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Pragmatism, patriotism and presbyterianism:
Use of Scots in written correspondence during the Union debates (1689–1707)

The year 1707 in Scotland marked the unification of two nations into a single political unit, but also cemented the ongoing anglicisation of the Scots language. As a result, English rather than Scots was the medium of choice for most forms of serious prose, and Scots was instead relegated to the context of 'the domestic, the familiar, the sentimental, the comic – in fact to the ambit of folk-life' (Murison, 1964: 37). Yet this period saw an arising linguistic awareness (Jones, 1995); an increasing recognition of the patriotic value of Scots (Dossena, 2002) at the very time that religious and national identity was at the forefront of political debate. Contemporary analyses have highlighted the complex role of linguistic variability in signalling allegiance with a political ideology (Hall-Lew et al., 2017; Shoemark et al., 2019), but it is unclear whether similar stylistic constraints operated on any continued use of Scots in the largely English-based literary style of eighteenth-century Scotland.

To explore this, I examine use of Scots in the correspondence of two prominent figures who were publically or actively involved in the debates leading to the Union of the Parliaments: Robert Wodrow and James Ogilvie. Their writings are tagged for characteristically-Scots spellings, inflections and lexis. Taking both a qualitative and quantitative approach, I compare their frequency and use of Scots in relation to the intended addressee(s), the religious or political nature of the work, the author's association with a local (Scots) identity or supra-local (British) identity, and on which linguistic levels they employ Scots (orthographic, lexical, salient, etc). Analysis suggests that while frequency was fairly similar, subtle stylistic differences are present between the authors in terms of where and when they use Scots. Variation appears to be influenced both by external (audience) pressures and internal (identity) motivations. It appears that authors could construct their political or religious identity utilising a combination of Scots and English, while the complex dualism present in some of their writings caters to simultaneous desires to reflect both the Scots-centric and pan-national ambitions of these authors. Through this, I present a first step towards understanding the role of Scots as a complex stylistic tool in early-eighteenth century writing.

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