Rethinking the traditional periodisation of the Scots language

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1 The aims of the paper

Drawing timelines and setting boundaries between stages in language history is an arbitrary exercise. As Görlach warns in a footnote to his periodisation of the language of advertising, '[a]ll period boundaries in historical disciplines are open to objections' (2002a: 102, fn.1), of which the author of the present paper is very much aware. Languages change gradually and therefore their historical development is a continuum, rather than a set of chronologically ordered neat and homogenous boxes, divided by clear-cut borders. Such borders create a certain illusion of well-defined stages in language history; therefore, they should be based on firm language-internal and extra-linguistic criteria, allowing the temporal continuum to be 'chopped up' in a systematic and justifiable manner into more manageable chunks. Periodisation is useful because it allows observing both focal points on the timeline as well as transitional periods. It also creates a framework of reference for comparative purposes: either in a diachronic perspective within a single language, or in a cross-linguistic perspective, when juxtaposing two or more languages at a given stage in history.

In this paper I would like to reconsider the most popular, one may say, traditional periodisation of the Scots language (Aitken 1985: xiii), using extra-linguistic and intra-linguistic criteria. One of the reasons why such an analysis seems worthwhile is that certain labels applied to the stages in the history of Scots, for instance the 'Middle Scots period', seem to escape such criteria and create an anachronistic picture of Scots. Another reason is connected with the fact that the traditional philological approach to language history often combined labels for literary periods with labels for a linguistic history of a given variety. Regardless of criticism,[1] the term

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[1] The application of the label 'Scottish Chaucerians' to a group of Scottish poets active in the late fifteenth-early sixteenth century (e.g. William Dunbar, Robert Henryson or Gavin Douglas) was subject to criticism already at the beginning of the twentieth century, in

'Scottish Chaucerians' is used even today (Carter and McRae 2001) and creates an impression that Scottish literature of the late fifteenth-early sixteenth century was a continuation (if not imitation) of medieval literature, which would justify the adjective 'middle' applied to the language in which Dunbar and Henryson composed their poetry. In light of the persistent misconceptions about the place of Scottish vernacular literature in a wider European context, which some literary critics do address (see Carruthers 2009) but at the same time continue to spread, it is a good moment to reconsider the applicability of traditional labels to the history of the language, too. The last reason, perhaps the most convincing and least debatable one, stems from the growing body of research on Scots and its history in the recent years, which provides new evidence of forms and functions of Scots throughout the ages.

The paper will start with a discussion of periodisation and the challenges it poses for a historian and a historical linguist, following with the approaches to the periodisation of the Scots language since the nineteenth century. The special problem I would like to concentrate on is the labels applied to the period from the end of the fourteenth to the end of the seventeenth century.[2] In the next sections I am going to argue that the adjective 'middle' is misplaced and that the term 'early modern' is missing from the periodisation of Scots. In order to support this claim, the paper moves on to the extra-linguistic criteria for such labels used in language description, paying attention to the interfaces between language, literature, society and the general mindset of a given era. The next section will concentrate on purely linguistic criteria for language periodisation, rehashing the approach to the development of Germanic languages from relatively inflectional systems to those with limited inflection. Finally, I will attempt to delineate an alternative periodisation of Scots, as a conclusion to the arguments presented in the paper.

Agnes Mure MacKenzie's book on Scottish literature to 1714 (1933) and later in Kurt Wittig's writings on the Scottish literary tradition (1958). A scathing criticism of the term was levelled by Tom Scott in his study on Dunbar (1966). I am grateful to J. Derrick McClure for these references. In order to acknowledge the genuine character of Scottish poetry in the late fifteenth-early sixteenth century, literary scholars have been using the label 'Scottish makars', literally – 'those who create, poets'.

[2] The timeline, naturally, continues until now. Given new findings and ongoing projects, a new evaluation of the history of Scots from the eighteenth century onwards could be a topic for another study.

2   The challenges of periodisation

Societies exist in time. Their practices, linguistic or otherwise, are subject to change, and any change presupposes a temporal component. The continuum of years and centuries passing by is difficult to grasp and describe in a systematic manner, which is why introducing divisions on a timeline works as a helpful tool. Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Johannes Fabian, among several different ways of approaching Time, distinguished a 'Typological Time': 'a use of Time which is measured, not as time elapsed, [...] but in terms of socioculturally meaningful events or, more precisely, intervals between such events. [...] Instead of being a measure of movement, [Time] may appear as a quality of states' (1983: 23). This use of 'Typological Time' underlies the division of historical continua into periods.

A specialist in the methodology of history, Topolski (2000) sees periodisation as a creation of narrative wholes. '[H]istorians start with two choices: the choice of topic of narratives (and of the research) and the choice of the form of the narrative, i.e. periodisation. The point is to choose an appropriate form (and periodisation) to a given topic or to a given aim connected with our narrative. To choose a certain periodisation is to choose a certain coherence' (2000: 16). The topic of our narrative is the history of the Scots language. It is then crucial to consider the coherence of the periods – the narrative wholes into which the timeline of Scots is divided, and check whether they answer to consistent criteria and constitute valid temporal entities.

Introducing any periodisation is an arbitrary and, in Bentley's words, elusive exercise, especially when processes under investigation cross social, cultural and political boundaries (1996: 749). He talks about three decisions which should be borne in mind when dividing a timeline into periods: the consideration for prior decisions, deeming what criteria are important, and the current perspective, or paradigm, in the field (e.g. historicism or feminism). For a periodisation of language history it will be important to consider prior conceptualisations of the linguistic periods and the criteria thereto applied, to revise these criteria if necessary, and to design a periodisation in line with the current state of linguistic knowledge and the dominant approach(es) in modern historical linguistics.

This kind of discussion has not been attempted for the Scots language yet, but similar concerns have been voiced by English historical linguists. The relationship between the English language and the Scots

language is a sensitive issue, and a complex one, indeed,[3] so the arguments drawn from the discussion of English periods should be treated as an illumination of the problem rather than as ready solutions for Scots. After consulting over 150 publications on the history of English, Fisiak (1994) notes that the authors use periodisation because of convenience and for pedagogical reasons. The histories of a language are easier to grasp (and teach) if one makes reference to clearly delineated narrative wholes. Periodisation also helps to compare and contrast the effects of language change operating within a given language, as well as in different languages.

Constructing timelines which would be effective in cross-linguistic comparisons adds another complication. Fabian says that 'for human communication to occur, coevalness has to be created' (1983: 30-31), because without it, different cultures construct their timelines differently. Perhaps this is why contemporary sixteenth-century Scots and English have been given different labels (see section 4.1 below): one is 'middle', the other is already 'early modern', which is an uncontested label for sixteenth-century English. Would this nomenclature imply that there is something inherently 'middle' about the Scots of that period, either for the users of language at that time, or for the linguists who study this language from today's vantage point? And, conversely, would that mean that the English as seen at the same physical time appears early modern? The discussion below will demonstrate that at the moment the histories of Scots and English are not constructed to enable Fabian's coevalness, and will suggest how this creation of shared time, so useful in inevitable comparisons and references between the two languages, might be aided.

3   Constructing linguistic periodisations

The specific challenge of linguistic periodisations stems from the nature of language change which does not have to follow other historical developments. '[T]he imagined dividing lines between adjacent historical periods and those between adjacent linguistic periods hardly ever coincide' (Lutz 2002: 145), because the changes in language are usually slower, while a historical event, such as a war, a fire or an epidemic, may be quite abrupt and its effects immediately palpable. For instance, the levelling of inflections and the Norman Conquest may both function as a caesura between the Old English and the Middle English period, but Lutz concludes

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[3] McClure says with emphasis that 'Scots *never*, strictly speaking, exhibited complete autonomy in relation to metropolitan English' (2010: 119).

that '[t]he two developments have nothing to do with each other' (2002: 146).

According to Fisiak (1994), to determine 'a stage' in language history, three premises should be established: firstly, the temporal borders according to accepted criteria (see sections 5 and 6 below); secondly, the geographical location, which in our case is Scotland, and perhaps more precisely, the Scottish Lowlands; and thirdly, the linguistic status of the variety under consideration: whether it is a selected dialect, an amalgam of dialects or perhaps some generalised linguistic entity. In an illuminating paper on the ideology behind the history of Scots, Costa (2009: 1) quotes Woolard, who says that language histories legitimise 'a selection of one from among contending centres of power in the present' (2004: 58). This is a major reason why the periodisation of Scots encounters problems. Unlike other national European languages, no form of Scots was a straightforward 'winner' in the struggle for an official national status. The reasons for this situation need not concern us here;[4] what matters is the fact that extrapolating backwards is not really a straightforward option for a history of Scots.

Histories and periodisations of language often concentrate on the most prominent or the best represented register, for example on the literary language. In the case of Scots, before the advent of historical corpora (Meurman-Solin 1993, Williamson 2008), the study of the language was largely centred on literary texts (Jack 1997). The merits of utilitarian and non-literary texts for the study of the linguistic past of Scots have been appreciated by historical dialectologists (see, e.g. McIntosh 1978, Williamson 2002) and, relatively recently, by historical pragmaticians and discourse analysts, who are also interested in the language of different genres, age groups, sexes and discourse communities (see, e.g. numerous publications by Anneli Meurman-Solin <http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/people/varieng_meurman-solin.html>; Kopaczyk 2013). The research on Scots within this new paradigm is ongoing and will complement earlier descriptions of the language at various stages in its history. It is therefore quite desirable to reconsider the temporal divisions of Scots which do not seem fit for a modern outlook on the language.

In the 1980s, the heyday of traditional dialectology, Aitken drew attention to the spoken dialects of the Scottish Lowlands. He makes note of:

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[4] For more detailed studies on the standardization of Scots and why it was not completed, see McClure (1994, 2003), Devitt (1989), Agutter (1990), Dossena (2003), Bugaj (2004a), Millar (2005) and Costa (2009).

an ancient belief – dating from 1494 – that there is an entity with some form of separate existence called the Scots language. [...] As regards the spoken language of today and the few more recent centuries, it seems to me a misleading and over-simple way of putting the matter. I would prefer to say merely that there is a large and continuing Scottish component to the English speech of Scotland as a whole [...] which can fairly be called a highly distinctive national variety of English

(Aitken 1982: 30)

Aitken's take on the spoken dialectal continuum is justified on linguistic grounds, but it does not make the periodisation of Scots any easier. For him, too, establishing the periods in a history of 'an entity' whose separate existence he questioned, must have been a problematic task. Still, Aitken's own periodisation of Scots (1985: xiii) has become the most influential temporal framework in the field, and will be subject to scrutiny in the remainder of the paper.[5]

4 The periodisation(s) of Scots
4.1 Aitken (1985)
The discussion of the periodisation of Scots finds its point of departure in the list of periods included in Aitken's introductory chapter in the *Concise Scots Dictionary* (Robinson 1985). This list of dates and relevant labels juxtaposes the history of the Scots language with the history of English in the following manner:

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[5] There is yet another way of looking at language history. Roelcke (1995) pointed out that 'periodization of linguistic periods needs to be based on changes of individual variables rather than overarching general developments' (Langer 2001: 2). This would allow steering clear of a timeline which lacks consideration for the independent pace of changes on different levels of linguistic analysis. In my opinion, this approach should be encouraged in the study of linguistic standardisation (and in delimiting the periods), but it requires a conceptual split of external language history and linguistic standardization, just like Roelcke (1995) does it for the periodization of German. I expound the reasons for distinguishing between *language standardisation* and *linguistic standardisation* in Kopaczyk (2011) and (2012).

'The main periods in the history of Scots

Old English:	to 1100
Older Scots:	to 1700
Pre-literary Scots:	to 1375
Early Scots:	to 1450
Middle Scots:	1450 to 1700
Early Middle Scots:	1450 to 1550
Late Middle Scots:	1550 to 1700
Modern Scots:	1700 onwards

A corresponding list of the periods for English

Old English:	to 1100
Middle English:	1100 to 1475
Early Middle English:	1100 to 1250
Late Middle English:	1400 to 1475
Early Modern English:	1475 to 1650
Modern English:	1650 onwards'

(Aitken 1985: xiii)

This list of dates becomes much more illuminating when set out graphically on a timeline (see Figure 1).
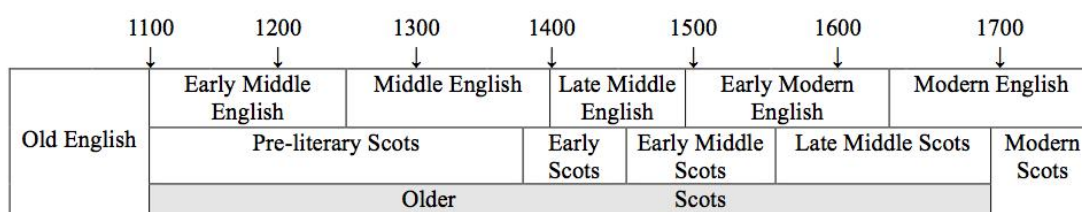

Figure 1 – Aitken's (1985) periodisation of Scots and English[6]

This periodisation has been very influential and reappears in several important reference sources on the history and structure of Scots, e.g. McClure (1994), [7] Smith (2000), with a note that '[a]ll dates are approximate', Macafee (2002) and Corbett *et al*. (2003). A similar comparison of Scots and English can be found in Görlach (2002b), but neither he nor Aitken provide a rationale or criteria for this division of the timeline, as if the labels were straightforward and the underlying principles

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[6] Since it captures the periods in a much clearer manner, I used this graphic rendition of Aitken's periods in my earlier work, (Bugaj 2004b), and recently revisited it critically in Kopaczyk (2013). This paper is a continuation and an expanded version of that critique.

[7] In fact, after having introduced Aitken's periodization, McClure (1994) chooses to employ only the terms 'Older Scots' and 'Modern Scots' throughout in his comprehensive discussion of the language.

self-evident. The only commentary which can shed some light on the periodisation was offered by Aitken in the context of the continuity of records and the range of genres represented in Scots in its history (1985: x), but these comments remained selective and no direct links between them and the periods were drawn.

In this chart, Scots is always lagging behind English in its historical development, as implied by the respective labels.[8] It is especially striking that 'Middle Scots' should stretch as far as the year 1700, while in the English context we would already be talking about early modernity for some two hundred years. It is true that periodisations of different languages often do not match (Lass 2000: 7), because they are constructed according to different criteria and within different traditions. As an aside one may add that that the label of 'Middle Polish' is assigned to the language of Poland well into the eighteenth century (Urbańczyk 1963, Klemensiewicz 1965) because of the persistence of Latin in the public sphere and the inadequacy of the vernacular to render all types of discourse. In section 6.2 below I address the same criterion of register flexibility with respect to Scots in the period called 'Middle'.

Should it then be important that the periodisations of Scots and English do not match? In essence, this question is not central to our argument. The answer could be 'no', as long as the timeline for Scots – which is in the centre of our attention here – is based on consistent criteria. But at the same time, whether consciously or not, English has always served as a certain backdrop for analysing forms and functions of Scots. The periodisations of both languages frequently appear side by side to allow for comparison. The periodisation of English is much better known among historical linguists while the timeline of Scots, a closely related variety, is inevitably seen through its prism. It is therefore a valid question to pose whether these discrepancies in nomenclature and the resultant lag in periodisation are actually justified according to some criteria. This final point brings back the reasons for a reassessment of the periodisation of Scots put forward at the beginning of this paper.

4.2   Earlier attempts at periodisation of Scots

The earliest influential periodisation of the Scots language was put forward by Murray (1873). Presenting his labels for the periods in the history of

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[8] Of course, this periodization of English may also be contested. For key discussions of English periodization, see Blake (1994), Fisiak (1994) and the reviews of the *Cambridge history of the English language* by Stockwell and Minkova (1994a, 1994b).

Scots, Murray very consciously limited his discussion to the language of literature:

> From the fourteenth century onwards, Scotland presents a full series of writers in the Northern dialect, which, as spoken and written in this country, may be conveniently divided into THREE periods. The first, or EARLY period, during which the *literary* use [capitals and emphasis original] of this dialect was common to Scotland, with England north of the Humber, extends from the date of the earliest specimens to the middle or last quarter of the fifteenth century. The second, or MIDDLE period, during which the literary use of the northern dialect was confined to Scotland (the midland dialect having supplanted it in England), extends from the close of the fifteenth century to the time of the Union. The third, or MODERN period, during which the northern dialect has ceased to be the language of general literature in Scotland also, though surviving as the speech of the people and the language of popular poetry, extends from the union of the kingdoms to the present day
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> (Murray 1873: 29)

The same periodisation rationale was later repeated, among others, by Grant (1911), who preferred the term 'Late Scots' to 'Modern Scots', and Flom (1966), who has 'Old', 'Middle' and 'New Scotch'. Murray's (1873) caveats go hand in hand with the point made above about focussing on the best represented, or the most prestigious register when devising language periodisations. The problematic sixteenth century for Murray belongs to the 'middle' period, because at that time the Lowland variety was still used for literary production while related northern English dialects were not employed for this purpose. An observant reader will notice that Murray placed the boundary between 'middle' and 'modern' Scots at the Union of the Crowns, which is admittedly less controversial than Aitken's boundary at 1700, for reasons to be expounded below.

Smith (1902) also applies a periodisation to the literary language, proposing the label 'Early Scots' 'in the restricted sense of the literary language of political Scotland preceding the Middle Scots Period – i.e. the written language of Barbour and other writers of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries' (1902: xiii), while 'the characteristics of Middle Scots are to be found as early as the first quarter of the fifteenth century, and as late as the reign of Charles I' (1902: xi). Thus, in this periodisation we can

see the Middle Scots period stretching into the seventeenth century but still not quite to 1700. Smith's approach to periodisation is again very conscious of its arbitrary nature and its restricted character in terms of register.

The first reference to linguistic features in dividing the timeline of Scots dates back to Templeton (1973). She notes that '[d]uring the 15th century, the Scots and English sound-systems had moved farther apart', which constitutes a threshold for the Middle Scots period. Templeton's periodisation is not purely linguistic, as she adds comments about the flourishing literature in Scots at the same time. Devitt (1989) also tries to apply linguistic criteria, saying that 'in linguistic features the Scottish dialect appears to have established itself during the Middle Scots-English period, usually cited as c. 1450 to c. 1650' (1989: 9). The comparison with English comes to the fore again: 'Middle Scots-English differed from Middle Anglo-English in pronunciation, morphology, syntax and vocabulary...' (1989: 9), but the crucial question is whether these two temporal entities are actually coeval, and whether Middle English, whose final boundary never crosses the year 1500, can serve as a backdrop for Middle Scots in the period between 1450 and 1650, as defined by Devitt. It is perhaps easy to look at fifty- or one-hundred year spans from a modern perspective and treat them as roughly contemporary, but one should also be conscious of the fact that every fifty years means two generations of speakers who acted as vehicles of language change as well as moulded the language to their own needs and circumstances.

An isolated voice in the periodising tradition comes from Murison (1979). He places an important boundary at 1550: 'The middle of the sixteenth century marks the beginning of the end of Middle Scots and the emergence of *Modern* Scots [emphasis JK]. The years 1460-1560 can be considered the heyday of the Scots tongue as a full national language' (1979: 8-9). Even though he still applies the term 'middle' to what he deems 'the heyday' of Scots, he is the only scholar to use the label 'modern' as early as mid-sixteenth century, especially in contrast to Aitken's periodisation (see Figure 1). In his approach, Murison resembles Murray (1873), who also sees the need for 'modernity' in the history of Scots, but marks its beginning half a century later.

The most recent alternative periodisation of Scots comes from the *Helsinki Corpus of Older Scots*, compiled by Anneli Meurman-Solin (1993). Her periodisation was modelled on the English 'mother corpus', the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts* (Rissanen et al. 1991), so, in fact, it does not answer to any Scots-related criteria. The author explains her rationale

thus: 'The principal chronological periods of the corpus do not correspond to the established time periods in the history of Scots.[9] It was considered important to keep the periods chosen for the main corpus, because this would enable the users to broaden the textual basis of their study to Scottish material, for example for purposes of comparison' (Meurman-Solin 1989: 453). As the corpus is built from non-literary texts, the periodisation is not bound by trends in literature and culture but may well be based on other principles. Here, the decision where to place period boundaries was dictated by the fact that the Scots corpus was seen as a complementary resource for the study of English in its regional and textual variants. In her discussion of the four corpus subperiods, Meurman-Solin makes a strong claim that '[w]e can safely use the label Early Middle Scots for the texts of the second period 1500-1570' (1989: 453), which is a different application of this term than Aitken's (see Figure 1) and creates an even more anachronistic picture of sixteenth-century Scots. Still, she does not provide further arguments for this decision.

As the histories of English and Scots are joined by intricate connections, the newest corpus resource, *A Linguistic Atlas of Older Scots* (LAOS, Williamson 2008), also complements a monumental work on English dialects, *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English* (LALME, McIntosh *et al*. 1986), and aims to represent the dialectal variety of Scots between 1150 (effectively 1380, as written records start only after this date in more substantial quantities) and 1700. In this project, however, the dividing line between the earlier and the later part of the corpus falls at the year 1500, while the author does not use any specific label to refer to the two parts, but rather uses an uncontroversial overall label for the history of Scots covered by the project: Older Scots (*About LAOS*, Accessed October 2012).

The overview of approaches to the periodisation of Scots draws attention to two issues: the choice of register which would represent the Scots language on a timeline, and the relationship between Scots and English, where the latter dictates the choice of the temporal framework. As the aim of the paper is to treat Scots as a linguistic entity with its own history and periodisation, let us now review the extra-linguistic and language-internal criteria which could be applied to a achieve a more consistent picture of the periods in the history of Scots.

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[9] In a footnote, Meurman-Solin refers to Aitken's (1985: xiii) periodization as the source of the 'established time periods' for Scots.

5 Extra-linguistic criteria and the periods in the history of Scots

It is quite fitting to start on a critical note when a discussion of language history props itself with arguments from outside its premise. As Malkiel noted in the late 1960s, perhaps a bit sarcastically, it is 'downright inelegant to appeal to extra-linguistic factors' for the periodisation of a language. In fact, he called such an approach a 'pathetic self-delusion' (1969: 534). Still, even the most up-to-date histories of, for instance, English rely on extra-linguistic factors for their linguistic timelines, often in a rather arbitrary fashion.[10] There seems to be no escape from looking at language history through the prism of events and developments in the socio-historical milieu whose inhabitants communicated in the language in question. The two subsections below will therefore concentrate on what extra-linguistic factors may contribute to calling a given period 'middle' and 'early modern', and how these factors relate to the history of Scots.

5.1 The 'middle' period

The term 'middle' invokes unfavourable connotations because it denotes 'a set of times that lies between other times' (Brown 2000: 9), which implies that such a period is positioned between two clear-cut, and perhaps more important periods, the classical antiquity and the revival of humanist ideas. English and Lansing note that Renaissance humanists coined the term 'Middle Ages' for the 'long stagnant, barbaric period between the cultural flowering of Antiquity and its rebirth in fourteenth-century Italy' (2009: 3). Some historians argue that the 'middle' period is a misconception because the shift from the late antiquity to the modern pre-industrial era happened in the twelfth century, while the next 'shattering shift' in how the world worked would happen in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the French and Industrial Revolutions (see Hollister 1992 for a thorough and convincing discussion). Still, others would claim that there is a certain coherence in the Middle Ages, achieved through the Latin Christian civilisation and the use of Latin as the written medium of communication (Brown 2000: 12). In addition, one of the most characteristic inventions of the Middle Ages was the keeping of administrative records (Clanchy 1979).

Since these arguments concern language use, they might help in deciding about the application of the term 'middle' to some stage in the

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[10] In his review of the third volume of the *Cambridge history of the English language*, 1476-1776, Bailey (2002) takes issue with the latter date as a purely historical one, with no real linguistic significance.

history of Scots. The first question to ask would be about the time when the shift from orality to literacy happened in Scotland, especially in the legal and administrative context, to mark the beginning of the 'middle' period. According to Britnell, '[l]egal recording was well established in the kingdom of Scotland during the thirteenth century', similarly in France, while in England it happened earlier, in the late twelfth century (2009: 423). The next question concerns the prevalence of Latin in Scotland. As in the case of Polish mentioned above, the use of Latin in the public domain would support the label 'middle' for the vernacular until Latin ceases to be the major vehicle of formal communication. Leith notices that '[i]n 1390, Scots was first used for parliamentary records; and the laws were translated into it in 1425' (1997 [1983]: 159), so one can look for the waning of the 'middle' period in Scotland in the early fifteenth century.

5.2   The 'early modern' period

The early modern period is missing from the timeline of Scots altogether (see section 3.1. above). It is then worth asking whether the extra-linguistic criteria applied by historians to early modernity hold ground in Scotland. Let us first consider the political and social context, where the so-called 'new monarchies' (Hollister 1992: 19) emerge to slowly replace the medieval feudal order. The feudal network of dependencies, based on the loyalty of local powerful lords, was inadequate to raise enough money for new, perpetual wars and for the 'appearance of consolidated territory' (Zmora 2001: 11). In the Scottish context, it was the Stewart dynasty that was responsible for the gradual, albeit eventful and challenging, consolidation of the Scottish state. Bingham (1974) portrays the rule of the Stewarts from the late fourteenth century until the Union of the Crowns as full of unexpected turns and difficulties, regardless of which the rulers managed to act as equal players with powerful continental and English monarchs. Changes in warfare and the advent of gunnery have also been put forward as markers of the modern era (Brown 2000). In Scotland, already James II (1430-1460) was a great enthusiast of guns; the famous bombard Mons Meg at the Edinburgh Castle remains a token of the king's modern interests.

Another symptom of early modernity was the growth of urban centres and a new model of trade: from exchanging goods to an economy based on money and profit (Hollister 1992: 15). Scottish burghs grew steadily in number from the late thirteenth century onwards (McNeill and MacQueen 1996: 196-198, 212-214, 231-236) and constituted important

commercial centres and sources of income for the crown. Because of their role in generating profit and a strategic geographic position along the coast, at important trade routes or transport tracks, they were also key players in domestic and foreign politics, having a say in the Scottish parliament as one of the Three Estates (Walker 1990: 225).

Modernity is interpreted as a period marked by the broadening of human horizons, both in the religious context of the Protestant Reformation, and in the more physical sense of geographical discoveries and colonisation. In fact, the key figure of the Scottish Reformation, John Knox, led an intense dialogue with the reformers in England and on the continent (Reid 1988, Farrow 2004), which placed Scotland within the perimeter of far-reaching socio-political consequences of the Reformation spanning the whole of Europe. Similarly, the colonising ventures of the United Kingdom really took off in the early seventeenth century, under the auspices of James VI of Scotland (and I of England), and their consequences were felt throughout the island, e.g. in the form of such novelties as tobacco. There is little ground, therefore, to quote these extra-linguistic conditions in the discussion of early modern English, and to overlook their relevance for the Scots language.

A phenomenon which bridges extra-linguistic and linguistic symptoms of early modernity is the introduction of the printing press and growing literacy (Eisenstein 1979). In addition to the Education Act of 1496, by the end of the fifteenth century there were already three universities in Scotland: St Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen, and one more was to be established in Edinburgh in the 1580s. Edinburgh was also the venue of early Scottish printing, where Chepman and Myllar's press was set up in 1507 with the personal involvement of the Scottish monarch, James IV (Mann 2000: 127). In this respect, sixteenth-century Scotland comes across as no less an 'early modern' country than its contemporary southern neighbour. Admittedly, '[s]everal of the first printers in Scotland were Englishmen or trained in England' (McClure 2000: 103), which contributed to the slow introduction of anglicised spellings into Scots writings. Standardisation of spelling can in itself be treated as a token of early modernity, regardless of the direction of convergence, be it on a foreign or a domestic model.

Finally, the spread of humanist ideas and the new trends in arts count as symptoms of early modernity. As noted in all periodisations of the Scots language presented in section 3, the Renaissance culture in Scotland had its own 'golden age' in the sixteenth century. Görlach notes that in terms of

reactions from the outside to the Scottish literature of the time: 'wherever [contacts between English and Scottish writers] were established, there does not appear to have been any feeling of superiority in English authors. They seem to have treated Scottish authors as different, but equal, and it is doubtful how far they regarded their products to be in a different language' (2001: 184). One may agree with Jack (1997) that Scottish makars, active at that time, were 'poised uneasily between Middle Ages and Renaissance, scholasticism and humanism' (1997: 230). Their works, however, are examples of original literature, conscious of the wider European context, and drawing on vernacular resources for themes and linguistic tools. This brings us back to the problem of language labels: did the makars write in a 'middle' variety, as Aitken and others would have it, or perhaps the label should be different? The next section will approach this problem from a purely linguistic angle.

6 Linguistic criteria and the periods in the history of Scots

Scots is a Germanic language. Its history is parallel to the histories of other related languages, especially English, which is the closest relative, spreading from the same Old English dialectal roots (although from different geographical foci) (McClure 1994: 23-24). In order to devise a periodisation of Scots on the basis of consistent linguistic criteria, which has not been attempted so far, it is necessary to consider the principles which underlie other periodisations for Germanic languages, English being the most relevant example. Germanic timelines date back to the work of Neogrammarians in the nineteenth century and are typically devised as tri-partite frameworks. Fisiak (1994: 47-48) presents a useful summary: '[s]ince early 1870's [...] the history of English has been divided into three basic periods [...], i.e. Old English, Middle English, and Modern English', similarly to the model designed for German by Jacob Grimm. The most influential division of the history of English dates back to Sweet (1874), who justified his periodisation on the basis of the form of the inflectional endings: full endings in the Old English period, levelled endings in the Middle English period, and lost endings in the Modern English period (Fisiak 1994: 49). Sweet was very much conscious of the fact that what he was describing was a history of only one selected dialect of English. Moreover, his division was rooted in the philological tradition, which treats language as an inseparable part of literature, and *vice versa*. Hence, each period in Sweet's history of the language was linked to the names of core

literary representatives of a given period (the English of Alfred, the English of Layamon, the English of Chaucer, etc.). Even though current historical linguistics no longer relies on philological studies of literary texts, Sweet's tripartite division with transition periods 'is not far from the view held by many today' (Fisiak 1994: 48).

6.1   The 'middle' period

From the linguistic point of view, if we assume after Sweet that the periods described with the adjective 'middle' represent a certain transitional stage between the complex inflectional Old English dialects and their typologically different modern descendants (Fisiak [1968] 2004; for a comparison of several Germanic language-states according to the degree of structural archaism, see Lass 2000), then 'Early Middle Scots' in Figure 1 (1450-1550) is, in fact, more advanced in this typological shift than its contemporary southern neighbour. The loss of /ə/ in final syllables had a regularising effect on the complex nominal and verbal paradigms. It is important to note after McClure (1994) that the reduction of verb morphology and the shift from strong to weak paradigm 'began earlier and proceeded more rapidly and more systematically than in southern English' (McClure 1994: 54). Some important changes had even taken place by the late fourteenth century, and the situation was similar in the nominal declensions. Clearly Scots was ahead of any changes which had in the end resulted in the 'middle' form of English, so it could be argued that the 'middle' period in Scots started earlier and may have finished quicker than in English.

Other criteria for the 'middle' period in the history of English include the loss of phonemic length contrast (Stockwell and Minkova 1994). This development is not relevant for Scots, as length contrast has been kept in this language and still exists today (on the Scottish Vowel Length Rule, see Aitken 1981). One more phonological argument is the inception of changes in long vowel quality, which form the Great Vowel Shift. Again, Scots was affected by these changes in a different manner and to a different degree than English, but the change was contemporaneous in both languages. On these grounds there is no reason to assign different labels to English and Scots during the period in question. The final criterion for a 'middle' period is lexical in nature and concerns the impact of French and Scandinavian vocabulary, which changed the Anglo-Saxon character of the English lexicon into a less homogenous inventory. The same can be said about Scots, albeit for different reasons. Scotland never experienced a

forced implementation of French in the official sphere. The contact with French was prompted by the spread of feudalism from Normanised England and by the political alliance with France against that very neighbour. When it comes to the Scandinavian influence, trade and the proximity of the Lordship of the Isles, ruled by the descendants of the Vikings until its absorption into the Scottish kingdom in 1493, prompted the influx of many vocabulary items which are limited to Scotland. The reasons for language contact and its outcomes are, therefore, different, but still this criterion for a 'middle' period holds for Scots, too.

6.2   The 'early modern' period

The traditional approach to periodising Germanic languages would see the 'modern' period as the time of limited or lost inflections. In view of the arguments included above, it would then seem justified to grant the 'early modern' status to Scots around the end of the fourteenth century; in the first extant literary works, like the *Brus*, the inflections are clearly regularised, both in the nominal and in the verbal paradigms. Compared with contemporary southern English poems, e.g. the *Canterbury Tales*, the language comes across as less archaic in its structure. On the other hand, scholars such as Grant (1902) talk about the *Brus* or the alliterative poems as linguistically forming a continuum with northern English dialects. Perhaps it would be justified more to talk about an 'early modern' type of Scots once it separates itself from these northern English connections in the mid-fifteenth century. This development would then constitute the watershed between the 'middle' and the 'early modern' period. Templeton's (1973) discussion supports this scenario. She calls upon phonological criteria, saying that '[d]uring the 15th century, the Scots and English sound-systems had moved farther apart' (1973: 7). The emancipation of Scots from the northern dialectal continuum was also prompted be the rise of national consciousness and the need for a national written medium. 'As far as the *written* language was concerned [...] the dialect continuum which had characterised the entire Middle English period was effectively gone; and in its place was a pair of mutually remote dialects each serving as the language of government, administration and letters in its own kingdom' (McClure 2010: 100, emphasis original).

Standardising linguistic trends constitute a very important symptom of early modernity. In his critique of the periodisation in *CHEL*, Norman Blake has argued that the 'middle' period ends when standardising forces start operating, which is why he postulated 'absolute limits' of Middle

English at 1150 and 1400 (1994: 42). In other words, until there is a multidialectal linguistic situation, this is a 'middle' period; when notions of standardisation start appearing, the term 'early modern' gains currency. Smith notices this development in Scots in his overview of the language, but applies traditional Aitken's labels: '[d]ialectal diversity, which seems to have been a feature of Early Scots, seems to have been muted for communicative reasons as the Middle Scots period progressed' (2000: 165). McClure makes a similar observation: '[T]hough Middle Scots texts show extreme linguistic diversity among contrasting literary styles and registers [...] and considerable individual variations in orthographic practices [...], scribal evidence for regional dialect variations is much less than might have been expected' (McClure 1994: 60). One should ask why not use the same labels as those applied to English in exactly the same conditions: 'middle' for the period of unsuppressed dialectal diversity, 'early modern' for the period of incipient standardisation. Even if we treat anglicisation of Scots as its standardisation, as Devitt (1989) proposes (see also MClure 2010: 102-103 and section 5.2 above), then at least the period from 1560 onwards would be a good candidate for the early modern era.

The level of language whose standardisation often marks out the early modern period is spelling. I would like to start at the graphetic level and pay attention to the scribal hands employed in Scotland. It appears that no distinction in hand was found between the official and non-official context before the sixteenth century. Simpson argues that '[t]he lack of specialised scripts among government clerks may reflect the less sophisticated and less departmentalised administrative system of medieval and early modern Scotland' (2009: 6). Nevertheless, in the sixteenth century italic hand was adopted by Scottish scribes, and a very characteristic secretary hand emerges in Scotland around 1520-1530, just as it does in England (Simpson 2009: 14-15).

At the graphemic level, which concerns the choice of symbols and their arrangement to represent specific sounds in a language, it is important to bear McClure's observation in mind, that '[n]either Scotland nor England had a standard writing system in the fifteenth or early sixteenth century' (2003). Moreover, the emergent Scottish spelling conventions were specific to the Scots language, highlighting its independent nature. As Kniezsa puts it, '[b]y the end of the 15th century Scottish writing developed its characteristic system, which clearly set it apart from any other writing, not only southern English ... but also the notational habits of the neighbouring northern English areas' (1997: 638). The consciousness of the separate

character of Scots spelling conventions grew in strength as the time progressed. If someone wanted to break out of this pattern in the late sixteenth century, like John Knox (?1512-1572) tried to do,[11] he would open himself to severe criticism. Ninian Winzet, in fact, ''threatens' to *write* in Latin in order to find a common language with Knox' (Kniezsa 1997: 642, emphasis original).

Apart from standardising trends in form, the elaboration of function is often called upon as a symptom of the early modern period. This is where the Scots language of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries clearly excels, as admitted in all histories and descriptions of this language. Both Lass (1987) and McClure (1994) concede that Scots in the second half of the fifteenth century achieved a status of a national norm, 'as close as metropolitan English to developing standard written form [...]', and kept it at least till the mid-sixteenth century. Smith observes that 'Scots developed an elaborated language, i.e. a variety which could be used in more than one register' (2000: 164): the Scottish Parliament started to legislate in 'Early Scots rather than Latin' in 1398, administrative records were kept in the vernacular, correspondence at home and abroad was written in Scots (Horsbroch 1999), and unique literature flourished. Perceptions of Scots as a token of national identity and an adequate medium for all purposes, literary and utilitarian, had also crystallised. Gavin Douglas, who is recognised as the first writer to use the label *Scottis* for the language of his poetry, 'signalled a radically new perception of it by proclaiming his work to be *writtin in the langage of Scottish nacioun*, and this to be a different language from what he called *Sudron*' (McClure 2010: 101).

In his influential introduction to the *Concise Scots Dictionary*, which has served as the point of departure for the present paper, Aitken formulates the same observation: Scots at that time 'became the principal literary and record language of the Scottish nation, having successfully competed in this function with Latin. Hence in the later fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries there were two national languages in use in Britain, metropolitan Tudor English in the kingdom of England, and metropolitan Older Scots in the kingdom of Scotland' (1985: x). The label for the 'Tudor English' in language histories is, of course, 'early modern'. The traditional label for contemporary Scots becomes anachronistic in comparison.

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[11] Kniezsa shows that Knox's use of English spellings was not consistent: 68% of his spellings were regionally unmarked, 13% were Scots, and 18% – Suthron (1997: 642). It is interesting that less than one fifth of spellings from outside the familiar pattern was enough to give his writings a foreign flavour.

7 A revised periodisation of the Scots language: Two proposals

In light of the arguments presented above, I would like to argue that a change in nomenclature for the history of the Scots language should be considered. The outset is uncontroversial: we start with the Old Northumbrian dialect, and the boundary between this stage and what was to come afterwards may well be kept at 1100. Between 1100 and 1375 there are no substantial literary writings in Scots, which has initially inspired the label 'Pre-literary Scots'. Since the present proposal tries to assess the forms and functions of Scots not only on the basis of literary texts, we might want to consider the existence of snippets of Scots in non-literary documents.[12] Then the label 'early middle Scots' or 'early Scots' could be employed for the period between 1100 and 1375, with the proviso that the dialectal continuum with northern English dialects was still the case.

After the appearance of more textual material, there are two ways of conceptualising the timeline of Scots. The first option would be to treat the period between 1375 and 1450 as Middle Scots, and the one between 1450 and 1550 as Late Middle Scots. The next period, 1550 to 1700, when the slow anglicisation becomes visible, could be called Early Modern Scots, which to some extent reflects the extra-linguistic circumstances (Figure 2; see, however, the next paragraph).
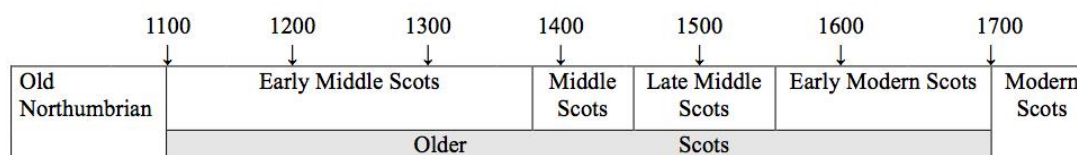

Figure 2 – A new timeline for the Scots language – Proposal 1

In fact, this division goes hand in hand with Murison's claim that the threshold between 'middle' and 'modern' Scots falls in the mid-sixteenth century (1979: 8). The label 'early modern' seems to be more appropriate,

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[12] A similar situation can be observed in England where there is a gap of more than one century in the textual presence of English dialects after 1100, as a long-term result of the Norman Conquest. Current research has shown that administrative documents and other non-literary texts may yet shed new light on the presence and forms of the English language in that period (Da Rold et al. 2010). Be that as it may, the label of 'early middle English' has never been denied applicability just because no literary texts survive from this period.

though, considering McClure's observation that for Modern Scots the 'essential factor' is 'the absence of any officially recognised standard or sociolinguistic norm – that place being held by Scottish standard English' (McClure 1994: 62). Therefore one can treat the year 1700 as the caesura after which the situation described by McClure can be observed, and the adjective 'modern' is in place.

Still, this timeline does not fully draw on the arguments presented above. After all, the discussion has shown that, in extra-linguistic terms, the medieval milieu in Scotland may be postulated until the mid-fifteenth century, because this is when modernity sets in.
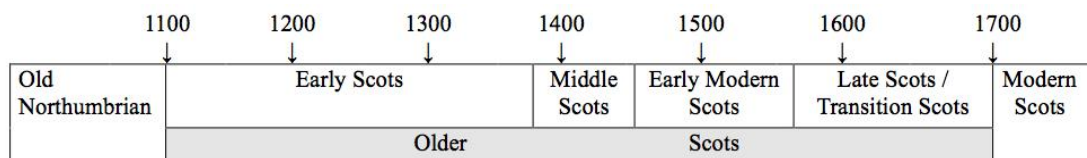
| 1100 | 1200 | 1300 | 1400 | 1500 | 1600 | 1700 |
| ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ |

Old Northumbrian	Early Scots		Middle Scots	Early Modern Scots	Late Scots / Transition Scots	Modern Scots
	Older			Scots		

Figure 3 – A new timeline for the Scots language – Proposal 2

Moreover, linguistic criteria support this division. Scots shows features of the 'middle' period up to around 1450, and after this date it can be objectively described as an early modern type of a Germanic language, with a loss of inflection, a standardising spelling system and elaborated communicative functions. Without looking at what was to happen next, the history of Scots does not lag behind the history of English in any respect, and does not justify anachronistic labels (Figure 3). Of course, after 1560 comes a period of gradual anglicisation of Scots, and after 1603 Scots becomes limited in its communicative functionality. This is why the period between 1560 and 1700 could be labelled with a new term, for instance 'late Scots' or 'transition Scots', which would capture the progressive diluting of the standardising Scots back into the form of dialects, be it written or spoken, in the period called Modern Scots. Admittedly, the history of forms and functions of Scots between the Unions (1603-1707) is yet to be written, but given the evidence from non-literary and utilitarian usage, as well as diasporic contexts (Horsbroch 1999), the position of Scots in the seventeenth century may not be as easily dismissed as it has been so far.

8 Final remarks

In his thought-provoking paper, Costa (2009) argued that the 'histories' of Scots were, to a large degree, developed in a period when one had to justify the status of this language and explain its place on the map of language variation in the British Isles. The linguistic history of Scots, together with its traditional periodisation, can be placed among the narratives created in the ideological climate of the past. In the teens of the twenty-first century the situation is much different, and there is a need for a new 'narrative whole', as Topolski would have it. The status of a language for Scots is not disputed, and the public recognition of both its heritage and its present forms and functions is growing. This is why we should approach old questions with new eyes, or ask the questions which have not been asked simply because the answers were taken for granted, or formed a traditional account. A few years back, to question the traditional account would mean to destroy a certain ideological agreement. Today we may resort to objective criteria for a linguistic periodisation of Scots, aiming to represent the history of this language in its own right, with appropriate consideration of the linguistic situation south of the border, and with due attention paid to both extra-linguistic and language internal factors. The nature of periodisation itself stays elusive and the boundaries between periods arbitrary. It remains to be seen whether the advantages of designing a criteria-driven timeline will prompt scholars to welcome a new conceptualisation of the history of Scots.

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