of Lowland Scotland, which became distinct from Northern English in the 15th. c. and was the official language of the Kingdom of Scotland

until 1707, though gradually anglicised from the mid-16th. c. and now surviving as a series of dialects and in a modified literary form” (Scottish Language Dictionaries Ltd., 2004).

This paper seeks to explain why the term Scots is difficult to define, focusing primarily on its status as a minoritised language. This discussion provides the basis for using Scots as a case study of the main research question: in what ways can literary translation contribute to the revitalisation of minoritised languages?

To address this question this paper begins by situating literary translation within broader debates on language revitalisation, drawing on both historical and contemporary theoretical perspectives. The literature review explores how, historically, literary translation has been crucial in the development of vernacular varieties as languages of culture but it also turns to perspectives provided by non-western traditions and by counterarguments regarding translating minoritised languages. The next section examines the linguistic and sociopolitical status of Scots, tracing its historical development from its early origins through periods of prominence, decline, and revival, and questions the value of framing the debate as a language-versus-dialect dichotomy. The paper then focuses on literary translations into Scots, analysing examples from English and other languages to identify the strategies that translators use to address the challenges posed by integrating different linguistic and literary systems. Case studies such as Brian Holton’s translation of the classic Chinese novel *Shuihu Zhuan* and Martin Bowman and Bill Findlay’s translations of Michel Tremblay’s Québécois plays illustrate some of these strategies but also reveal the additional complexities that arise from the particular status of present-day Scots, in relation to aspects of recognition, legitimacy and acceptance.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *2.1. Historical perspective*

Outlining the historical influence of literary translation on the revitalisation and enrichment of languages is equivalent, in effect, to tracing the evolution of translation studies from its classical roots to the emergence of modern European languages—even though through a predominantly Western lens shaped by Classical and European Christian traditions. Although this paper focuses on minoritised languages and the obstacles they must overcome, the

processes that can contribute to their revitalisation are essentially the same that, for example, first elevated Latin and later the modern European vernaculars into languages of high culture. This section will examine some of these processes, drawing primarily on Bassnett's (2014) "History of translation theory".

It is a common generalization that Roman literature primarily developed through the adaptation of Greek models and traditions. However, the role of translation in Roman literature transcended the mere replication of Greek literary themes, forms and genres, assuming a more complex function. Bassnett (2014) stresses the relevance that translation had in Roman literary culture and highlights the influence that Cicero and Horace's ideas on translation had in shaping Latin's evolution into a richly expressive literary language in the centuries that followed:

The underlying principle of enriching their native language and literature through translation leads to a stress on the aesthetic criteria of the TL [target language] product... Since the process of the enrichment of the literary system is an integral part of the Roman concept of translation, it is not surprising to find a concern with the question of language enrichment also. (pp. 54-55)

Most educated Romans were able to read Greek texts because Greek was the language of culture. As a result, translations operated as "metatexts", read together with and against their Greek originals (p. 55). It can therefore be inferred that there was an aesthetic and stylistic interest in the Latin versions that granted translators the freedom to experiment with form, given that the content was already familiar (p. 55). For example, Dowson (2023) studies how Latin philosophical vocabulary emerged through the translation of Greek sources by five key authors—Lucretius, Cicero, Apuleius, Calcidius, and Boethius. Dowson analyses the choices of these translators through morphological and semantic variables, showing how neologisms, loan-words, and semantic extensions were incorporated at different stages of Latin's lexical evolution (p. 2). He demonstrates that these individual innovations collectively transformed Latin from a language borrowing Greek models into an autonomous medium capable of expressing original philosophical discourse (p. 29).

Building on the theoretical principles established by early translations of Greek literature and philosophy, the translation of the Bible into Latin, and later into vernacular languages, introduced new challenges. While Cicero and Horace's models had refined Latin for an elite audience, the Bible's universal reach compelled translators to invent and adapt vocabulary that could convey theological doctrine to clerics, scholars, and laypeople but with an added constraint: "the problem of the fine line between what constituted stylistic licence and what constituted heretical interpretation" (Bassnett, 2014, p. 56). The translation of biblical

texts consolidated the status of Latin as the language of Christianity and of education across Europe for centuries. However, towards the 9th and 10th centuries the rise of vernacular literatures prompted a further transformation. Translation began to be perceived as fulfilling moral and didactic functions (p. 61). It became a tool for disseminating knowledge and at the same time for elevating the vernacular to the category of source language text:

As emerging literatures with little or no written tradition of their own to draw upon developed across Europe, works produced in other cultural contexts were translated, adapted and absorbed on a vast scale. Translation acquired an additional dimension, as writers used their abilities to translate as a means of increasing the status of their own vernacular. (pp. 61-62)

Even during the Romantic period, the interest in the rediscovery of earlier authors who “shared a common sense of creativity” (p. 73) instigated a profuse exchange of critical works and contemporary writings in translation across Europe. For instance, Shakespeare, Scott and Byron into German, French and Italian, Dante into German and English, etc (p. 74). These translations had such an impact on their target languages that critics continue to struggle “to distinguish between influence study and translation study proper” (p. 74).

This openness, this eagerness to absorb from other cultural contexts, dissolved towards the end of the 19th century when the rise of nationalisms led literary systems such as English, French or German to no longer consider translation as an instrument for revitalising their own culture (p. 77). Paradoxically, these systems became closed to exterior influence precisely at the height of colonialism, when they were exerting a dominant influence over other cultures.

## *2.2. Contemporary perspectives*

As Bassnett points out, translation has not only shaped our understanding of the past, but it also helps us to understand the present and the future, in a world that, immersed in a process of globalisation, also seeks for its antithesis: a renewed interest in cultural origins and identity (Bassnett, 2014, p. 2). Additionally, she highlights that, particularly since the 1990s, Translation Studies have emphasised the indissociable link between linguistic and cultural approaches to translation (p. 3). In this sense, it is necessary to turn the attention towards non-Western perspectives on translation and towards theoretical frames that offer some counterarguments to what has been discussed so far.

### 2.2.1. A conversation among languages: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o

The Kenyan writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (2018) warns against the dominance of European languages in translation, which can marginalise African languages and perpetuate colonial hierarchies: “[h]ierarchy is a question of power. It assumes that some languages are more of a language than other languages” (p. 127). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o develops this argument by examining how, from the colonial times through to the post-colonial period, African languages have been systematically delegitimised as credible means for producing and transmitting knowledge. The process that began as an exterior imposition has been internalised and accepted by African governments and population, to the extent that it shapes political discourse and social perception (pp. 124-125). European languages are perceived as the key to modernity while African languages are seen as barriers to progress and globalization (p. 125), a distinction that also applies to the privileging of monolingualism over multilingualism (p. 126). This is an example that clearly illustrates the difference between minority and minoritised languages. Languages such as Swahili, Yoruba or Hausa are by no means minority languages because they have millions of speakers, but they are minoritised by a situation of unequal power relations.

Although Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has often referred to translation as “the universal language of languages” or as “a conversation among languages” (p. 128), he also emphasises that these power imbalances limit its full potential. Only under equitable relations can translation foster mutual understanding and the circulation of ideas (p. 131). He quotes the Kenyan American author Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ, who said that ‘in translation, there are no indigenous, vernacular, native, local, ethnic and tribal languages producing vernacular, native, local, ethnic and tribal literatures, while English and French produce world and global literature. There are only languages and literatures’ (2016, as cited in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 2018, p. 131). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o cites the Jalada Translation Project as a compelling example of the potential of translation as a form of dialogue between languages. (p. 128). This is an unprecedented literary initiative by Jalada Africa, a collective of Pan-African writers dedicated to promoting translation into and between African languages, and to making African literature accessible to a wider audience (Nimdzi Insights, 2019). Founded in 2013, the collective brings together authors from different African countries. Its name comes from the Swahili word *jalada*, meaning “archive,” reflecting its mission to serve as a digital repository of African stories (Nimdzi Insights, 2019). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o donated his short story *The Upright Revolution, or How humans began to walk upright* [sic] to the collective. He wrote the story first in his mother tongue, Gĩkũyũ, and later translated it into English (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o,

2018, p. 128). Through this project, the story has been translated into 100 languages, including numerous African languages as well as many Asian and European languages (Jalada Africa, 2016).

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o draws a parallel between the role these translations can play in the growth of African languages and the influence that Bible translations and translations of Shakespeare’s works have had on languages worldwide (2018, p. 129). But, more importantly, he underscores the significance of inter-African language translation as a means “to change the terms of debate and even the paradigm” (2018, p. 129). He emphasizes that the most significant achievement of the Jalada Translation Project has been to demonstrate “that African languages have been and still are legitimate sources of knowledge; that thought can originate in any African language and spread to other African languages and to all the other languages of the world.” (2018, p. 130). Building on a metaphor by the poet Aimé Césaire, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o argues that translation functions like oxygen for communication, enabling one system—whether a cell or a society—to interpret another’s signals. For him, “[n]ature is multilingual” and translation is the everyday—often unseen—process that makes interconnection possible (2018, p. 131).

### 2.2.2. Theoretical approaches

In the previous discussion, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o sees translation, figuratively and to some extent literally, as a biological process. In this sense, his ideas resonate with the concept of the ecology of language, as thoroughly analysed by Bastardas-Boada (2017), who provides a theoretical frame that perfectly encompasses the reality described above. Linguistic ecology is the study of how languages interact with each other and with their surrounding environments. The concept was put forward by Einar Haugen in 1971, who defined it as “the study of the interactions between any given language and its environment” (p. 3), understanding environment as “the society that uses it” (p. 4). Language is seen as a metaphor of an ecosystem. Like species in nature, languages coexist, compete, evolve, and sometimes go extinct (p. 6). Bastardas-Boada suggests extending this analogy to linguistic research and to the study of language diversity, change, preservation and recovery (p. 6). Additionally, he identifies an increasing awareness of the need to preserve endangered languages, much as environmentalism works to preserve biodiversity (p. 6). From this perspective, and in the same vein as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, ecology of language upholds equal rights for all languages and relations free from hierarchy or subordination (p. 6).

Bastardas-Boada goes on to argue that modernisation introduces new political and economic pressures that reshape linguistic ecosystems, prompting communities to adapt by learning the dominant language(s). If, in addition, this shift promotes a discourse that denigrates and stigmatises local languages as merely oral, dialectal, and non-standard, it undermines their legitimacy and accelerates their disuse. (p. 7). The preservation and recovering of endangered languages require altering the ecosystem that led to their decline (p. 11), which, depending on the case, can have all sort of political and social implications. However, Bastardas-Boada also points out that when a language has disappeared from both institutional and individual use, revitalisation is extremely difficult. It is easier to transition from individual to institutional use than the reverse (p. 15). Therefore, any effort to sustain individualised use of the language is crucial for the survival of minoritised languages, and literary translation can serve as a tool in this preservation effort.

Although Bastardas-Boada's work centres on sociolinguistics, language contact, and policy rather than on translation studies, his ecosystemic approach can inspire translators to adopt strategies that foster linguistic diversity. For example, viewing source and target languages as interdependent entities, preserving minority voices by resisting dominant-language pressure, and prioritizing sustainability and subsidiarity. In other words, if Bastardas-Boada asserts that "a more 'global' language should not do anything a 'local' language can do" (p. 17), then translators should aim to ensure that a 'local' language can do anything a 'global' language can do.

While the discussion has so far centred on translating *into* minority or minoritised languages, it is important to mention, if only briefly, that there are also potential issues when these languages are used as the source in translation. One of them is reproducing the hegemonic imagery and narratives generated by the target language. For example, translations of Indian literature into English have generated certain cultural stereotypes that *sell* in the West as representative of India, but that constrain and distort authentic representation (Bassnett, 2014, p. 5). Another risk is diluting the cultural essence of the original text or, using the terminology popularised by Venuti (1995), there is a risk of domesticating the source text.

Domestication and foreignization are two contrasting translation strategies originally formulated by Schleiermacher in the early 19th century (Venuti, 1995, p. 19). A domesticating translation adapts the source text to make it more familiar and natural to the target audience, making it feel as if it had been written in the target language, minimizing the "foreignness" of the original (pp. 20-22). For example, by finding equivalent idioms or cultural references in the target culture. On the other hand, a foreignizing translation retains elements of the source

culture to preserve its distinctiveness, making the reader aware that the text comes from a different cultural context (pp. 20-22). For example, by keeping original names and cultural references, even if they are unfamiliar to the target audience. Foreignization may cause a feeling of estrangement to readers unfamiliar with the source culture but the effects of domestication can range from the loss of cultural connotations to the deletion of the source culture's identity from the target text. Venuti argued that these strategies are not just linguistic choices, they are ideological. Domestication often reflects dominant cultural norms and can reinforce cultural hegemony, while foreignization is seen as an ethical attitude that promotes diversity and challenges cultural assimilation (p. 20). He identified domestication as a defining trait of the (scarce) literary translations into English and as a symptom of an Anglo-centric "complacency" which he sees as "imperialistic abroad and xenophobic at home" (1995, p. 17).

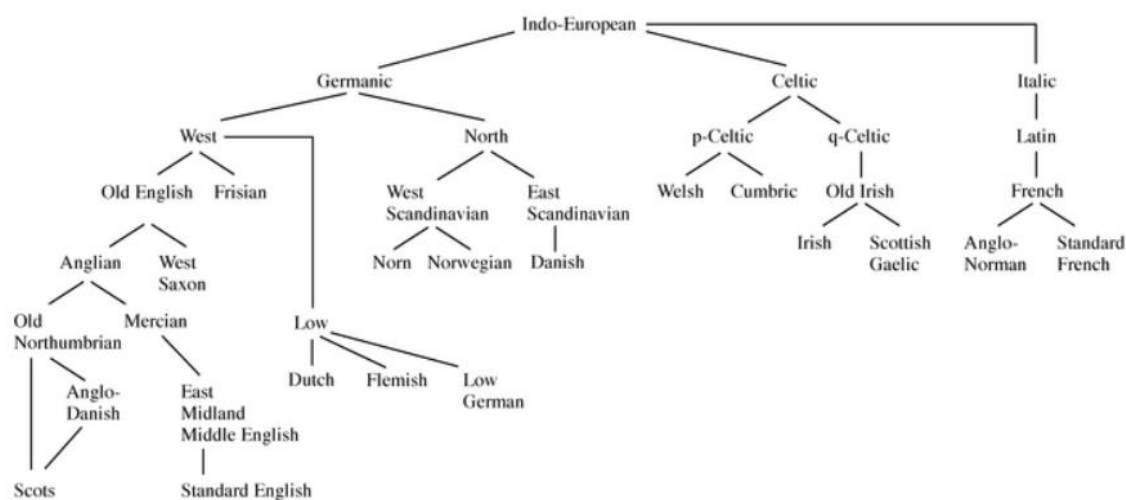
Fishman (2001) contends that the concept of a "translated culture" is, in most cases, defective and "even abhorrent" because of the deep connection between language and its cultural expressions such as literature, folklore, beliefs, conventions, etc (p. 3). Furthermore, he argues that "[t]o claim that social meanings can remain the same when a different language, coming from a different ethnocultural point of origin, is employed, is to misinterpret the dynamics and symbols of 'insiders' to any culture" (p. 4).

Fishman's caution about translation underscores the risk that it may become an empty substitute for original use of language. However, this paper aims to demonstrate that in the Scots context, literary translations can enrich the language's expressive resources, elevate its public visibility, and inspire original works, perhaps owing to the shared ethnocultural heritage between English and Scots, as the next chapter will explore.

### **3. WHAT IS SCOTS?**

As noted in the introduction of this paper, the term 'Scots' resists definition. The following sections aim to offer an outline of the factors that have complicated this definition by looking into its historical development, its present-day position, and its relationship with English, while avoiding the often reductive language vs. dialect dichotomy.

### 3.1. History



**Figure 1. The family tree of Scots**  
*From: (Macafee & Aitken, 2002)*

Scots is classified within the West Germanic branch of the Indo-European family of languages and –like English– descends from Old English (OE), the language spoken by the Germanic invaders that settled in Britain from the 5th to the 7th century. The OE period is conventionally framed by the Anglo-Saxon invasions into Britain in 449 and the Norman Conquest in 1066 (Algeo, 2010, p. 78). Across and beyond this period, Scots and English developed in different ways, –shaped by different language contact situations, different territories, and different power relations. This section aims to offer an overview of the major milestones in the history of the Scots language, primarily informed by the works of Aitken (2015a; 2015b), Corbett et al. (2003) and Corbett (2024). The origins and earlier development will be examined in greater detail due to its relevance to the broader historical process. Although this summary is organized chronologically, some sections necessarily overlap because they describe concurrent historical influences.

### 3.1.1. Origins and early development: from the Iron Age to the Middle Ages

Before the migrations of the Anglo-Saxon (West Germanic) settlers, the territory of the British Isles<sup>1</sup> was inhabited by Celtic-speaking tribes. These groups did not share a unified language, and various dialects were spoken across different regions. Celtic languages divided into two groups, q-Celtic and p-Celtic, distinguished by the development of the Proto Indo-European (PIE) voiceless labio-velar plosive phoneme [kʷ]. This can be illustrated by the evolution of the PIE word [kʷen] ‘head’, which in q-Celtic languages lost the labial trait ([kʷ] > [k]) becoming [ken] *ceann* (as in Gaelic) while in p-Celtic languages it lost the velar trait ([kʷ] > [p]) becoming [pen] *pen* (as in Welsh). Q-Celtic languages are the Gaelic or Goidelic languages, represented by modern Irish, Scottish Gaelic and by Manx (Isle of Man). P-Celtic languages are the Brittonic or Brythonic languages: Cumbric (northwestern England – southern Scotland), Cornish (Cornwall), Welsh (Wales), Breton (Britany) and Pictish (northern Scotland) (Macafee & Aitken, 2002). Nevertheless, some linguists argue that available evidence is insufficient to determine whether Pictish was a Celtic language (Algeo & Pyles, 2010, p. 61), with some even proposing the possibility of an earlier non-Indo-European substrate (Forsyth, 1997). In any case, by the time of the Roman invasion of Britain in AD 43, the Celtic tribes could be linguistically classed into three main groups: the Gaels in Ireland, the Picts in northern Scotland



and the Britons in the rest of Britain. Romanisation did not affect all territories in the same measure and the influence of Latin was more important on the southern dialects of Britain, where contact with Roman administrative and cultural centres had been closer and more sustained. The western and northern tribes, particularly the Picts, resisted Roman rule for almost four centuries, until the withdrawal of the Roman legions around AD 410 (Cunliffe et al., 2004, pp. 41-43).

**Figure 2. Map of the Celtic linguistic areas before Anglo-Saxon invasion**

**Note.** Adapted from *Map Gaels Brythons Picts*, by Asarlaí, 2019, Wikimedia Commons ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_Gaels\\_Brythons\\_Picts.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_Gaels_Brythons_Picts.png)). Captions added. Licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

<sup>1</sup> Geographical names reflect contemporary usage, for clarity.

Raids into Roman Britain were frequently conducted not only by the Picts but also by the Scots –known to the Romans as Scotti– who originated in the north of Ireland (p. 46). The Scots were a q-Celtic speaking people who, between the 4th and 6th centuries, migrated from northeastern Ireland to western Scotland. For centuries, the Picts coexisted with the Scots but they were gradually assimilated and by the 9th century their p-Celtic language and Brittonic identity had been substituted by q-Celtic Gaelic language and culture (Cunliffe et al., 2004, p. 64; Woolf, 2000, pp. 149-150).

However, as mentioned above, the population movement that brought about the dissemination of OE in Britain was the migration of the Germanic tribes (Jutes, Angles and Saxons) who in the 5th century invaded the island drawn by the collapse of Roman authority. The Jutes came from the north of the Jutland peninsula, the Angles from the south, and the Saxons from northwestern Germany and Holland. Each one of these tribes settled in a different region: the Jutes in Kent, the Angles in East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria, and the Saxons in Wessex, Essex and Sussex, forming the seven kingdoms known as the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy (Algeo & Pyles, 2010, pp. 80-81). As a result, in little more than a century, Celtic populations were displaced to the periphery of the territory, mainly to Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, Wales, and Brittany, in France (Cunliffe et al., 2004, p. 54). OE texts suggest that four Germanic language varieties were spoken in the seven kingdoms: Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon and Kentish. The term Anglian is often used to encompass both Northumbrian and Mercian because they shared many characteristics during the early OE period (Algeo & Pyles,



2010, p. 85). As will be discussed later, Modern English descends from Mercian (p. 86) while Scots developed from the Old Northumbrian dialect which spread from what is now the English Midlands to the south of the Scottish Lowlands during the early medieval period. The rest of Scotland was still predominantly Gaelic, at least until the 11th century (Macafee & Aitken, 2002).

**Figure 3. Anglo-Saxon dialects**

**Note.** From *The dialects of Old English c.800 CE*, by CelticBrain, 2020, Wikimedia Commons ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Old\\_English\\_Dialects.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Old_English_Dialects.png)). Licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

The Viking invasions from the 8th to the 11th centuries were an important determinant in the divergent development of OE in England and Scotland and in the early formation of the Scots language. The first Viking raids, coming from Norway, settled in the western and northern isles of Scotland. In Orkney and Shetland, the p-Celtic language was largely replaced by Norn,

an Old Norse dialect that was still spoken in the islands as late as the 18th and 19th centuries, and from which Scots borrowed a large number of loanwords (Corbett et al., 2003, p. 5). But the most significant factor was the Dane conquest of the central Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, often referred to as ‘The Great Scandinavian Belt’. Only the north of Northumbria and Wessex remained outside the Danelaw (Macafee & Aitken, 2002). The language of the Danes and the Anglo-Saxons was probably mutually intelligible because of their common origin (Corbett et al., 2003, p. 6). The hybrid language resulting from the contact between the two communities is often referred to as ‘Anglo-Danish’ (Aitken, 2015b), ‘Anglo-Norse’ or ‘Anglo-Scandinavian’ (Corbett et al., 2003; Macafee & Aitken, 2002).

One outcome of the long confrontation against the Vikings was the unification of the vulnerable Anglo-Saxon heptarchy into two dominant kingdoms: England and Scotland (Cunliffe et al., 2004, p. 52). In the pre-Norman times, those Anglo-Scandinavian speakers started to move north and spread their language into Scottish Lowlands, where Old Northumbrian was already predominant. However, it was after the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 when a migration surge accelerated the diffusion of this developing language that became Scots (Corbett, 2024, p. 146). Stronger ties between the Scottish and English crowns brought a Normanizing influence to the Scottish court. Anglo-Norman landowners, along with large numbers of Anglo-Scandinavian servants and retainers were drawn to the newly established Scottish towns because of the special trading privileges they had been granted (Corbett et al., 2003, p. 7). Supporting the relevance of this large-scale migration, Aitken writes:

This Scandinavianised Northern English – or Anglo-Danish – was certainly the principal, though probably not the only, language of the early Scottish burghs and its contribution to the formation of the language later known as Scots is probably even greater than that of the original Old English of south-eastern Scotland. (2015b, p. 2)

It is important to note that language change is defined not only by geography and historical time, but also by social factors. As Aitken describes, different languages coexisted within the same time and place. For example, in the 11th and 12th centuries, Norman French was the language of the court, Latin was the language of religion, education and law, Anglo-Danish was spoken in the emerging burghs, and Gaelic still prevailed in most rural areas (Aitken, 2015b, pp. 1-2) and across the Highlands.

Over time, the Northumbrian variety of OE spoken in Scotland, strongly influenced by Scandinavian pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, began to diverge from the variety spoken in England. Besides, its presence and use – both spoken and written – progressively

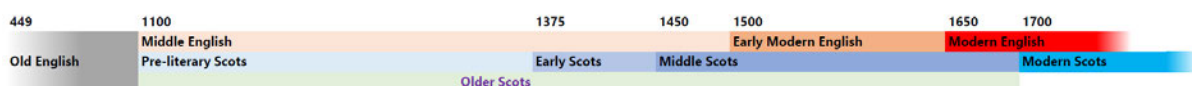
diversified, extending to multiple contexts and to all layers of society (Corbett et al., 2003, p. 8). By the 14th century it was the language of most of the population in the south and east of Scotland, including the aristocracy and the royal court. It was the beginning of the Early Scots period and literary Scots, which is commonly dated to the appearance of John Barbour’s poem *The Bruce* in 1375, an account of the War of Independence (Aitken, 2015b, p. 2).

### 3.1.2. The Golden Age of Scots: 15th to 16th centuries

It was, therefore, in the Early Scots period (1375-1450) when the language began to gain prestige. It increasingly replaced Latin and French in government, administration and literature, both in translated and original texts, the most notable evidence being the use of Scots in the Acts of Parliament (Corbett et al., 2003, p. 8). The following period, Middle Scots (1450-1700), represented the consolidation of Scots as the preeminent language in cultural, social and political domains. In view of this, Aitken confers Scots the status of “national language” (2015b, p. 4) and, similarly, Corbett maintains that “Scots had a legitimate claim to be understood as the separate language of an autonomous nation” (2024, p. 147). Nevertheless, they also concur on another aspect: the distinction between Scots and English was more political and social than linguistic. At this point, languages were not standardized and Scots was still very close to the Northern dialects of English (Aitken, 2015b, p. 4; Corbett, 2024, p. 147). In fact, the term used in Scotland to refer to both Scots and English was ‘Inglis’, to differentiate it from Gaelic (called ‘Erse’, Irish). It was not until the late 15th century that that the term ‘Scottis’ began to be used. (Corbett et al., 2003, p. 8). That proximity was an open door that facilitated the infiltration of English features into Scots, which first led to its anglicisation and later to its decline (Aitken, 2015b, p. 4).

### 3.1.3. Anglicisation. The decline: 17th to 18th centuries

Chronologically, Middle Scots period in Scotland (1450-1700) encompasses Early Modern English in England (1500-1650).



**Figure 4. The main historical periods of English and Scots**  
Based on data from: (Macafee & Aitken, 2002)

Turning briefly to the developments in England from the 15th century onwards, the language variety that gradually emerged as the spoken standard was the East Midlands –Mercian– dialect of London, the largest economic and commercial centre. The introduction of the printing press to England in 1476 marked the beginning of the definition of spelling conventions and the standardization of written English (Algeo & Pyles, 2010, p. 119). This was perhaps the earliest factor that contributed to English’s perceived authority and laid the basis for its increasing prestige.

One cause of Scots’ Anglicisation can be traced to the Protestant Reformation of 1560, when Scotland failed to introduce a Scots translation of the Bible, using instead the English Geneva Bible (Macafee & Aitken, 2002). Another cause was the Union of the Crowns in 1603. After James VI of Scotland became James I of England and the royal court moved to London, the prestige of English increased among nobility, even more so after the Union of the Parliaments in 1707 and the loss of Scotland’s political independence. In the course of the 17th century, Scottish elites adopted English, first in written and official contexts and eventually in speech because they regarded it as the *proper* and *polite* way to speak. Conversely, Scots lost prestige and social status although there is evidence that it was still spoken in many contexts, including law (Aitken, 2015b, p. 6; Corbett et al., 2003, p. 11). In the 18th century the use of Scots became more restricted and associated with informal settings. Many speakers began to view Scots as an inferior form of English rather than as a distinct language. As Corbett notes, the middle and upper classes strove to adopt an anglicised pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, thus “a hybrid variety, Scottish English, was born” (2024, p. 147).

#### 3.1.4. The Revival: from 18th to early 20th centuries

Despite this, Scots did not disappear in the 18th century. It remained among the vast majority of the Lowland population and it was preserved in traditional songs, poetry, and storytelling. In fact, there was a literary revival of written Scots. Writers such as Walter Scott and Robert Burns played a crucial role in revitalising the language and its literary potential. In the early 20th, Hugh MacDiarmid attempted to standardize Scots drawing attention towards the linguistic heritage. During the 20th century, Scots continued to be a subject of academic study (as it had been in the previous centuries). Linguists documented its dialects, vocabulary and historical development, and a number of proposals for spelling reform were presented, although with a limited success (Corbett et al., 2003, pp. 12-14).

### 3.2. *The position of Scots today*

As of 31 July 2025, the *Scottish Languages Act 2025* recognises Scots as one of Scotland's official languages, together with English and Gaelic. It was not until 2023 that the Scottish Parliament started to discuss the official status of Scots and Gaelic and the law was finally passed unanimously on 17 June 2025 (Scottish Parliament, 2025). It is the first time there has been a legislative measure for Scots and the first time the Government has committed to preparing a language strategy to facilitate and support its use (McLeod, 2025).

According to the 2022 census, 22% of the population speaks, reads and writes Scots while 54% has no skills in Scots (Scotland's Census, n.d.). Its main area of influence is eastern and southern Scotland while Gaelic's is the Highlands. Scots' presence in traditional printed and broadcast media is limited, reflecting a persistent tendency to oscillate between its stigmatization as a working-class or humorous language to its confinement to literary contexts and scholarly discussions (Corbett, 2008). In contrast, its presence in digital and social media is increasingly gaining scope and contexts of use. One characteristic of Scots in digital media is the variety of formal models, spellings and grammatical conventions, which can be seen as an indicator of a renewed linguistic vitality. However, Costa (2017) casts doubt on this suggesting that, while no official standard should restrict an "idiosyncratic" (p. 62) use of a language, the lack of a Scots' standard actually narrows its possibilities. Costa goes on to argue that non-standardized languages struggle beside standardized languages. A standard is an unmarked voice: it carries no special label or stigma. A non-standard Scots is a marked voice: it signals heritage, regional and social identity, and often sparks judgements, criticism or discussions about its correctness (pp. 62-63).

### 3.3. *Language or dialect?*

*Language* and *dialect* are commonly used terms, yet they are difficult to define. In linguistics, it is generally accepted that even the more prestigious and standardized varieties are dialects (e.g. Standard English). Chambers & Trudgill affirm that the word *language* is "from a linguistic point of view a relatively nontechnical term" (1998, p. 5).

In the extensive body of work of Aitken and Corbett (e.g., Aitken, 2015a, 2015b; Corbett et al., 2003; Corbett, 2024) the relationship between Scots and Scottish Standard English (i.e., the variety of English spoken in Scotland) is described using the concept of language continuum. A language (or dialect) continuum usually refers to a range of varieties

spoken across a region in which speakers of neighbour varieties understand each other, but, as distance increases, intelligibility decreases, thus varieties at both ends of the continuum may be mutually unintelligible. The concept of language continuum applies to both geographic and social variation (Chambers & Trudgill, 1998, pp. 5-9). In this light, according to Aitken and Corbett, Scots is at one end of the continuum and Scottish English is at the other end. The Scots variety that is at the end of the continuum is mostly unintelligible for most English speakers, both in oral and written forms, because it is characterised by a distinct pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. At the other end of the continuum, Scottish English is also distinct in its speech, as its prosody and pronunciation reflect varying degrees of Scots influence. In writing, however, it is very close to other standard English varieties, differing only by occasional Scotticisms (Corbett et al., 2003, p. 2). Scottish speakers position themselves along this continuum depending on multiple factors, such as origin, upbringing, education, felt identity, ideology, etc. Additionally, Corbett points out that the concept of language continuum cannot be represented as a single line because Scots encompasses a complex linguistic system. There are many different regional varieties across Scotland's north, east and south, and within these regions, there are many social varieties, particularly in the major cities. (Corbett et al., 2003, pp. 2-3).

Another characteristic that differentiates Scots is its literature. In Aitken's words: "Nowhere in the English-speaking world is there a *dialect literature* [emphasis added] which remotely compares with Scottish literature for antiquity, for extent and variety, and for distinction" (2015b, p. 8). Among others, Aitken highlights the medieval makars, the Older Scots literary prose, the regional literatures of Shetland, North-Eastern Scots and Glasgow, and names such as Burns, Scott and MacDiarmid (p. 8) already mentioned in this paper.

Finally, it is also worth restating that the academic study of Scots began in the 16th century with the first glossaries and dictionaries. From the 18th century onward, it has been the focus of extensive investigation in etymology, lexicography and dialectology, and today philological research continues across several disciplines.

Regardless of classification, it is clear that Scots is an important part of Scotland's cultural identity and heritage. Its distinctive features and its speakers' determination to sustain it, despite the overshadowing influence of English, make of Scots an appropriate language for literary translation, as the following sections will attempt to explain.

## 4. LITERARY TRANSLATIONS INTO SCOTS

### 4.1. *Translating English into Scots*

A pertinent question arises regarding the purpose of translating English literary texts into Scots, given that virtually all Scots readers are also English readers. This concern is not unique to Scots, but is shared by many minority languages that exist under the direct influence of a dominant language. In the specific context of Scots-English relations, Corbett (2024) identifies an additional complication: determining whether a translation should be considered intralingual or interlingual. In relation to the notion of language continuum outlined in the previous chapter, this distinction depends not only on the status of the source and target varieties at a particular historical moment (p. 145) but also “on how translator and reader understand the status of Scots” (p. 153). Translation from other languages into Scots has been present in Scottish literary tradition since the 15th century but translation from English into Scots began in the 19th century (p. 146). The selection of texts translated at any given moment often reveals deliberate intentions and reflects the political and social context of the period. As Rion states, “the main point is not to study translations themselves but the discovery of the models which have produced them” (2009, p. 167). The historically disputed status of Scots is central to understanding the role of modern English-Scots translations because the strongest motivation behind them is to assert the autonomy and the distinct identity of the language (Corbett, 2024, p. 147-148).

Corbett (2024) analyses different examples of English-Scots translations from the 20th and 21st centuries, approaching them from different perspectives. This paper now turns to those more pertinent to its central aim: translation as a means of building resilience against a dominant language, translation as a strategy for reappropriating key English-language texts, and translation as an educational project.

First, Corbett considers the translation of canonical Old English poems into Scots made in the mid-20th century by the poets Alexander Scott and Tom Scott. Delving into their motivations for translating Old English poetry, Corbett suggests that one reason may be to follow a path opened by Ezra Pound’s polemic translation of the West Saxon poem “The Seafarer”, thus, inserting Scots poetry into the late waves of Modernism (p. 149). An additional reason is that translating from an Anglo-Saxon dialect into Scots implies the recognition of a common ancestor for English and Scots: “‘Old English’ is also ‘Old Scots’” (p. 149). Interestingly, given that all interlingual translations are defined by the “tension between the

familiar and the strange” (p. 148), an Old English text would look more familiar to a Scots reader than to an English reader. Corbett observes that this similarity is used in Scots translations to highlight the difference between the two languages (p. 150). Therefore, the translation of Old English poetry into Scots not only asserts both the shared origins and distinct traditions of English and Scots but also vindicates equal linguistic status (p. 149).

Second, Corbett examines the functions that the translations of some major English-language canonical texts have in Scottish literature. The primary purpose of these translations is to enrich the Scottish literary tradition by introducing genres and movements not previously present. For example, the near absence of a tradition of 17th century theatre in Scots led to the translation of European playwrights in the 1940s, but it was not until 1992 that a play by Shakespeare was rendered into Scots in two very different adaptations of *Macbeth* made by David Purves and Robin Lorimer (Corbett, 2024, p. 153). McClure (1999) raised the question of why these two translators selected one of Shakespeare’s most difficult plays, in which he demonstrates some of his more experimental and inventive use of language (p. 31). Clearly, an important factor is that this is ‘Shakespeare’s Scottish play’, and translating it into Scots is a way of “reclaiming” the text (Corbett, 2024, p. 152). But it is also an assertion of the autonomy of the language: “If Scots is sufficiently developed to encompass *Macbeth*, it is incontrovertibly a fully mature literary medium” (McClure, 1999, p. 38). Thus, translation can function as a bridge, reconnecting a literary tradition disrupted by gaps in the target language. (Rion, 2009, p. 165).

Nevertheless, the two versions by Purves and Lorimer work very differently, as McClure’s comparison shows. Purves prioritises clarity and readability over linguistic experimentation (1999, p. 49). On the other hand, Lorimer restores the historic practice of adopting lexical borrowings—a trait Shakespeare also exploited—revitalising a fruitful literary device of Scots in its Golden Age (p. 49). In this sense, his translation mirrors the original more closely than Purves’s, allowing direct comparisons that underscore both the literary excellence of the translated text and the expressive power of its language (p. 49). While Purves measures his text against what modern Scots readers are ready to “understand and tolerate” (pp. 49-50), Lorimer seeks to convey accurately Shakespeare’s language assuming the risk of “startling and challenging his audience” (p. 50).

This contrast has a correspondence on Venuti’s domestication vs. foreignization debate mentioned in a previous chapter of this paper. Purves domesticates the source text to bring it close to the target audience. Lorimer’s foreignizes his translation preserving the source-language strangeness to challenge and enrich the target audience’s perspective. However,

Corbett adds another layer to this discussion. He argues that Scots readers might find Lorimer's text "both strangely familiar and strangely unfamiliar" (Corbett, 2024, 154) and this is because Scots readers are also English readers, and because of the universality of *Macbeth*.

Finally, Corbett discusses the role of translations from English into Scots as a tool to be used in educational projects that promote literacy in Scots. One of these projects is Itchy Coo, an imprint founded in 2002 by James Robertson and Matthew Fitt specialised in publishing original texts and translations into Scots addressed to children and young people. It is also the name of an educational programme that works with schools and other educational institutions to promote a "better understanding and greater acceptance of the Scots Language" (Itchy Coo, n.d.). At the time of their 20th anniversary in 2022, they had published more than 80 titles, including translations of Roald Dahl, J.K. Rowling, and Robert Louis Stevenson (Itchy Coo, n.d.) with great commercial success. Robertson (2013, as cited in Corbett, 2024) explains that children engage with their translated stories "because they recognise the words and sounds as *their* words, and *their* sounds" (p. 157), and they acquire new Scots vocabulary exactly in the same way they acquire new English vocabulary. However, Corbett argues that these texts succeed in part because they derive from a familiar source (2024, p. 159), while the absence of a standardized form acts as a deterrent for some readers (p. 160). Projects such as Itchy Coo contribute to the normalisation of Scots prose across different registers because, as Findlay (2004) points out, there is a historical deficiency of prose translation into Scots, whether from English or from other languages (p. 5).

Surprisingly, this is not the case for poetry and drama, for which there exists a significantly greater body of translations into Scots. For example, in the 1920s, the poet Hugh MacDiarmid advocated for translation as a means of revitalising the Scots language in form and content, and he has had a lasting influence in Scottish poetry (Findlay, 2004, p. 4). Regarding drama, Scots translations and adaptations by writers like Robert Kemp, Liz Lochhead, Edwin Morgan, Martin Bowman, Bill Findlay, and others have become the backbone of Scottish theatre to the extent that, today, Scots enjoys greater acceptance in theatre than in fiction (Corbett, 2005, p. 117). While a range of cultural and social factors surely contribute to this disparity in reception, Corbett offers a more individual interpretation:

Having your own language mirrored to you by actors onstage can lead to a profound relationship of identity; even if it is not 'your' language that is actually being presented. Non-standard accents and dialects on stage invite communal identification and ownership. (Corbett, 2007, p. 44)

This reflection could perhaps be considered in relation to that of Robertson cited above. Theatre audiences seem to approach the Scots text much as the children who learn to recognise their own language in the Scots narrative: without prejudice or prior assumption. Yet this attitude is rarely found in the reception of Scots fiction in the adult literary domain, which raises the question of what impediments prevent Scots fiction from being accepted in the same way. The following discussion considers how this distinction operates in a Scots translation of fiction and in a dramatic work.

#### *4.2. Translating other languages into Scots: case examples*

This section will examine two different examples of translation into Scots: first, Brian Holton's translation of the classic Chinese novel *Shuihu Zhuan*, and, secondly, Martin Bowman and Bill Findlay's translation from Québécois of Michel Tremblay's play *Les Belles-soeurs*. This overview is largely based on the perspectives offered by Bowman and Findlay (2004) and Holton (2004) in the collection *Frae Ither Tongues: Essays on Modern Translations into Scots*, where they, alongside other translators, reflect on their own work and on the particular challenges of translating into Scots.

##### *4.2.1. Men o the Mossflow, Brian Holton's translation of Shuihu Zhuan*

*Shuihu Zhuan* is one of the four Ming dynasty "Classic Chinese Novels" of vernacular Chinese literature. Brian Holton is a poet and translator of Chinese poetry and fiction into Scots and English. He studied Chinese at the Universities of Edinburgh and Durham, and has taught translation as well as Chinese language and literature at several universities, including Hong Kong Polytechnic's (Scottish Poetry Library, n.d.).

The original text of *Shuihu Zhuan* was written in the 14th century and it has been attributed to Shi Nai'an, though his historical existence is disputed. It is apparently clearer that Luo Guanzhong, at least, contributed to the earlier editions of the novel. In any case, its rich and expressive language together with its varied and precise use of registers make of this novel the first masterpiece written in the Chinese vernacular (Holton, 2004, p. 21). The text continued to develop under different editors until the late 16th century, when a 100-chapter version was published, followed later by a 120-chapter edition (Lowe, 2011, Preface). Holton explains that in the 17th century, Jin Shengtan, an erudite scholar, shortened the novel to 70 chapters, with an added prologue and extensive commentary. This edition achieved widespread popularity

and was the standard text until the 20th century. Set in the final years of the Song Dynasty (early 12th century, a period of social unrest and government corruption), the story narrates the vicissitudes of a band of 108 outlaws who build a brotherhood dedicated to defending the oppressed and fighting against injustice. The novel explores themes of morality, justice, authority and loyalty (Holton, 2004, pp. 21-24).

Jin Shengtan's 70-chapter version was first translated into English by Pearl S. Buck in 1933 under the title *All Men are Brothers*, and by J. H. Jackson in 1937 with the title *Water Margin*. More recently, the 100 and 120-chapter versions were translated as *Outlaws of the Marsh*, and *The Marshes of Mount Liang* (Lowe, 2011, Preface). Holton titled his translation *Men o the Mossflow* and it was based on Jin Shengtan's text.

Holton (2004) draws attention to the two main challenges specific to literary translation into Scots. The first one is the lack of a standard dialect and spelling, which required him to define which variety of Scots he would employ:

[A] balance ... between my ear, my own idiolect, and a vaguely-defined idea of what a general reader might be comfortable with. ... I tried to make a kind of Scots that could be spoken with ease, and which had enough elasticity to accommodate the shifting registers of the original. (p. 17)

The second challenge is the lack of certain registers. Holton argues that when Scotland lost its royal court and its political independence "Scots lost its high register prose" (p. 18). As previously noted, Scots remained in use in poetry, ballads and popular folklore but barely in other literary genres. Therefore, when undertaking the translation of a text as richly layered and complex as *Shuihu Zhuan* there were few references to turn to. Holton, however, found in this limitation an opportunity: "not only do we have more freedom to invent, we often have no choice but to invent – words, structures, registers – because if we do not, we will have a poorer, thinner tongue to work with" (p. 18). Holton goes even further in this claim:

If Scots is to be something worth the keeping . . . we should be able to take the biggest of books and stretch the tongue beyond what we think it can do, make the tongue new by including things we'd never before have dreamt of saying in Scots, to build the language we lack out of the otherness of a different tongue. (p. 24)

For example, to translate high-register liturgical language, particularly ecclesiastical titles, Holton opted for latinising some of the names using terms, existent or invented, that closely echoed the original meanings. He also drew on the records of the medieval royal burghs and craft guilds. Another strategy was to create new words reproducing the word-formation pattern of the Chinese word, for instance by derivation (adding equivalent affixes to an equivalent root

word) or by compounding (combining equivalent words) (p. 27). Ultimately, using Holton's very graphic metaphor, what he was trying to do was "a transfusion of Chinese" (p. 24), an image that perfectly illustrates the overall aim, which is to restore vitality to a language by incorporating elements from another.

In a biographical account of Holton's translation work, Bruno (2018) notes that, when Holton began translating *Shuihu Zhuan* in 1981, his initial drafts were enthusiastically received by Edinburgh University lecturers and by the editor of the literary and cultural magazine *Cencrastus*. The first two chapters were published in this magazine between 1981 and 1984 (Bruno, 2018, p. 310). After a change of editor, *Cencrastus* decided not to issue any new episodes but the *Edinburgh Review* published the next three chapters from 1986 to 1993. However, Holton never found a publisher for the full *Men o the Mossflow* novel or obtained funding to finish it (p. 311). He turned to other translations from Chinese into Scots, particularly poetry. Over time, Holton's growing corpus of translated poetry has been widely praised for its contribution to the modernization of Scots through an innovative and creative use of language, as well as for its intrinsic literary quality (pp. 314-316). This, once again, highlights the different receptions between prose and poetry in Scots. At best, it reflects a lack of habit of reading Scots prose. At worst, it stems from the still prevalent stigmatization of Scots as a valid vehicle for certain literary forms. As Holton warns, writers choosing to write prose in Scots must anticipate that some readers will expect it to be comic, others will find the spelling puzzling or unreadable, some will think it is Old Scots and some will simply reject it (Holton, 2004, p. 15). Holton aimed to demonstrate that Scots is capable of conveying any narrative, no matter how distant in time or place, but he met with resistance from a readership accustomed to encountering Scots primarily in poetry or drama, and who, therefore, found Holton's prose unfamiliar and difficult to engage with.

#### 4.2.2. *The Guid Sisters*, Martin Bowman and Bill Findlay's translations of Michel Tremblay's Québécois plays

As has been pointed out, although theatre is one of the genres scarcely present in Scots literary tradition, the translation of drama into Scots underwent an important development, first, in the 1940s with the translation of classical Greek plays and other major playwrights such as Molière, Ibsen, Chekhov, or Brecht, and especially, in the 1980s with the translations of Dario Fo and Michel Tremblay (Findlay, 2004, p. 5).

Michel Tremblay was the first playwright to write in Québécois and *joual*, the working-class sociolect of Montreal. *Les Belles-soeurs*, premiered in 1968, was revolutionary not only in the use of language but also in the portrayal of working-class women's alienation (Bowman & Findlay, 2004, pp. 68-70). Until then, *joual* had been regarded simply as 'bad French' and as a sign of ignorance. However, starting with Tremblay, it became an artistic tool and a symbol of cultural democratization (p. 69). Bowman, a Canadian of Scottish descent, and Findlay, a native Scot, were drawn to translating Michael Tremblay's plays due to the social and cultural affinities they perceived between Québécois and Scots. While not suggesting that the social, cultural and political linguistic contexts of Quebec and Scotland are comparable, they identified similarities in the status and the function of Québécois and Scots as literary languages: both are under the influence of dominant standard languages –French and English– experience marginalization, and seek to assert their distinct identity via literary expression (pp. 69-70).

One further motivation for translating Tremblay was the translators' wish "to challenge and extend the capacities of modern vernacular Scots" (Bowman & Findlay, 2004, pp. 68-70) through Tremblay's innovative use of Québécois, particularly in relation to the different ways of conveying a range of registers. For this purpose, Tremblay mixed in his dialogues standard French, the Quebec variant of standard French, and several rural and urban forms of Québécois (including *joual*). Bowman and Findlay reproduced this by drawing on standard English, Scottish standard English, and rural and urban dialects of Scots (p. 60). In *The Guid Sisters*, their translation of *Les Belles-soeurs*, the equivalent of *joual* is a very localized working-class Glasgow dialect. In spite of this, Bowman and Findlay deliberately chose not to adapt the play to a local setting. The action still takes place in Montreal, character names or titles remain in French (e.g. 'Germain Lauzon' 'Monsieur', 'Madame') and most cultural references are kept, as it would be the case, for example, translating Ibsen or Chekhov into English (Woodsworth, 1996, pp. 222-223).

In translation studies, it is commonly accepted—following Newmark (1981)— that dialects, and non-standard language in general, should be translated into the standard form of the target language. The reason for this is that sociolinguistic dynamics between standard and non-standard varieties in the source language are unlikely to have direct equivalents in the target language. Therefore, trying to replicate those dynamics might result in distortion or misrepresentation. However, an exception appears to arise in the specific case of translating from *joual* and standard French into Scots and standard English because Bowman and Findlay were able to identify clear associations in terms of prestige, stigma, regional identity or class. For them, translating into a mix of standard and non-standard language can more effectively

highlight the register contrasts, and the linguistic tensions that Tremblay's original poses (Bowman & Findlay, 2004, p. 75). Their objective was to incorporate into Scots the aesthetic ambition that Tremblay exemplifies, not only by exploring innovative ways in which a non-standard language could be used for theatrical experimentation, but also by "stretching the capacities" of that language (p. 75). Moreover, they believe that "a crucial aspect of Tremblay's artistry would be lost" (p. 82) if his plays were translated entirely in standard English. The reception of *The Guid Sisters* and the repercussions of this translation seem to support these arguments, as will be discussed next.

*The Guid Sisters* was first staged in Glasgow in 1989 and became an immediate success. Between 1989 and 2003, Bowman and Findlay translated seven more of Tremblay's plays, all of which were met with an excellent reception from audiences and critics, who praised the translations for their ability to engage the spectator. Reviews highlighted "an astonishing affinity of class, religion, voice and emotional oppression for Scottish audiences", observing that "the Tremblay dialogue ... translates into urban Scots as though the two languages were long lost twins", and applauding the translators for creating "a new dramatic language for Scottish theatre by capturing in the Scots idiom the lyricism and energy of Québécois" (Bowman & Findlay, 2004, pp. 67-68). In 1992, Michel Tremblay was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Stirling "for a unique contribution to Scottish theatre" (Findlay, 1992, as cited in Woodsworth, 1996, p. 226) and *The Guardian* affirmed that he was "the best playwright Scotland never had" (Bowman & Findlay, 2004, pp. 67-68).

The Scots translation of the plays have also been highly acclaimed in New York, Toronto and Montreal (Woodsworth, 1996, p. 224) contributing to the promotion of Scottish theatre outside Scotland. In addition, Canadian critics endorsed the use of Scots as a better option than standard English for the translation of Tremblay's drama (Woodsworth, 1996, p. 224). The representation of *The Guid Sisters* in Montreal in 1992 initiated a sustained cultural exchange between Scotland and Québec and inspired other collaborations. One notable case is Bowman's translation of Harry Gibson's stage adaptation of Irvin Welsh's novel *Trainspotting*. On this occasion, Bowman was able to apply the knowledge and experience he had acquired through his collaboration with Findlay on the *joual*-to-Scots translations to the inverse task: translating Irvine Welsh from Scots into *joual* (Bowman, 2000).

*The Guid Sisters* is an example of a successful translation into a non-standard variety. It generated new opportunities that contributed to elevating the prestige of Scots as a medium for contemporary theatre and to creating a bridge between two linguistic and socio-cultural systems, ultimately expanding the Scottish literary canon.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

As this paper has shown, Scotland's rich history has shaped a complex linguistic reality. Although Scots and English share a common origin in medieval Anglian Old English, Scots evolved along a separate path due to geography, migration, different language contact, independent literary development, and specific political circumstances. From its Golden Age in the 15th century to its decline following the political union with England, and its modern revival, Scots has demonstrated remarkable resilience despite the increasing influence of English. The official recognition of Scots as one of Scotland's official languages in 2025 should, to some extent, alleviate the, often unproductive, debate over whether Scots is a language or a dialect. Instead, the concept of language continuum more accurately captures the complex linguistic system that the term Scots encompasses: a wide spectrum of social and regional varieties, with Scottish Standard English at one end, and the richest forms of Scots at the other. Between them, varieties increment the density of Scots features, becoming increasingly divergent, and in some cases unintelligible, as the linguistic distance from Standard English increases.

Beyond the pressures of globalisation, the main challenges Scots faces today are its low social prestige, the absence of a standardised written form, and its limited range of registers. Bastardas-Boada (2017) explains that when an autochthonous language is excluded from formal communication, it cannot develop the registers needed for these types of contexts. As a result, it tends to adopt terms from the dominant standard language, and over time, even existing words and structures in the minoritised language may be replaced (p. 9). This is precisely the process that began after Scotland lost its political independence in the early 18th century. As the need to produce official or formal texts in Scots disappeared, the range of registers in which the language was used reduced, particularly in utilitarian and literary prose. Over time, the gradual shift towards varieties closer to Standard English has generated a situation that may seem paradoxical to an outside observer: Scots is perceived either as the language of scholarly study and archaic sounding literature or as a kind of slang suited only to informal contexts. This paper has shown that literary translation can work within these two poles to expand the registers in which Scots is used, enhance its social prestige, and contribute to the gradual emergence of a standard that develops spontaneously rather than being artificially imposed.

The two case examples examined in this paper show that there are still differences in how readership and audiences approach the different literary genres in Scots, particularly, the two under comparison: theatre and, as Corbett puts it, “that rare beast, a novel in Scots” (2005, p. 118). As the analysis has shown, there was a disparity in both the reception and recognition of Brian Holton’s novel *Men o the Mossflow* and Martin Bowman and Bill Findlay’s translations of Michael Tremblay’s plays.

Using Venuti’s (1995) terms, both Holton on the one side and Bowman and Findlay on the other, opted for a foreignizing translation strategy as an assertion of Scots’ capacity to convey explicitly non-Scottish narratives and contexts, and as an affirmation of its status as a literary language. In doing so, they challenged prevailing hierarchies of linguistic prestige and reinforced the role of Scots as a medium for serious, wide-ranging cultural expression. This aligns with Rion’s observation that “literatures which are stable tend to impose their own codes on the translated works, while those literary systems that are in crisis try to maintain the codes of the foreign texts to revitalise their culture and canon” (2009, p. 164). Nevertheless, Holton’s attempt to translate the novel *Men o the Mossflow* was ultimately unsuccessful, despite being praised precisely for maintaining the codes of the source text through a creative use of language. This suggests that there is a reluctance to accept change and innovation in a genre that lacks contemporary referents. However, as Rion observes, “the stability of a literary system ... depends on its capacity for assimilating change” (2009, p. 168). Literary prose translators, and Scots fiction in general, have yet to discover the keys by which they can effectively connect with their audience.

In contrast, the translations by Bowman and Findlay did a lot more than adapt a text. They identified similarities and common issues underlying the external differences, and made visible underrepresented communities. Further, they established durable links between two linguistic and cultural systems, Scotland and Quebec, and inspired new creative projects. Significantly, these results were achieved through the translation from non-standard *joual* into non-standard Scots, demonstrating the creative and cultural potential of translation beyond the standard language norms.

The example set by Scots language drama translations by Bowman, Findlay, and others has contributed to the development of a vibrant Scottish theatre scene, sustained not only by translated works but also by original productions. Extending this model to other literary genres, particularly prose fiction, could significantly diversify the contexts in which Scots is encountered, while also reshaping how readers and audiences engage with the language. Such exposure has the potential to transform reception and reading habits, gradually dismantling

internalised prejudices against Scots. In turn, it may reinforce a shared responsibility for shaping the language's future.

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