



Anderson, W. (2006) “Absolutely, totally, filled to the brim with the Famous Grouse”: intensifying adverbs in the Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech. *English Today* 22(3):pp. 10-16.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/4685/>

Deposited on: 12 November 2008

“Absolutely, totally, filled to the brim with the Famous Grouse”: Intensifying Adverbs in the Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech

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1. Introduction

The Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech (SCOTS) has been available online since November 2004.¹ The corpus currently contains over 2.3 million words of texts in varieties of Broad Scots and Scottish English.² Regular additions are made to the textual content of the corpus and the integrated search and analysis software is continually undergoing improvement. Over the next year, the corpus will grow to around 4 million words, 20% of which will comprise spoken language in the form of conversations and interviews.

Three main features make SCOTS distinctive among language corpora. The first of these is the provision of spoken language texts as orthographic transcriptions aligned and synchronised with the original source audio or video material. This opens up possibilities for phonetics research as well as enabling lexical searching of both written and spoken texts together.

The second distinctive feature of the project is that SCOTS targets a general audience as well as academic users, and may be freely consulted over the Internet. This has important implications for the design of the website interface; no specialist knowledge should be required for straightforward searches and as far as possible all tools for linguistic analysis should be integral to the website rather than requiring a separate download. Future versions of SCOTS will be able to offer a more sophisticated concordancing facility than is currently available, as well as word list functions and statistical information.

Thirdly, all texts in SCOTS are accompanied by detailed metadata which increases the value of the resource for sociolinguistic researchers and lexicographers. This includes a wide range of information, such as the author or participant's place and decade of birth, educational background, other languages spoken, and contextual information about the genre, audience, date, and so on of the text itself. The most recent version of the search system enables users to carry out a word or phrase search of the entire corpus, or to narrow down a search by selecting criteria on the basis of this metadata. For example, it is possible with the advanced search system to compare the usage of a particular word by speakers born before 1980 with the usage of the same word by speakers born in this decade or later. Similarly, it is now possible to investigate the geographical spread of lexical items by specifying authors or participants who were born in, or who now live in, different regions.

¹ The Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech (SCOTS) is a venture by the Department of English Language and STELLA project at the University of Glasgow. The first stage of the project was grant-funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC Grant no. GR/R32772/01); the current three-year stage is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC Grant no. B/RE/AN9984/APN17387). The project website can be found at www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk. I would like to thank Dr John Corbett, Principal Investigator of SCOTS, and Professor Christian Kay, for their invaluable contributions to this paper.

² 'Scots' is difficult to define. Here, I use it and 'Broad Scots' interchangeably, to refer to varieties which differ from English Standard English in lexis, grammar and pronunciation. Varieties of Scots are discussed further in Section 3. For information on the history and development of Scots, see Murison (1977), Smith (2000).

2. Intensifying Adverbs

Intensifiers or intensifying adverbs are those adverbs which function to increase or tone down the strength of another word in the sentence, usually an adjective or another adverb. Some examples from SCOTS are as follows (with the intensifying adverb highlighted):³

‘he wes ferlit ti finnd himsell **unco** wabbit’ (he was surprised to find himself extremely exhausted)
[prose fiction]
‘That step’s **gey** shoogly, whaur ye fell’ (That step’s very wobbly, where you fell) [poetry]
‘a chance to chat about stuff **totally** informally’ [conversation]

There has been academic interest in such adverbs for many years. Stoffel (1901) discussed intensive adverbs, noting that those which etymologically express completeness have a tendency to weaken over time:

“[...] new words are in constant requisition, because the old ones are felt to be inadequate to the expression of the idea of completeness of a quality, or of a quality to the very highest degree of which it is capable under the circumstances. In other words, of certain classes of adverbs the sense is constantly becoming weaker and less emphatic, so that others have to take their place where completeness of a quality has to be expressed.” (Stoffel 1901, p. 2)

There is a high turnover of such words, and this area of language changes relatively quickly. This is therefore quite likely to be an area in which differences in usage will become apparent between different generations in SCOTS’ spoken material.

Stoffel’s terms, ‘intensives’ and ‘downtoners’, are adopted by Quirk et al. in the seminal *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (1985). Intensification is a pervasive function in language, more so indeed than our investigation here will reveal. Dwight Bolinger’s 1972 work *Degree Words* expands the discussion of intensifiers from the use of adverbs to qualify adjectives and adverbs, to these and other parts of speech modifying the strength of nouns and verbs as well (such as the intensifying adjective qualifying the noun in “It was utter heaven”, Bolinger 1972, p. 151), and notes that some syntactic forms also function as intensifiers (for example, the inversion in “He talked back to her and was she mad!” *ibid.*, p. 17, citing Kirchner 1955).

Macaulay’s linguistic study in the late 1970s of the dialect of Ayr (see Macaulay 1991, 1997) found that middle-class speakers used adverbs in *-ly* for intensification much more frequently than do the lower-class speakers. SCOTS will not be able to replicate such a question directly, since we do not record speakers’ social class, this being a notoriously controversial area as Macaulay himself recognises (Macaulay 1991, p. 13). Other parameters such as educational level, age, and occupation may, however, affect speakers’ usage of intensifying adverbs, as we shall see.

More recently, intensifiers have been the object of corpus research, for example by Partington, who relates the delexicalisation of intensifiers to syntactic flexibility:

³ Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine. They are intended simply to clarify the meaning to readers unfamiliar with Scots and not to reproduce stylistic or poetic effects of the original text.

“The lower the semantic content of an intensifier, the more restricted the syntactic environments in which it may occur. Or, put the other way round, the more restricted the syntactic flexibility of an item, the more reduced is its semantic potential.” (Partington 1993, p. 190)

That is, an intensifier like ‘extremely’ today occurs almost exclusively in premodifying position, whereas in the past it was also comfortable in postmodifying position (“A sinecure which would fitt me extremely” – Swift 1709) or before a prepositional phrase (“Two humours equall abounding together, extremely in superfluite” – 1562) (*ibid.*, p. 190; the examples are Partington’s). This in turn relates to the phenomenon of collocation:

“In fact, the more delexicalised an intensifier, the more widely it collocates: the greater the range and number of modifiers it combines with.” (*ibid.*, p. 183)

In other words, the less meaning is contained within the intensifier itself, the more it will acquire from its surrounding co-text (see next section for examples from SCOTS).

3. The Scots – English continuum

The SCOTS Project does not attempt to label texts as exemplifying dialects of (Broad) Scots, or Scottish English. Rather, we follow the view, of Aitken (1979) and McArthur (1979) among others, that with regard to its Germanic language varieties (therefore not including Scottish Gaelic, or community languages such as Polish, Panjabi and Urdu), the present linguistic situation in Scotland can best be described as a continuum, or a bipolar model, with Scottish English at one end and varieties of Scots at the other. The latter include among others the Doric variety spoken in the rural northeast of Scotland, the literary ‘Lallans’ variety and urban varieties from Glasgow and Edinburgh. Speakers and writers can, and do, modify their usage in different directions according to such factors as the level of formality, genre, and mode of language. A desire for a greater degree of formality, for example, will push the language produced in the direction of Scottish English, which differs little from Standard English except in pronunciation. (See also Douglas (2003) for a discussion of the issue of language variety in corpus building.)

Certain intensifying adverbs in SCOTS tend to be found in documents which are closer to the Scots end of the continuum, and others cluster in documents which are undeniably Scottish English, and contain very few Scots items. Textual mode and genre also influence the intensifiers found. SCOTS’ sociolinguistic metadata and the advanced search system are invaluable here for distinguishing patterns of usage.

Among texts which might be described as being located close to the Scots end of the continuum, the intensifier ‘gey’ (very) is the most frequent: there are 349 occurrences of the word, spread through 110 different documents in the current version of the corpus. Of these, however, only four instances occur in spontaneous speech and these all feature in a single interview. A further nine instances occur in written documents produced by the Scottish Parliament (one of which is in transcribed speech). Of the rest, the vast majority appear in literary texts, whether prose or poetry. This is partly due to the make-up of the corpus, in which most of the participants in conversations or interviews use a variety of language somewhere around the middle of the Scots – English continuum rather than Broad Scots. It

also stems, however, from the fact that Scots, when it is used in writing, is typically to be found in literary genres.

In keeping with Partington's comments noted above, it does not come as a surprise that 'gey' is syntactically restricted, and collocates widely. This said, a number of repeated collocations emerge from the SCOTS material: 'gey near', 'gey lang' (very long), 'gey cauld' (very cold), 'gey few', 'gey ill', 'gey thrang' (very crowded) and 'gey sair' (very sore). A substantial majority of instances serve to intensify a negative attribute, although positive contexts do exist. There appears to be a polarising tendency, with examples in the first group below being more typical than those in the second group:

- 'a gey dreich day this' (a very dull day, this) [poetry]
- 'It wis gey mucky stuff' (It was very mucky stuff) [prose fiction]
- 'a gey gloomy funeral day at the steadin' (a very gloomy funeral day at the stearing) [prose fiction]
- 'ye're a gey carnaptious deevil!' (you are a very quarrelsome devil!) [prose fiction]
- 'You look gey peely wally.' (You look very sickly) [dramatic script]

- 'a gey prosperous and braw future' (a very prosperous and fine future) [dramatic script]
- 'He main hae bin gey bonnie fin he wis a loon' (He must have been very attractive when he was a boy) [prose fiction]
- 'Gey guid beef, this, ma lassie' (Very good beef, this, my girl) [prose fiction]

Another frequent Scots intensifier is 'unco', which has a range of uses, extending from the delexicalised intensifying adverb 'very', to adjectival use meaning 'strange', 'unfamiliar', 'unusual', 'remarkable', with greater semantic content. In its use as an intensifying adverb, this item occurs 39 times in the current version of SCOTS (from a total of 126 uses of the form 'unco' – the majority are adjectival), and in fewer documents than 'gey' (24). Not one instance is from a conversation or interview text, and only one occurs in the non-fiction prose of the Scottish Parliament. The vast majority, again, occur in fiction writing (prose and poetry). The choice of this item, even more than 'gey', appears self-consciously 'literary'. Examples include:

- 'A cleid masell in an unco teuch rhinoceros coat' (I dressed myself in a very coarse rhinoceros coat) [poetry]
- 'But cocky, smert an unco trig, Aa dressed up in a gowden coat' (But cocky, smart and very trim. All dressed up in a golden coat) [poetry]
- 'No deid asleep, but unco dozy' (Not completely asleep, but very dozy) [poetry]
- 'an unco grund disjune laid oot on the taibil' (a very grand breakfast laid out on the table) [prose fiction]
- 'Ah ken that yeir sou's unco seik' (I know that your sow's very ill) [prose fiction]

Both of these items then may be seen to predominate in texts of a literary nature in SCOTS: there are few examples in conversation, and few also in non-fiction texts such as documents from the Scottish Parliament. To find frequently used intensifiers in spoken texts, we must look to the Scottish English end of the continuum. This is partly because of the current imbalances in the corpus, but also partly as we have seen because of the tendency for 'dense' Scots, that is, language with a high incidence of specifically Scots lexical or grammatical features, to be found in literary writing rather than colloquial (and spoken) language (see McClure 1979, p. 38).

4. Totally, utterly, completely

The spontaneous spoken language material in SCOTS (as opposed to, for example, prepared lectures, or poetry or prose fiction read aloud) currently amounts to 35 texts, totalling around 180,000 words. To these spoken texts, we can add (with caution) the non-verbatim transcription of speech which forms many of the documents from the Scottish Parliament, such as Official Reports of Parliamentary and Committee meetings. As was mentioned above, SCOTS also contains sociolinguistic metadata about authors, participants and texts where this was available to us; this allows correlations to be investigated between factors such as speakers' age, sex, geographical background, the level of formality and spontaneity of an instance of language, and their linguistic usage.

As noted above, the intensifiers used in spoken documents in SCOTS tend to be found towards the Scottish English end of the continuum. In what follows I shall look at one item, 'totally', in detail, with comparison where this is fruitful with the related adverbs 'definitely', 'completely' and 'utterly'.

'Totally' appears in the Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue (DOST) component of the Dictionary of the Scots Language (available online at www.dsl.ac.uk). It does not appear in the modern Scottish National Dictionary (SND) component, since this dictionary does not seek to record items which are common to English and Scots. The entry in DOST reads: "Totally, total(l)ie: Completely, utterly, wholly". As this is a historical dictionary of early Scots, none of the citations dates from later than the seventeenth century. The entry in the Oxford English Dictionary (online at www.oed.com) for 'totally' includes, in addition to the main entry, an addition dated June 2005 with a note on its use as an intensifier, which is marked as colloquial, and originally and chiefly of U.S. provenance. One citation is from the *Chicago Tribune* in 2004: "Dude, I had to give her my seat. She totally reminded me of my mom!"

Can the SCOTS corpus provide additional information? To what extent is the usage evidenced by the corpus specific to Scotland, and to what extent are such usages shared by other varieties of English? Of the 116 occurrences of 'totally' in SCOTS, 56 are to be found in spontaneous speech. Another 36 occur in documents from the Scottish Parliament. Few occur in fictional writing, and some of these are in fact part of direct speech in dialogue:

- '"Oi! I made all this. I'm not totally useless, am I?"' [direct speech in prose fiction]
- '"Naw ther's no Mr Gee – you're totally windin us up!"' [direct speech in prose fiction]

As in this last example, in the following examples the adverb intensifies parts of speech other than adjectives and other adverbs. Here, it qualifies the verb:

- 'Although I accept totally that a verifier must take the overview [...]' [written record of speech, Scottish Parliament]
- 'He just, totally lost it.' [conversation]
- 'I was totally reminded of Rafi' [conversation]

In other cases, the force of the intensifier works on the proposition as a whole, even if grammatically it appears to qualify the verb or even a noun phrase:

- 'I'm totally interrupting you.' [conversation]
- 'I totally didn't see your note this morning.' [conversation]
- 'That's totally got a big influence' [conversation]

'That's just totally my opinion on it' [conversation]

And sometimes it intensifies the effect of a quotative expression:

'Art and English liked me and then Maths and that were totally, "Oh no".' [conversation]

Sometimes the intensifier stands alone as a comment:

'Maybe. Totally. [laugh] But I've written them a very strongly worded letter.' [conversation]

'Yeah, totally, but it was just really annoying.' [conversation]

'Yeah, yeah, yeah, totally.' [conversation]

'[Speaker 1] You just hate it, I know. [Speaker 2] Totally.' [conversation]

'Mhm. Totally.' [conversation]

This sort of usage, in which the speaker uses 'totally' to convey a strong degree of agreement with his or her interlocutor, is similar to some of the uses of 'definitely' in the SCOTS corpus. One participant in particular, a man in his early twenties from Lanarkshire in the West of Scotland, frequently uses 'definitely' in this way. As an aside here, it is interesting to investigate the pronunciation of this item using the SCOTS corpus. In the West of Scotland in particular, 'definitely' (/defɪnɪtli/) is often heard pronounced as /defɪnetli/ or /defɪnetli/. This pronunciation sometimes finds its way into the written language: there are as yet no written examples in the SCOTS corpus, but I have recently seen the misspelling 'definitely' twice in informal electronic communication by Honours students or graduates of English Language. One advantage of the SCOTS corpus, however, is the facility with which both written and spoken texts can be searched together; it is then a simple matter to hear the relevant part of the audio or video file and compare pronunciations. Doing this here reveals that one participant (a student in her early twenties from the Glasgow area) does indeed repeatedly pronounce the intensifier /defɪnetli/ giving more emphasis to the /ɛ/ when the intensifier stands alone.

Sometimes, the strength of intensifiers is undermined by what follows, in these cases the downtoner *kind of* which serves as a compromiser to lower the effect:

'but she was totally kind of grumpy' [conversation]

'I used ehm certain other forms which were definitely kind of [...]' (speaker truncates utterance here) [conversation]

At other times, intensifiers accumulate, either in a productive way:

'the cup, was absolutely, totally, filled to the brim with the Famous Grouse' [conversation]

or to form more or less fixed expressions, thereby losing some of the accrued force of the intensification:

'the most respected businessmen in Scotland – as "completely and utterly barmy"' [written record of speech, Scottish Parliament]

'Does she reject the idea as completely and utterly unacceptable?' [written record of speech, Scottish Parliament]

'Fiona McLeod's thesis is, once again, completely and utterly wrong'. [written record of speech, Scottish Parliament]

'it was intimately familiar, somehow, and yet [...] completely and utterly strange.' [prose fiction]

In the first three of these examples, a speaker is addressing an audience, and the doublet reinforces the rhetorical effect. This collocation, of ‘utterly’ with ‘completely’, accounts for more than a fifth of the instances of ‘utterly’. Corpus research carried out on the intensifier ‘utterly’ (see for example Louw 1993, Partington 1993) has found that there is a strong tendency for the item to be found in a negative surrounding co-text. In other words, it has a negative semantic prosody. Positive examples are found too, but Louw claims that these are either ironic usages or point to insincerity on the part of the writer. This pattern is corroborated by the examples in the current version of SCOTS. Most uses appear in a negative co-text, for example:

‘natural law finds slavery utterly repugnant’ [prose fiction]
‘as an implementable strategy, it is utterly incapable of attainment’ [written record of speech, Scottish Parliament]
‘it must be the most utterly boring thesis ever attempted’ [conversation]
‘something which is utterly unintelligible’ [review]

A few examples, however, sit uncomfortably with the prevailing semantic prosody:

‘and you’re thinking “hang on, that’s an utterly Christian view”’ [conversation]
‘I apologise. I am utterly confident that NHS 24 provides a good service’ [written record of speech, Scottish Parliament]
‘I shared that feeling utterly.’ [written record of speech, Scottish Parliament]
‘Autumn afternoon utterly still: one leaf spins slowly down’ [poetry]

The participant speaking in the first example lists his religious beliefs as ‘agnostic’, and later in the same utterances talks, non-inclusively, of ‘these Christians’, so it is possible that this use of ‘utterly’ reveals a certain distancing. Nothing in the wider context of the second example above suggests any discrepancy between the speaker’s words and his intention; clues from intonation of course are not available from this written record of speech. The surrounding context of the third example concerns the anxieties of staff in an organisation regarding challenges ahead. A certain resignation concerning an unsatisfactory but unavoidable state of affairs comes through in the speaker’s words. The final example is in fact a complete haiku: we should not be surprised to find usages which stand counter to typical semantic prosodies in poetic language. A translation of the haiku into Scots also appears in the corpus. Interestingly, there is no direct equivalent in the Scots version of the ‘utterly’: ‘Back-end efternuin lown: ane leaf birls doun slaw’.

5. Reflection and evaluation

The preceding discussion and examples are as yet based on a fairly small corpus, albeit one which already contains a wide range of genres and text types, and an ever-growing quantity of material. Inevitable imbalances in the corpus means that it is not possible to carry out reliable quantitative analysis of the material, although tendencies are already beginning to emerge through more qualitative interpretation. More evidence is certainly needed to firm up our description of the use of intensifying adverbs in Scots and Scottish English.

Already, however, the SCOTS corpus enables researchers to form an understanding of the sorts of constraints influencing the use of such features of language as intensifying adverbs. Language variety and age are clear factors; gender may also turn out to be significant. A more representative geographical selection of spoken texts will enable us to see whether region of birth or residence is also a factor.

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