

# Lancaster Literacy Research Centre



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**An investigation into attitudes to language and  
dialect in a group of Scottish literacy learners**

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# **An investigation into attitudes to language and dialect in a group of Scottish literacy learners**

## **Introduction**

My aim in this essay is to explore the views of a group of literacy learners with regards to language and dialect, and to reflect on the implications of these views for their literacy learning. More specifically, I aim to examine participants' perceptions of their Glaswegian Scots dialect and its relationship to 'Standard English', and on the basis of this examination to assess the appropriateness of integrating 'vernacular literacies'<sup>1</sup> into my teaching practice with this group.

I will begin by giving an account of my methodology. I will go on to explain the background to the study, and will describe the study group, my role in working with this group, and my reasons for wishing to explore these particular issues. I will also comment on the limitations of this study and ways in which it could be developed. I will give an outline of the theoretical background I am using to inform this study, focussing on the debate around defining 'Standard English' and 'Glaswegian Scots'. Finally I will give an overview of my findings and offer some brief observations, based on these findings, for educational practice in this particular context.

As a result of this study I conclude that although access to dominant literacies is extremely important, it is also vital that there should be a place in the literacy classroom for the learners' vernacular spoken and written language. I will argue that the inclusion of vernacular literacies promotes more effective learning and helps to empower learners who are speakers of non-Standard English by counteracting the deep sense of inferiority that many of them experience.

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<sup>1</sup> I am taking the term 'vernacular literacies' to mean the literacies of everyday life. In the case of my learners this will therefore include Scots dialect.

## **The study**

### **Methodology**

In order to further explore my learners' ideas about language, I designed a discussion session based around an extract from a novel and a questionnaire. The novel extract was from *Buddha Da* by Anne Donovan (see Appendix A), which is written entirely in phonetically spelled Glaswegian-Scots dialect. The book caused controversy when it was published, with some reviewers complaining that it was incomprehensible. I gave the participants copies of the extract, and it was read out by one of the participants. I commented that I would find it difficult to read the Donovan extract myself, as I cannot pronounce Glaswegian dialect correctly. The text was then used as a basis for discussion.

The second part of the session involved the participants filling in a questionnaire (see Appendix B), which asked for their opinions on various aspects of language. Having completed this task, the participants then took part in a group discussion of the issues raised by the questionnaire.

I ran this session with two separate groups of literacy learners. I had ten participants in total. Both of these sessions were recorded, and I have included quotations transcribed from the recordings. In transcribing the participants' comments, I have used a phonetically spelled representation of their speech. Given the aims of this study, I felt that this was more appropriate than 'translating' their speech into Standard English.

### **Background to the study**

The idea for this study came out of my work as an adult literacy tutor in Glasgow. I work for two partner organisations: Move On is a voluntary organisation that offers support and training to people who have experienced homelessness. The ARCH is a

resettlement centre for homeless men in the east end of Glasgow. The vast majority of our service users, and all the participants in my study, are men with drug or alcohol addiction issues. They range in age from early twenties to late fifties, and many of them have limited literacies due to having missed out on early education. My role within the two organisations is to provide literacy tuition on a one-to-one and group basis. At Move On, this forms part of a training and development programme, and at the ARCH it contributes to the resettlement programme.

I am Scottish, but spent the latter part of my childhood living in London. I have a middle class background and would describe my accent as a ‘modified RP’ (Mesthrie, 2000, p. 21), with some Scottish influences. My speech contrasts strikingly with that of my learners, who almost without exception speak working class Glaswegian Scots. On my first day at the ARCH, I was introduced to the tenants by the manager, who commented that he himself could do with improving his literacy, as he “cannae spik properly”. This comment referred to the fact that he, like all the tenants then living at the ARCH, speaks Glaswegian dialect, and clearly implied a belief that literacy is linked with speaking ‘Standard English’.

I decided that I would immediately set about challenging what I saw as a fundamental misconception about adult literacy. Over the following months I attempted to open up discussions on dialect and Standard English, and to include vernacular literacies as part of my teaching. The response to these sessions was mixed and I felt that there was some ambivalence amongst the learners with regards to their own dialect and its relationship to Standard English. The study that I have conducted here is an attempt to explore these attitudes towards language in slightly greater depth.

The scope of this study is necessarily small, as I was limited in the time available for carrying it out and in the number of people I could involve as participants. I do not, therefore, claim wider significance for my findings. My aim here is to investigate the attitudes and views of this particular group and to draw conclusions for my own practice in this particular setting.

I am, however, aware that factors such as my relationship with the participants, my role in their lives and as facilitator of the discussion sessions, the participants’

relationships with one another, group dynamics, and the settings where these discussions took place will all have influenced the way the men expressed themselves in various ways. For example, my impression is that in a group setting, the men felt more able to express opinions that they might perceive as controversial or confrontational<sup>2</sup> than they might have done in a one-to-one interview. I think that in an interview many of them would have felt more pressure to say what they imagined I wanted to hear, given that I am a ‘teacher’ in a position of authority over them, and also a speaker of something approximating Standard English.

On the other hand, I think that some participants were inhibited from expressing their views in the group setting, especially if their opinions did not appear to concur with those of the majority of the group. For example, the questionnaire asked the participants to name ‘accents and dialects with low status’. One respondent had written ‘foreign accents’ and one had written ‘German’, but neither offered his idea in the group discussion, possibly because they believed these to be ‘wrong’ answers. I think that a combination of group discussion and one-to-one interviews would be a more effective way of investigating the views of this group.

I would have liked to find out more about individuals’ experiences at school, their perception of Scots as a language, and their uses of language in different contexts. A more thorough study would involve further group work and would also include in-depth interviews carried out on a one-to-one basis over a longer time span and with a larger study group.

## **Theoretical Background**

### **(i) Standard English**

As my purpose in this essay is not to answer the question ‘what is Standard English?’ but to examine my study group’s ideas on this issue, I will not attempt to draw conclusions here. The following is merely an attempt to provide some theoretical

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. ‘Ah dinnae want tae spikk like a snob’

background to this contentious issue, and to compare existing theories to the views of the participants in my study.

The question, ‘what is Standard English?’ is not easy to answer. Even among linguists there appears to be little agreement, and it is clear that it is extremely difficult to delineate. Some linguists argue that standard languages are not ‘native’ to anyone, while others contend that they are the native language of a particular social group – i.e. the educated middle classes (Mesthrie, 2000, p. 22). The former view sees Standard English as a cultural endowment serving primarily written, formal and technical functions. The latter view, subscribed to by most sociolinguists, sees it as encompassing ‘everyday’ as well as technical language, and therefore as being inclusive of informal as well as formal norms (Ibid.). Some linguists contend that Standard English has a particular pronunciation (usually referred to as ‘Reference Pronunciation’), while others (such as David Crystal, quoted in Mesthrie, 2000, p. 21) maintain that accent is not a relevant factor in defining Standard English.

Mesthrie (2000) offers the following definition of ‘standard language’:

“...the standard form of a language is that dialect which is most often associated with specific subgroups (usually educated people or people having high status and authority within the society) and with specific functions serving a community that goes beyond that of its native speakers (for example writing, education, radio and television.”

(Mesthrie, 2000, p. 20)

It is the accepted view amongst linguists that Standard English emerged due to the economic, social and political dominance of a particular area of southeast England. The dialect spoken by the inhabitants of this area prevailed over other dialects as the language of power, and became accepted as ‘standard’ (Ibid. p. 21).

As Mesthrie and many other commentators have pointed out, however, the popular conception tends to be that Standard English is an ‘original’ or ‘pure’ form of the language, which pre-existed other dialects, and from which those dialects are ‘deviations’ (Ibid.) Alan Addison quotes a Scottish literacy learner as having

remarked, “Ah thought Ah’d find the bit in history where we started turnin English intae slang...” (Addison, 2001, p. 162).

This perception certainly appeared to be prevalent amongst the participants in my study. The word ‘slang’ was consistently used to refer to all non-Standard English words, and to ‘Glesca talk’ in general.

In other respects, however, the perceptions of the study group corresponded with the ideas outlined above. In my questionnaire I asked ‘What do you think Standard English is?’ Out of the ten respondents, the majority (four) answered ‘what I was taught at school’, or words to that effect. One answered ‘correct grammar’, another ‘Queen’s English’ and three referred to ‘proper English’ or ‘proper English without slang’<sup>3</sup>.

In answer to the question, ‘Do you think there is more than one correct form of English?’ eight out of the ten participants answered ‘yes’. In the group discussions it appeared that most believed that all dialects of English can be ‘correct’ on their own terms, and are only ‘incorrect’ if they are looked at in relation to Standard English.

“Like that thing we read [the extract from Anne Donovan’s *Buddha Da*]. It’s no actually wrang for itsel’, the wiy it is.”

It seems, therefore, that although some of the participants linked Standard English to ‘good grammar’, most of them also have a sense that non-standard dialects have their own internal coherence and logic. This view contradicts a common myth that non-Standard dialects have ‘no grammar’ (Bauer, 1998; Milroy, 1998; Degener, 1999; Zuidema, 2005, p. 4).

In answer to the question, ‘Who do you think speaks Standard English?’ one respondent answered ‘everyday people’, one answered ‘middle class people’, one answered ‘Royalty’, one answered ‘toffs’ and two answered ‘snobs’. Other suggestions were ‘people who don’t speak slang’, ‘well-spoken people’, and ‘news

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix C for a full summary of the questionnaire results

broadcasters and MPs'. One respondent replied, 'It isn't easy to say'. During the group discussions, participants from both groups mentioned 'people from Bearsden / Milngavie / Newton Mearns' as 'speakers of Standard English'. These were references to wealthy, middle class areas of Glasgow, and the implication is that at least some of the participants agree with Crystal's view that it is possible to speak Standard English with a regional accent. There was general agreement in both groups, however, that Standard English is predominantly the language of middle class people living in the southeast of England.

## **(ii) Glaswegian Scots dialect**

The two distinctive indigenous languages<sup>4</sup> of Scotland are Gaelic and Scots. Scots, sometimes referred to as 'lowland Scots' in order to distinguish it from the Gaelic of the Highlands, is closely related to English, but developed independently and had become clearly distinct from English from around the 15<sup>th</sup> Century onwards (Addison, 2001, p.164). However, from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century onwards, the language went into decline, gradually losing the prestige and status it once had (Matheson, 2000, p. 5). Scots, in its modern forms, is still spoken by a large proportion of the population of Scotland (Grant and Docherty, 1992, p. 9). However, in spite of a revival of interest in Scottish language and culture in the wake of devolution, Scots still has low prestige and is used very little in the media, in education or within the realms of government and law (Ibid.).

There is no agreed orthography or grammar for the Scots language, and there has been disagreement amongst those who would see one established (Nihtinen, 1999, p. 52). This lack of a codified form is clearly an obstacle in the way of raising the status of Scots, and of attempts to 'standardise' it. It also poses challenges for anyone who wishes to represent Scots dialect in written form, and for those who wish to read those

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<sup>4</sup> Various linguists and language historians (eg. Nihtinen, 1999; Addison, 2001; Matheson, 2000 and many others) have argued persuasively that Scots is actually a separate, though closely related, language rather than a dialect of English. There is much historical evidence to support this view, but common attitudes have given rise to the false impression that Scots is just a dialect of English, or even 'bad English' (Nihtinen, 1999, p. 50). Although there is continued debate about the validity of Scots as a language, given its historical roots it would probably be more accurate to describe Glaswegian as a dialect of Scots rather than a dialect of English.

representations (Corbett, 2001; Russell and Flaws, 2006; Johnston, 2006; Matheson, 2000).

Addison contends that the least valued variety of Scots is the language of the urban working class<sup>5</sup> (Addison, 2001, p. 164). I would argue that the Glaswegian dialect and accent is probably one of the most stigmatised in the UK, although here I am largely judging by my own experiences, the opinions of commentators such as Addison, and the opinions of the participants in my study<sup>6</sup>. Glasgow has a reputation for violence, drug problems and poverty, and the language of working class Glaswegians tends to be associated with this<sup>7</sup>. When asked, ‘Which accents or dialects in Britain do you think have the lowest status?’ five out of the ten respondents to the questionnaire named their own dialect.

On the other hand, Glasgow also has a reputation for being a warm, friendly city, and many see it as the ‘comedy capital’ of Scotland, as it has a rich comic heritage and thriving current comedy scene. Glaswegians are known for being quick-witted and garrulous, and these characteristics are closely associated with ‘the Glesca banter’ or ‘the Glesca patter’.

During a previous literacy session at the ARCH, I asked the men to write down as many Glaswegian words as they could think of. I then showed them a video, taped from the BBC TV ‘Voices’ series called ‘Scunnered’, in which various Glaswegian words are discussed in the context of Glasgow’s comedy heritage. This was followed by a discussion of the video.

During the first exercise, the men had difficulty identifying words that were ‘Glaswegian’. As Wolfram (1997) points out, group-exclusive dialect forms might

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<sup>5</sup> Sometimes referred to as ‘vulgar Scots’

<sup>6</sup> I noticed that MacAulay (1973) implies that Glaswegian dialect is less prestigious or ‘further from Standard English’ than other Scots dialects: “...it is clear that a Scots accent (*even a Glasgow accent*) has its own prestige.” and, “...*even in Glasgow*, those higher up the educational and social scales are likely to be closer to RP than those lower down.” (MacAulay, 1973, p. 1328, my italics)

<sup>7</sup> As a child at primary school in St Andrews, I recall one particular child constantly being ‘brought up’ and publicly humiliated by the teachers for using ‘youse’ (‘you’ plural), ‘gie’s’ (‘give us /give me’) and other typically Glaswegian words and phrases. Without knowing that these words were Glaswegian, it was clear to me that they were particularly frowned upon by the teachers in a way that other Scots terms were not.

not be recognised as such by speakers of the dialect. Few of the men involved in this exercise had spent much time outside Glasgow, and it was therefore difficult for them to identify which parts of their language were ‘Glaswegian’. As Glaswegians speak a dialect of Scots, many of the non-standard words currently in use are common to other Scots speakers, and are therefore not group-exclusive. There are, however, many words and phrases that are strongly associated with Glasgow, which could perhaps be categorised as ‘group-preferential’ forms (Wolfram, 1997, p.119).

The words the men finally came up with were overwhelmingly terms of abuse (e.g. ‘plamf’, ‘bawbag’), and words for alcohol or being drunk (e.g. ‘blutered’, ‘swally’). Some of the men suggested that this shows that Glaswegian dialect is crude and rough. However, it could certainly be argued that their *prima facie* sense of the inferior, ‘slang’ nature of their dialect might have influenced the men to focus on words with negative connotations and to overlook others.

A research piece from the early 1970s investigating Glasgow dialect comments that “...many of them [Glaswegians] are aware that Glasgow speech enjoys a certain ‘negative prestige’” (MacAulay, 1973, p. 1327). I would argue that this is an understatement. Addison (2001, p. 157) puts the case rather more strongly when he contends that speakers of working class urban Scots suffer from a deep sense of inferiority, caused by “years of unconstrained, institutional delegitimisation.” This sense of inferiority is an issue that I will touch on in the following section of this essay.

## **Findings**

### **(i) Reactions to written representation of Glaswegian dialect (extract from *Buddha Da* by Anne Donovan)**

Some of the participants were clearly delighted by seeing a written representation of their own speech. Most of the men also appeared to enjoy the fact that they were at an advantage over me in terms of their ability to read this text out loud.

“Ye don’t see it that often, and when ye dae see it, especially people like us – we’re like, wow! Look at that! It comes across to me as good, funny sense o’ humour. Ah relate tae it, aye.”

There were mixed feelings, however, as to whether writing in dialect is useful or not. Some commented that it makes the writing ‘more realistic’. Most agreed that it appeals to people who speak in that dialect. Some, however, opined that it was pointless writing a book that most people would not be able to understand.

“Gie that book tae somebiddy fae England – how the f\*\*\* are they gonnae read it?”

“If we wrote in Glaswegian, yer average English person widnae know whit we were on about.”

Some thought that it was difficult to read, but admitted that this might be because they were not used to seeing written representations of their dialect.

“That’s the way we talk, aye, but seein’ it wrote doon - that’s a bit different, like...”

Some of the participants questioned the correctness of the Donovan text in terms of its language use. For example it was pointed out that ‘wifie’ is more a north eastern word, unlikely to be used by a Glaswegian; that ‘Heilander’ is likewise a north eastern pronunciation; and that ‘thon’ is an old-fashioned word, unlikely to be used by a child. One participant commented,

“I find that a lot of these wans that are talkin’ like this, they’re tryin’ too much, pure push it oot, every single word’s gottae be slang, Glesca dialect. Sometimes it’s tryin’ too hard.”

I found it interesting that the men were so easily able to spot what they perceived as linguistic inaccuracies in the text. There appeared to be complete agreement in both groups as to what these inaccuracies were, and both groups picked out the same words

and pronunciations. Although they expressed some misgivings, it appeared to me that the men were very much ‘at home’ with this text and that they were confident about pointing out ‘mistakes’ in a way that they perhaps would not have been with a text written in Standard English. If we think of Glaswegian Scots as their first language and Standard English as a second language, this is hardly surprising (see Roth and Harama, 2000).

**(ii) Ambivalence regarding own dialect**

The ambivalent attitudes towards their own speech, which I had encountered prior to carrying out this study, came across very strongly during the discussion sessions. On the one hand, many of the participants expressed a sense of defiant pride in ‘spikking Glesca’. Most acknowledged that it gave them a sense of identity and belonging.

“Ah’ve nivver talked Standard English, and Ah don’t intend tae noo.”

“When ye talk like that [Standard English] ye jist sound like a snob.”

“It [speaking Glaswegian] protects ye, aye, gie’s ye a sense o’ identity.”

However, the idea that their way of speaking is an inferior version of Standard English also appeared to be deeply ingrained in their thinking. Scots words were referred to as ‘slang’, and speaking Standard English was referred to as speaking ‘better’ or speaking ‘proper’ English. Some went as far as to express embarrassment, bordering on shame, regarding their own dialect.

“There are some folk, ye know, the wiy they talk’s jist pure slang, it’s jist pure cringe – the wiy they talk, it’s an embarrassment. It’s horrid. I don’t like it. It’s no nice.”

I have heard these sorts of sentiments expressed many times by my learners. Addison (2001, p. 158) refers to this as ‘the Scottish cringe’. Such a negative perception of their dialect is hardly surprising, given the powerful ways in which non-standard speakers are marginalized. Although attitudes within the Scottish education system

have, in the past ten years, begun to change, most Scottish people will have been taught that Standard English is the only legitimate language, and that their own dialect is an inferior or slang version of it, associated with rudeness and disrespectful attitudes. They may well have been punished for speaking their dialect at school (Addison, 2001, pp 156 – 157; Johnston, 2006; Russell and Flaws, 2006).

David Johnston in an article entitled ‘Scots in the Secondary School’ comments that “for many Scottish children, making the linguistic transition between home and school still creates difficulties, with many being effectively told that their home language is at best inappropriate, at worst, inadequate. There still exists, for many therefore – in the reality of a modern, devolved Scotland – a marked sense of confusion and alienation emerging as a direct consequence of the lack of consonance between the language used at home and that which is required at school.” Matheson (2000, p. 4) refers to ‘the schizophrenic effect of thinking and speaking in one language and writing in another’ (See also Grant and Docherty, 1992, p. 10). Addison (2001, p. 156) describes a piece of informal research in which Scottish adults on literacy courses were asked the question: ‘Dae ye speak Scots or slang?’ The most common answer (60 – 70% of the 70 people questioned) was ‘Ah speak slang’.

This ambivalence is something that is noted by MacAulay (1973, p. 1330), who quotes a ‘working class Glasgow man’:

“On TV - ye hear Scots folk - sounds terrible, ye know - but, uh, I don’t think I’d like to speak any other - than the way we do speak.”

MacAulay comments that, “such ambivalent feelings toward their own speech are common among Glasgow speakers, but there are few signs that Glaswegians would like their characteristic speech changed...” (MacAulay, 1973, p. 1330). At an earlier point in his article he states that, “almost all the informants felt that there was something to be gained from the distinction in speech” and that “it is clear that a Scots accent (*even a Glasgow accent*) has its own prestige” (MacAulay, 1973, p.1328, my italics).

### **(iii) Awareness of marginalized status**

In answer to the question, ‘Do you think there are any advantages to speaking Standard English?’ eight out of the ten participants answered ‘yes’ (see Appendix C). Three answered that it can make communication easier, and two referred to better access to employment.

In answer to the question, ‘Do you think you have ever been discriminated against because of the way you speak?’ eight out of the ten participants responded ‘yes’ ‘possibly’ or ‘sometimes’. During the group discussions, there was a universal acknowledgement amongst the participants that people who speak working class dialects are discriminated against on the basis of the way they speak, and that Standard English is commonly associated with being better educated and also *morally* better. Without exception, the men showed awareness that ‘spikking Glesca’ disadvantages them in terms of access to education, employment and social status. Most of the participants expressed some level of resentment regarding this type of discrimination, and had anecdotes to tell regarding particular incidents.

“Is it gonnae get ye jobs, talking Glesca? It’s no. Is it gonnae further yer education talking Glesca? It’s no.”

“Ye shouldnae huf tae, but, should ye [Speak differently if you go for a job interview]. Ye shouldnae huf tae, ye shouldnae be discriminated against.”

“Some people jist think they’re a cut above the rest, and the wiy they’ll talk tae ye is like yer jist a piece o’ shite oan their shoe sorta thing.”

Many of the participants also expressed contempt for people who try to ‘improve’ their speech by altering it to approximate Standard English.

“That Kirsty Young – she’s really worked at it. Ah hate listenin tae her. Sometimes Ah think she really struggles, ye know, tae maintain it.”

“And d’ye know the worst thing is, ye can actually tell when someone’s puttin it oan, an that’s even mair embarrassin!”

“Ah know people that’s moved tae Newton Mearns an they were no better than anybiddy else, but then all of a sudden they’ve got this new language.”

There seemed to be a general consensus amongst the men that people who try to change their speech in this way are betraying their roots and ‘selling out’ for the sake of status. However there was also an acknowledgement that there are certain situations where most of them would likewise modify their speech, that this is ‘par for the course’, and that those who cannot do this are at a disadvantage.

“Ah spikk different if Ah go for a job interview. Maist people wid.”

“Ah think it’s an advantage tae be *able* tae dae it, whether ye use it or no [speak in Standard English].”

“Maist people can if they *huf* tae. There are folk that cannae change how they spikk, but.”

When asked, ‘Do you think it would be better or worse if everyone in Britain spoke and wrote in Standard English?’ four out of the eight who answered this question indicated that they think it would be better. Several suggested that communication would be easier, and one commented that there would be equality and equal access to employment. During the group discussions, most of the participants expressed ambivalence regarding this question. On the one hand they all agreed that communication would improve if everyone spoke in the same way, but there was also an acknowledgement that it would be ‘boring’ and that there would be a loss of identity and culture.

“It’d be dull and borin [if everyone spoke Standard English].”

“There’d be nae bias, or racism and mair communication.”

“It wid help if it was aw standardised, but it’d be borin.”

## Some reflections on implications for educational practice

### (i) Standard literacies and the critical approach

It is clearly important that any approach to adult literacy that attempts to integrate vernacular literacies must not underplay the importance of access to standard literacies. To do so would be to deny the reality of the discrimination faced by non-standard speakers, and the linguistic oppression that shapes their experience. As a well-educated person with a high level of access to dominant literacies, it would be patronising to attempt to deny such access to my learners.

The participants in my study were all acutely aware of their own marginalized position as speakers of a non-standard dialect, and some saw linguistic discrimination as *the main barrier* to social equality. Milroy (1998, p. 65) calls discrimination on the grounds of language “the last bastion of overt social discrimination.” Some commentators have called this type of prejudice ‘linguicism’ (Zuidema, 2005, p. 1). I think that any approach integrating vernacular literacies must acknowledge and address the issue of ‘linguicism’ as an integral part of its focus.

Addison (2001, p. 162) makes the point that integrating Scots into literacy learning should not be about denying learners access to dominant literacies or about presenting vernacular literacies as superior. He argues that the purpose of such programmes is rather to encourage people to think critically about literacy and their own educational experiences, and to develop a more positive view of their own language or ‘mither tongue’. The main aim of any ‘critical literacy’ is to understand dominant forms of knowledge in order to be able to critique them (Degener, 1999, p. 9). Johnston (2006) concludes that “truly inclusive classrooms will encourage Scots alongside... Standard English, and acknowledge the validity and value of each.”

### (ii) Language and learning

Many educational theorists have argued that there are important links between language, thinking and learning (Johnston, 2006). A popular theory is that learning is best achieved when learners are able to build on what they already know and have experienced (Ibid.). The implication is that for effective learning to occur, learners need to be able to construct their understandings using the language that comes most naturally to them. Degener (1999, p. 10) argues that “students must be able to speak their own language in the classroom, because it is through that language that they make sense of their reality and their own experiences in the world.”

As has been mentioned earlier, many of my learners have had negative experiences at school, and most will probably have experienced some level of conflict over the difference between their own language and the language of education (Roth and Harama, 2000, p. 757). Degener (1999, p. 6) goes as far as to suggest that schools “dehumanise students by robbing them of their culture, language, history and values.” She goes on to assert that “too often teachers who place great importance on learning to speak, read and write in the standard language delegitimise the language experiences that students bring with them to the classroom. When the dominant language is most highly valued in the learning process, non-standard speakers are automatically devalued, and their words and ideas are seen as less important” (Degener, 1999, p. 10).

In Scotland, a much less repressive attitude to Scots dialect has begun to emerge in the education system (Russell and Flaws, 2006; Matheson, 2000; Johnston, 2006; Addison 2001). However there is clearly still a long way to go, and I think that adult literacies practitioners in Scotland need to work hard to counteract the language oppression that most of their learners will have experienced. In the case of my group, this could include counteracting the idea that being literate means speaking Standard English, and encouraging learners to express themselves freely in their ‘mither tongue’ as not only a fundamental right, but as an essential aspect of effective learning (Ibid.).

### **(iii) Language oppression and self esteem**

Any practitioner attempting to integrate vernacular literacies into educational practice in this setting needs, I think, to be extremely aware of the effects of language oppression. These learners already occupy a marginalized position within society, and language oppression is yet one more factor in their experience of being discriminated against. It is, however, clearly an important one. Russell and Flaws (2006) comment that “If you feel the way you speak is incorrect or second-rate, then you lose confidence in your speech, in your ability and in yourself.”

Attempting to counteract this oppression can be a delicate process, however, as the learners themselves may be resistant to the idea of incorporating their own language into their learning. Some may see this as a waste of time and effort; this is certainly an attitude that I encountered during my early attempts at integrating vernacular literacies with these learner groups. Addison reports that when groups of Scottish parents were asked whether or not Scots literacy is legitimate in schools, the majority declared that they believe it to be irrelevant (Addison, 2001, p. 162). He concludes that “centuries of language oppression have led to a great many people believing their language to be educationally irrelevant, if not barbaric... Many see Standard English as the only language in which to couch their aspirations” (Ibid.).

However, I think it is vital for learners to make a connection between literacy learning and the literacies of their own lives, and I believe that it is possible to make these connections without alienating learners. Incorporating vernacular literacies can allow learners to see that they already have a wealth of knowledge about language and its uses, and that they can build on this knowledge to extend their literacies. I would argue that an integrated programme should be designed in such a way that learners can readily appreciate the relevance of using both standard and vernacular literacies as learning tools. For example comparing and analysing different uses of language and developing a critical approach to texts of all kinds.

I also think that learning about the history of their language can help Scottish learners to develop a less negative concept of their own speech, and go some way towards lessening the deep-seated sense of inferiority that many experience as part of their

cultural identity. Teaching about language diversity could also help to create greater cross-cultural understanding amongst learners. Zuidema (2005) offers some useful ideas and strategies for teaching against language myths and challenging 'linguicism'.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to give an overview of the findings of my investigation into the views of my study group with regards to language and dialect. I have offered some theoretical background and have made some very general observations on implications for educational practice in this setting. I feel, however, that I have barely 'scratched the surface' of this fascinating and important subject, and look forward to continuing to increase my understanding through ongoing reflective practice and study.

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## Appendix A

### from 'Buddha Da' by Anne Donovan

Ma Da's a nutter. Radio rental. He'd dae anythin for a laugh so he wid, went doon the shops wi a perra knickers on his heid, tellt the wifie next door we'd won the lottery and were flittin tae Barbados, but that wis daft stuff compared tae whit he's went and done noo. He's turnt intae a Buddhist.

At first Ma thought it wis another wanny his jokes.

"Ah'm just gaun doon the Buddhist centre for a couple hours Liz, ah'll no be lang."

"Aw aye, is there free bevy there?"

"Naw hen, ah'm serious. Jist thought ah'd go and have a wee meditate, try it oot, know?"

Mammy turnt roond fae the washin up, and gied him wanny they looks, wanny they 'whit's he up tae noo?' looks ah'd seen a million times afore.

"Jimmy, d'you think ma heid buttons up the back? Yer a heathen. The last time ye set fit in a chapel wis when yer daddy died. The time afore that was when ah'd tae drag you tae Anne Marie's First Communion. And you're tellin me ye're gaun tae a Buddhist centre on a Tuesday night, quiz night doon the Heilander. Tae meditate? Gie's a break."

When ma Da gets embarrassed he looks like thon skinny wan in the Laurel and Hardy films and starts tae scratch his ear wi his left haund. That's when ah began tae think he could jist be tellin the truth.

## Appendix B

### Language Questionnaire

**1. What do you think 'Standard English' is?**

**2. Why do you think 'Standard English' is seen as better than other types of English?**

**3. Who do you think speaks 'Standard English'?**

**4. Why do you think there is more than one form of English?**

**5. Do you think there is more than one correct form of English?**

**6. Which accents or dialects in Britain do you think have the lowest status?**

**7. Do you think there are any advantages to speaking ‘Standard English’?**

**8. Do you think there are any advantages to speaking a ‘non-Standard English’ dialect (like Glaswegian)?**

**9. Why do you think some writers (like Irvine Welsh) choose to write in non-Standard English dialect?**

**10. Do you think you have ever been discriminated against because of the way you speak?**

**11. Do you think it would be better or worse if everyone in Britain spoke and wrote in ‘Standard English’?**

## Appendix C

# Language Questionnaire Results

Ten people filled in the questionnaire, although not everyone answered every question. All the participants completed the questionnaire using Standard English. Below is a summary of the results. I have corrected misspelled words for the sake of ease of interpretation, but have not altered the answers in any other way.

### 1. What do you think 'Standard English' is?

- correct grammar
- what I was taught at school
- what you learn at school
- what we are taught at school
- Queen's English
- what they teach at school
- proper English
- It's proper English without the slang of whatever area you're from
- Polite, non-slang, straightforward speaking that is understandable to all
- Well-spoken people without slang

### 2. Why do you think 'Standard English' is seen as better than other types of English?

- They way they talk and come across is different
- It's easier to understand as other areas speak different
- Because all regions are meant to understand it more readily
- Grammar
- Because it's not slang
- Snobs speak it
- It's seen as more educated
- It's what you're supposed to learn
- No slang
- Seen as more proper than what other folk speak

### 3. Who do you think speaks 'Standard English'?

- People who don't speak slang
- Middle class people
- Well-spoken people
- News broadcasters, MPs
- Royalty
- Toffs
- Everyday people
- Snobs
- It isn't easy to say
- Snobs

**4. Why do you think there is more than one form of English?**

- culture
- don't know
- different locations
- don't know
- put it down to peoples' choice
- different areas of origin
- because people have got their own slang
- because of the different areas
- because of different classes and how people are brought up

**5. Do you think there is more than one correct form of English?**

Yes: 8/10

No: 0/10

Don't know: 2/10

**6. Which accents or dialects in Britain do you think have the lowest status?**

Glaswegian: 5/10

- Glasgow, working class
- Manchester, Liverpoolians, Glaswegians, Newcastle
- Scousers, Glaswegian, Manchester, Newcastle
- Glaswegian, Scouse, Highland, Cornish, South West
- East coast of Scotland
- Don't know
- Edinburgh, Bufter country
- Scouse, Glaswegian, Mancs, Cockneys
- German
- Foreign accents

**7. Do you think there are any advantages to speaking 'Standard English'?**

Yes or 'yes and no': 8/10

No: 1/10

Don't know: 1/10

- Yes, more people know it
- Yes, you will be understood better when you meet people from other areas
- Yes, possibly employers would favour a Standard English speaker over a Glaswegian, as they may be seen as well educated
- Yes, you are more likely to get a job
- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- Yes and no. Communication is easier
- Yes
- Yes

**8. Do you think there are any advantages to speaking a ‘non-Standard English’ dialect (like Glaswegian)?**

Yes / maybe: 50%

No: 50%

- Yes
- Yes, it separates the snobs from the lower class
- No, but it is where I am from so it is not my fault. I had no choice in it.
- Apart from being able to understand other Glaswegians, maybe not. Maybe being unique and having your own identity
- No
- Yes
- No
- Not really

**9. Why do you think some writers (like Irvine Welsh) choose to write in non-Standard English dialect?**

- to give people an idea of a place
- to appeal to different readers and give non-Scottish speaking people a taste of what it’s like
- to give people another language from other places
- to appeal to certain people
- It comes across funny when you read it as you don’t hear it a lot
- To get into the correct atmosphere, junkies talking politely wouldn’t be believable to others who read it.
- He sees a market for books in that area.
- To provide a taste, setting, to the characters and location
- Easier to understand

**10. Do you think you have ever been discriminated against because of the way you speak?**

Yes / possibly / sometimes: 80%

No: 20%

- sometimes
- Yes. Went for a job as bus conductor but didn’t get it even though I passed the exams.
- No
- Yes
- Yes
- No
- Yes, when I lived in England people would look at me as if I was scum.
- Possibly, when I lived in Aberdeen.
- Yes, all the time
- Yes

**11. Do you think it would be better or worse if everyone in Britain spoke and wrote in 'Standard English'?**

Better / maybe better: 4

Worse: 3

Mixed: 1

- better
- worse
- if everyone spoke the same way we could communicate easier
- Maybe better, as it would be easier for everyone to understand each other
- Worse
- Possibly better as we wouldn't have problems understanding each other, but then it would be boring if we all sounded the same
- Yes, better because we would all be the same and could get jobs

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