

Between Scotland and Silesia¹

Tomasz Kamusella
University of St Andrews

In many ways Silesia is similar to Scotland, besides sharing the same initial letter in their names. Both used to be countries in their own right, though nowadays are peripheral or borderland regions in the states in which they happen to be located, Scotland in the United Kingdom facing Ireland across the sea, while Silesia mostly in Poland on the border with the Czech Republic, beyond which the southernmost part of this historic region is located. Both Scotland and Silesia are multilingual. In the past the northwestern half of Scotland was Celtic-speaking, while the rest Germanicphone. Nowadays, following several centuries of English political, economic and cultural pressure emanating from London, the invariably bilingual speakers of Gaelic live in the Hebrides. Yet the suppression of Gaelic in most of the mainland Scotland left Celtic traces in place names and this language brushed off on the increasingly Anglicized speech of Scotland's Germanic-speakers. Their language of Scots is a product of the social and historical changes. Today it is another *mither tongue* of the Scots, alongside Gaelic and English.

Gaelic and English are present-day Scotland's two official languages. Alongside Latin, Scots – known then as *Scottis* or *Inglis* – was a co-official language in the Kingdom of Scotland until the early Eighteenth century. Later, especially in the wake of the 1707 Act of Union between Scotland and England, this language fell out of written use, while English became the sole medium of education and official business across Scotland in the latter half of the Nineteenth century. People speaking their language of Scots were often derided at school and among the cultivated (that is, English-speaking) public, despite the publication of the two authoritative multivolume dictionaries of Scots, namely, *The Scottish National Dictionary* (1931-1976) and *The Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (1931-2002). This prejudiced attitude began to change at the turn of the Twenty-First century. Year 2001 proved to be highly symbolic of this change. Under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, ratified by Britain, Scots was officially recognized as a 'regional or minority language.' A decade later, in the 2011 British census, the question on the command of Scots was included, revealing that a quarter of Scots (that is, 1.2 million) know and use this language in everyday life. Ironically, to this day half of native Scots-speakers and as many as three-quarters of non-Scots-speaking Scots tend to believe that Scots is not a language in its own right, but 'a mere accent of English.' Importantly, the international community of scholars see Scots as a language and under the standards of ISO 639-2 and ISO 693-3 (managed by the Library of Congress, Washington DC and SIL International), it was granted with the identifier *sco*.

In Silesia (or in other words, the historic region of Upper Silesia) the inhabitants in the western half of the region spoke Germanic, while their counterparts in the eastern half

¹ I thank Tim Wilson and Steve Murdoch for corrections and useful suggestions for improvement. However, I alone am responsible for any remaining infelicities.

Slavic. In the process of modernization, which meant the rapid industrialization of the easternmost reaches of Silesia, German became the main language of education and written communication, though the use of Latin and Polish continued in churches. By the turn of the Twentieth century, the Slavophone population had become largely bilingual. But after World War II, when all of Silesia found itself within communist Poland's borders, monolingual German-speakers were expelled, the use of German banned, and the bilingual Slavophone-speakers thoroughly Polonized through education, state offices and the mass media. At present, though Poland's German minority of some 0.2 million members is concentrated in Silesia, there is not a single locality where German would be the language of everyday communication.

All Silesia's Germans speak Silesian, like their indigenous neighbors, who identify either as ethnic Silesians or Poles. The uprooted German language and its Germanic dialects left their indelible traces in the Silesians' Slavic speech. German scholars used to see it as a kind of 'watered down Slavic or Polish' (*Wasserpölnisch*) or as a *Kulturmundart*, a dialect of German united with this language through German culture shared by both, Silesians and Germans. On the other hand, Polish researchers propose that Silesian is a dialect of Polish. However, Silesian-speakers have always seen their speech as *po naszymu* / *po naszymu*, or 'our own language.' When the era of totalitarianisms (1926/1933-1989) came to an end in Silesia, most Silesian-speakers (be it Silesians, Poles or Germans) began to demand a recognition for Silesian as a language in its own right. In the first postcommunist Polish census, held in 2002, despite widespread irregularities in its conduct in Silesia, 50,000 respondents successfully declared Silesian as their language of everyday communication. The much more accurate census of 2011 recorded 0.8 million Silesians and half a million speakers of the Silesian language. Meanwhile, in 2007 Silesian (or *ślōnskŏ gŏdka*) gained international recognition as a Slavic language and was conferred with the ISO 639-3 identifier *szl*.

The Scots Wikipedia was launched in 2005 and at present (2016) enjoys 37,000 articles. The Silesian Wikipedia commenced only three years later, in 2008, and by now has reached the benchmark of 5,000 articles. Both, *Scots leid* and *ślōnskŏ gŏdka*, have a similar number of speakers and are located in the regions of with the same number of population, at around five million. The Scots Wikipedia is seven times bigger than its Silesian counterpart, due to the official recognition accorded to Scots as a language in Britain and Europe, which has entailed state support for its cultivation and development. Any books, periodicals, websites, podcasts or videos produced in Silesian are privately financed. Although 0.8 million self-declared Silesians and 0.2 million Silesia's Germans are Polish and EU citizens who pay taxes, their desire for the recognition of Silesian as a language has been time and again rejected by the Polish authorities in the name of the national myth of the ethnolinguistically homogenous character of the country.

Mirosław Syniawa is one of the most active promoters of Silesian and has excelled as the translator of world poetry into this language. In 2014 his *Dante i inksi. Poezyjŏ w tłumaczeniach Mirosława Syniawy* (Dante and Others: Poetry in Mirosław Syniawa's Translations) was published, following into the footsteps of Zbigniew Kadłubek's 2013 translation of Aeschylus's *Prŏmytyjos przibity* (*Prometheus Bound*). Now, in this new volume Syniawa offers the Silesian translations of a selection of Robert Burns Scots-

language poems. The bilingual volume is a rare gift to both Scots- and Silesian-speakers, and quite uniquely pairs two minority and non-official languages, which until recently the powers-that-be wanted to erase from the multicolored coat of European culture. Luckily for Europe, Scotland and Silesia, both Scots and Silesian persist and change accordingly with the times, so the two languages' speakers may enjoy the world through their native languages as they see fit; not according to the dictates of language planners based in the far away state capitals.

All Poles and Silesians know Robert Burns much better than the Polish romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz, or his Silesian-German counterpart, Joseph von Eichendorff. Even if they actually never heard or do not recollect the name of this Scottish national bard. Who in Poland has not at least once in their youth sung the scouting song 'Ogniska już dogasa blask' (The Bonfire's Flames Are Fading), which is none other but a loose adaptation of Burns's most renowned farewell poem 'Auld Lang Syne.' Both the Scots original and the Polish-language adaptation share the very same folk tune.

I trust that this exceptional volume will make Scots-speakers fully aware of the Silesian language, and Silesian-speakers of the – in many ways, kindred – Scots language. Both, Scots and Silesians should remember that it was the Scottish engineer, John Baildon, from Larbert (or Lairbert in Scots) in Stirlingshire who in the 1790s laid the foundations of the metallurgical industry in easternmost Silesia. Hopefully, Scots may also realize that among this half a million Poles who have settled in Britain since 2004, there are also many Silesians. In the pre-national Europe many a Scot became a successful Silesian; nowadays, courtesy of the European Union citizenship, numerous Silesians are becoming Scots.

*Saunt Aundraes
St Andrews
Cill Rìmhinn
March 2016*