Teachers’ language attitudes and their role in language maintenance in the North-East of Scotland

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Abstract

Over the last few decades there has been a rising interest and appreciation of the Scots language. Within the sociolinguistic literature positive language attitudes, especially amongst teachers, are often considered to contribute significantly to minority language maintenance.¹ This study employs a mixture of quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (interviews) methods which allow me to evaluate such assertions in the Scottish context. Findings indicate that teachers’ language attitudes are surprisingly positive, but these apparently positive attitudes are not necessarily translated into actual teaching practice. A key question is why this should be the case. The incongruence between attitudes and practice may in part stem from an observable lack of competence in Scots. However, the explanation here is more socio-cultural in character. I consider the conception of Scots as invaluable heritage to be preserved and cherished and argue that historicity, which is seen as a key determinant of positive language attitudes and the maintenance of minority language varieties,² contains the basic contradiction that it may preclude local dialects, by appropriating and redefining Scots as a historical artefact or a symbolic token. In short, apparently positive language attitudes may in fact accelerate language death.