# BURNS'S LANGUAGE: A CONDENSED SUMMARY OF A TALK GIVEN TO THE LINGUISTIC SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND

by

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[At the beginning of my talk, I gave a brief account of the Scottish Regional Dialects at the present time, and of their history. Cyclo-styled sheets were issued, containing examples of Burns's language at all levels: English English, Scots English, General Scottish, Special Vocabularies, and Regional Dialect proper.]

In approaching Burns's poems from a linguistic point of view, it is necessary to put aside such purely literary considerations as the "sound values" of the verse, or the poet's preference for verbs of motion, simple similes, and the personification of abstract ideas. Instead of examining these matters, the linguist must concentrate on such questions as the total size of Burns's vocabulary; the relative proportions of the Scots and English sides of his vocabulary, syntax and pronunciation (so far as these can be ascertained); the significance to be ascribed to Burns's use of Scots and English, sometimes in different poems and sometimes in the course of a single poem; and the extent to which Burns's poetic vocabulary was a specifically Ayrshire or South-Western one.

Burns's poetic vocabulary consists of some 11,400 words[1], of which roughly 2,000 are specifically Scots words[2], as opposed to easily recognizable phonetic variants of Standard literary words (e.g. unlawfu' for unlawful). From a purely quantitative point of view this means that Burns had a larger poetic vocabulary than Milton's 8,000 words - but, as might be expected, it is not nearly so large as Shakespeare's, which has been variously estimated at between 15,000 and 25,000 words[3]. If, however, we were to include Milton's prose works in our estimate of his total vocabulary, the final number would obviously be much greater than 8,000. The same would apply to Burns's vocabulary too, though to a lesser extent. The 712 pages of his correspondence (all, except for one letter, and a few facetious passages and phrases scattered throughout the correspondence,

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1. J.B. Reid, Complete Concordance to the Poems and Songs of Robert Burns, Glasgow 1889, Preface.

2. This is the approximate number of words glossed in The Poetry of Robert Burns, edd. W.E. Henley and T.F. Henderson, 4 vols., Edinburgh 1896-7, Vol.IV, pp.115-176.

3. The estimate that Shakespeare used 15,000 words and Milton 8,000 was made by Marsh in the 19th century. And cp. O. Jespersen, Growth and Structure of the English Language, Oxford 1948, p.199.

written in standard literary English) would almost certainly increase his known vocabulary to at least 14,000 words - and diminish the proportion which distinctively Scottish words bear to the whole.

It is wrong to over-estimate the degree of conflict in Burns's mind between Scots and English linguistic forms. Literary Standard English came as naturally to him as vernacular Scots, and he recognized the ability to modulate into Standard as a source of poetical strength. In the words of a contemporary witness:

> When I pointed out some evident traces of poetical imitation in his verses, privately, he readily acknowledged his obligations, and even admitted the advantages he enjoyed in poetic composition from the copia verborum, the command of phraseology, which the knowledge and use of the English and Scottish dialects afforded him....(4)

Burns's poems can be arranged in series according to the number of specifically Scottish linguistic features which they contain. First, there are poems written in what might be called "English English" - i.e., works which on the printed page do not appear to differ from Southern English pieces written in mid-eighteenth century Literary Standard, with its set forms (e.g., heroic couplet, formal ode) and characteristic poetic diction. Examples are the "Address to Edinburgh" and "It was the charming month of May." It must be remembered that as read aloud by a Scot even poems of this first group would sound differently from the same poems read by an Englishman, though these phonetic variations are not sufficient to make any great alteration in total meaning.

Secondly, there are the poems written wholly in "Scots English" or "Anglo Scots." This is a form of English which comes perfectly easily to Burns, and into which he modulates when he begins in Scots and then goes on to make a general or rhetorical statement arising out of a situation first described in the vernacular. Examples are: "To a Mouse," st.II; "The Cotter's Saturday Night," sts.XIV-XXI; and the following passage from "Tam o' Shanter":

> But Pleasures are like poppies spread,
> You seize the flower, its bloom is shed;
> Or like the snow, falls in the river,
> A moment white - then melts for ever;
> Or like the borealis race,
> That flit ere you can point their place;
> Or like the rainbow's lovely form
> Evanishing amid the storm.

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4. R. Anderson to J. Currie, 28 Sep. 1799; printed in Burns Chronicle 1925, p.12.

Scots English, in contrast to English English, must be read aloud by a Scot for its full emotional meaning to become apparent. Only on the printed page, and when considered in isolation from their context, do the eight lines just quoted seem "English" in the way that Pope and Shakespeare are English; when read as part of a larger whole, they are just as Scottish as anything else in "Tam o' Shanter." True, contact clauses such as "falls in the river" are not specifically Northern features; but they are very common in colloquial Scots, and are found elsewhere in Burns. "River" and "ever" are examples not of assonance but of rhyme; to this day, Scots pronounce "ever" as [ɪvʌr]; and the apparently poetic "evanishing" is perhaps more Scots than English(5).

Thirdly, Burns may often use a Scottish vernacular literary language, or scripta, which is not the language of any particular area (i.e., not a regional dialect), but rather "General Scottish" - with its own technical vocabularies(6), archaisms, proverbs, idioms and colloquialisms, and understood all over Southern, Central and Eastern Scotland. Though Burns always reserved the right to modulate into either Scots English or regional dialect if it suited his purpose, many of his best poems draw on that General Scottish poetic diction which he inherited from Robert Fergusson and Allan Ramsay. I cannot, however, agree with Professor F.B. Snyder when he goes so far as to say that "the dialect of the poems was not the natural language of the poet, but was made to appear so by the skill with which [he] handled it."(7)

Fourthly, Burns sometimes draws on regional dialect proper - i.e., on the speech of Ayrshire and the South West, as distinct from that of Lowland Scotland as a whole. This is apparent only in vocabulary, in words which appear to have a specifically west of Scotland provenance, e.g., crunt, a blow; daimen, odd, scarce; kiaugh, trouble; messan, cur, mongrel; raucle, strong, bitter; snirtle, snigger; tawie, tractable; thummart,

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5. The word was used by King James VI in Basilicon Doron (1603), p.104, and elsewhere in his writings; most of the earlier examples of "evanish" in the N.E.D. are from Scottish authors; there are additional citations in the Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue; and in Burns's own century, Allan Ramsay used it in The Gentle Shepherd.

6. Cp. "Tam Samson's Elegy" for Burns's use of the technical vocabulary of the sport of curling; "Willie Wastle" for terms derived from the weaving trade; and "The Inventory" for farming vocabulary.

7. In "A Note on Burns's Language" in Modern Language Notes, XLIII (1928), 518.

polecat; wiel, eddy; wintle, stagger, wriggle; winze, curse[8]. But these South-Western words form only a minute fraction of the 2,000 or so specifically Scots words in Burns's poetical vocabulary, and even a poem where the speaker is an Ayrshire farmer uses the general Scottish agricultural vocabulary rather than words which are confined to the West alone[9].

In assessing the value of Burns's works as evidence, the linguist should remember that, like all great writers, Burns was especially sensitive to the language of those around him. His poems draw on the speech habits of many social groups in eighteenth-century rural Scotland - fanatical Calvinists, moderate Church reformers, musicians, quack doctors, bawdy young men ("fornicator loons"), husband-hunting girls, sportsmen, Freemasons, farmers, weavers, tinkers and wandering beggars. Since the ends Burns proposes are aesthetic ones, Burns's language is not in the first instance deployed for documentary purposes, but is a careful selection of words and idioms that tends, except in special circumstances, to exclude the local and the parochial. Although it borrows many words and phrases from earlier Scottish vernacular poets, Burns's language is seldom the artificial creation that Professor Snyder has made it out to be[10]. In some poems, such as "Death and Dr Hornbook," and "In simmer, when the hay was mawn," Burns comes so close to the idioms, proverbs and the intonation-patterns of his native district that one cannot but feel: "Here is no sleight-of-hand; this is how men and women actually talked."[11]

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8. D. Murison, "The Language of Burns" in Burns Chronicle 1950, pp.39-47. It is, of course, possible that one of the results of the present survey of Scottish dialects, designed to culminate in a Scottish Linguistic Atlas, will be to prove that some of the words listed here have a wider distribution than is at present believed.

9. See "The Auld Farmer's New-Year Morning Salutation to his Auld Mare, Maggie, on giving her the accustomed Ripp of Corn to Hansel in the New-Year." Of the words in this poem for which entries exist in the volumes of the Scottish National Dictionary that have so far appeared (A - I), only one (donsie, ill-tempered, unmanageable) has a specifically South-Western sense; but in other senses the same word is known all over Scotland, and even in some American dialects.

10. See above, n.7.

11. The ultimate basis of this judgment is of course a subjective one, but it can to a certain extent be corroborated from the intonation-patterns and idioms of modern Scots, and justified by comparison with Burns's treatment of such special languages as can be tested from other sources - e.g. the speech of the "Saints" in "Holy Willie's Prayer," which can be placed beside a large number of Calvinist sermons and theological works containing similar turns of phrase. If it can be proved that Burns did stick closely to the actual speech of Calvinist ministers and Elders, it would seem probable that he was at least as accurate in his reproduction of the give-and-take of small town conversation in "Death and Dr Hornbook."