

# Answering 10 nonsense myths about Ulster-Scots



haivers



**Ulster-Scots Agency**

Boord o' Ulstèr-Scotch

Everybody kens a  
wee bit o' Ulster-Scots



# 10 Myths About the Ulster-Scots Language

Most people in Northern Ireland respect cultural diversity and have respect for Ulster-Scots identity, heritage and language.

Sadly, a minority of people do not respect Ulster-Scots and can often be quite vocal about it. Sometimes the criticisms are brutal and obvious, other times they are more subtle.

The myths that they spread can be very damaging, because they cause people to be embarrassed or fearful about embracing, enjoying and sharing Ulster-Scots.

# 1. “It doesn’t exist”

It has often claimed that Ulster-Scots just doesn’t exist. This simply isn’t true. The language was established in Ulster in the early 1600s with the arrival of Lowland Scottish settlers and has been here ever since, featuring in printed prose and poetry for around 300 years.

The first printer in Ulster was **James Blow** who came over from Fife in 1696 and was printing literature in Scots from the outset. The earliest known Ulster-Scots poet was **William Starrat** of Strabane, who was writing in 1722.

The last census in 2011 recorded that there were around 140,000 Ulster-Scots speakers in Northern Ireland, and there is an important Ulster-Scots language community and tradition in east Donegal.



## E P I S T L E

*From Mr. WILLIAM STARRAT  
Teacher of Mathematicks at Straban in Ireland.*

A E windy Day laft Owk, I’ll ne’er forget,  
I think I hear the Hailftanes rattling yet ;  
On *Grochan* Bufs my Hirdfell took the Lee,  
As ane wad wifh, juft a’ beneath my Ee :

## 2. “It’s sectarian”

Ulster-Scots was once infamously described as a “DIY language for Orangemen”. The truth is that our language is used right across the community in Northern Ireland and everyone has a wee bit of Ulster-Scots.

The famous poet **Seamus Heaney**, who came from Bellaghy, wrote,

“From the start, Burns’ birl and rhythm,  
the tongue the Ulster-Scots brought with them  
and stick to still in County Antrim was in my ear.  
It westered in from east of Bann on the Derry air.”

Recently, Féile an Phobail, the West Belfast Festival, hosted the **World Cribby Championship**. The well-known street game gets its name from the fact that the Ulster-Scots word for footpath is cribpad.

‘In school, one had to talk “polite” to the teacher; but in the playground one talked the local “patois” which in North Antrim was close to Lowland Scots’.

Cardinal Cahal B. Daly *Steps on My Pilgrim Journey* (1998)

### 3. “It’s political”

It has been claimed that Ulster-Scots is political, in part because Ulster-Scots was recognised within the Belfast Agreement of 1998.

An *Irish News* columnist even wrote:

“Ulster Scots was invented by Britain during the Good Friday Agreement negotiations to give unionists wriggle room on Sinn Fein’s promotion of Irish and to claim that the Troubles represented a row between two cultures in which Britain was a non-partisan peacemaker” (11.08.12).

This is complete nonsense. Ulster-Scots was well-known in Northern Ireland up until the 1960s. The onset of the Troubles pushed communities apart and led to a much greater focus on religious (Catholic/Protestant) and national (British/Irish) identity.

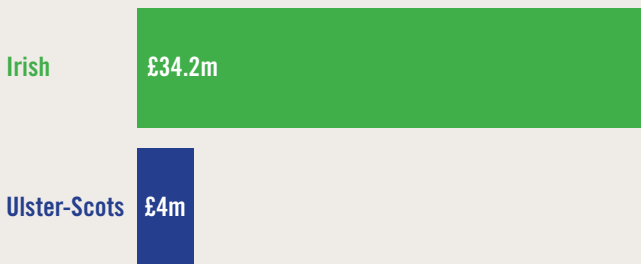
Ulster-Scots didn’t disappear during the Troubles, but recognition in the Belfast Agreement kick started a long overdue process of cultural restoration. Ulster-Scots pre-dates 1998, 1921, 1912 and even 1690!

## 4. “It’s all about taking money away from Irish”

**It is sometimes claimed that the Ulster-Scots movement only exists as a spoiler to take money away from the Irish language movement. That simply isn’t true.**

In Northern Ireland we often rush to make comparisons between different groups and the shape of equality legislation often encourages us to think this way. The Ulster-Scots community, which receives modest support from government, is entitled to have its rights respected and its needs met.

Lobbying to achieve fair treatment is not an attack on anyone else’s identity and certainly hasn’t led to any reduction in government support for Irish.

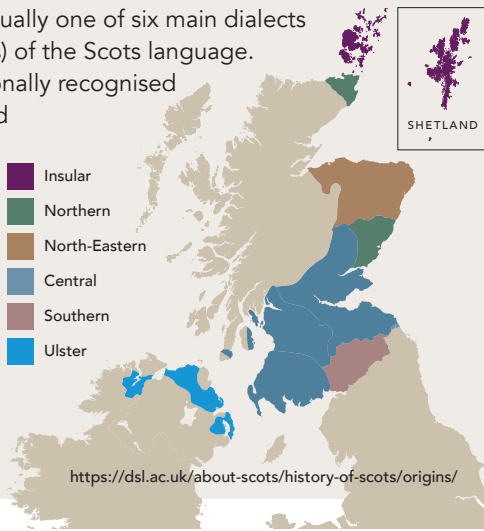


## 5. “It’s a dialect, not a language”

**People often claim that Ulster-Scots is a dialect, not a language. A dialect is simply a regional variety of a language.**

Whether something is described as a language or dialect is much more to do with politics and power than it is with linguistics, which is why people often say that “a language is a dialect with an army and navy”. Most of the critics don’t really understand the terms and when they call Ulster-Scots a dialect they are really trying to run it down and say it is just bad English.

Ulster-Scots is actually one of six main dialects (regional varieties) of the Scots language. Scots is internationally recognised as a language and so is Ulster-Scots, reflecting the fact that we are geographically separated from Scotland.





## 6. “It’s just bad English”

Ulster-Scots is often dismissed as bad English. The close proximity of some Ulster-Scots words to English words, like coul/cold; houl/hold; toul/told; or boul/bold is often used to justify this, but it is wrong. Scots is a sister language to English and many words have a shared origin. It is just like French and Spanish. For example, the French word for country is pays, which in Spanish is país. No-one would ever claim that Spanish is just bad French, even though 75% of their words are very similar because of their shared roots in Latin.

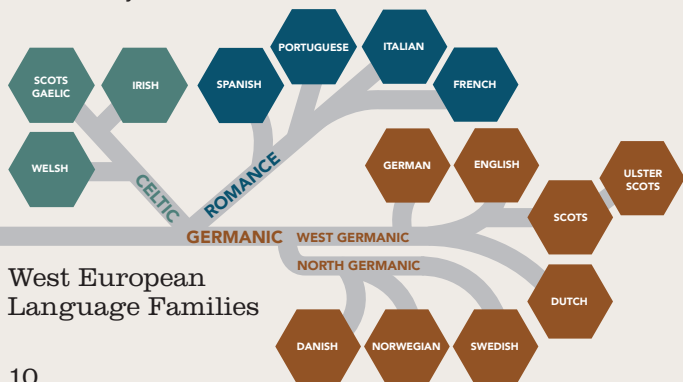
It is not unusual around Europe to find languages that are closely related to each other and have situations where people who are speaking two different languages can understand each other without difficulty. This would be normal in areas like Scandinavia, Iberia or the Balkans. Celtic languages are also closely related, especially Irish and Scots Gaelic, but no-one would dream of saying that Scots Gaelic was bad Irish!

## 7. “It’s closely related to Irish”

Some commentators wrongly claim that Ulster-Scots is closely related to Irish. In fact, Ulster-Scots and Irish are members of two entirely separate and distinct language families.

Irish is part of the Celtic language family, in common with languages like Scots Gaelic, Welsh, Cornish and Manx. Ulster-Scots is part of the Germanic language family, in common with languages like Scots, English, German, Dutch and Flemish.

Like other languages that share a geographical space, words have been loaned/borrowed between Ulster-Scots and Irish, the most famous example of which is the word **crack**, which has become an iconic Irish word even though it is actually Ulster-Scots.



West European  
Language Families

## 8. “It’s just talking with a Ballymena accent”

Talking a language isn’t about how you sound, it is about using the words and speech patterns. Someone from Belfast sounds different to someone from Ballymena or Ballyhalbert or Londonderry or even East Donegal, but they could all be speaking Ulster-Scots.

A Ballymena accent doesn’t sound any different whether the person is speaking in English or Ulster-Scots. It is the words and how they are used that makes the difference.

SINCE I was a boy in my ain native toun,  
There’s naething but bigging and pu’ing wa’s  
down ;  
The streets are grown wider, the houses are high,  
And half o’ their windows peer into the sky ;  
Their doors wad let in ony cart frae the street,  
Their owners ne’er think o’ a shoe for their feet,  
They a’ maun hae boots ere they venture abroad ;  
Their claething appears to an auld body odd ;  
How changed frae the times when our forefathers  
lay  
In houses weel streekit wi heather and strae !  
Happy hames, happy hearts, we had ilka place  
roun’,  
Whan I was a boy in my ain native toun.

## 9. “It’s how country people talk”

Many people, even within the Ulster-Scots community, think that Ulster-Scots is only used in rural communities. This couldn’t be further from the truth.

A lot of Ulster-Scots is used in urban settings, but it is often dismissed as slang or bad English. Words like youse or yousens; windaes; and shap (shop) are all good Ulster-Scots words. Channel 4 actually issued a guide to help people understand the speech on the hit tv series **Derry Girls** and most of the words in it are Ulster-Scots!

boke  
dose  
eejit  
slabber  
wain

<https://www.channel4.com/press/news/derry-girls-glossary-learn-local-lingo-you-eejit>

# 10. “It’s how stupid people talk”

It has often been said or suggested that people who use Ulster-Scots are stupid.

A columnist in the *Irish News* once wrote that:

“Ulster-Scots is just someone adopting the accent and limited vocabulary of an uneducated person from Co Antrim or north Co Down” (19.07.07).

Despite such amazingly patronising remarks, Ulster-Scots is virtually identical to Ayrshire Scots, the language of **Robert Burns**, recognised as one of the world’s greatest poets. It has been used by generations of Ulster writers, including **C.S. Lewis**, one of the world’s greatest authors, who was also a professor at Oxford University.

‘...conversing with a liveliness... which I could easily have mistaken for low Scotch ... I feel I cannot describe these Ulstermen better...’

CS Lewis (1927) © copyright C.S Lewis Pte Ltd

# haivers

*v*ti **1** talk in a foolish or trivial way, speak nonsense *la*18 – **2** make a fuss about nothing, make a pretence of being busy *la*19–, *now Ayr Uls.*

*n* **1** nonsense, foolish talk, gossip, chatter. **2** a piece of nonsense, a foolish whim or notion

**haiverel** *n* **1** a foolishly chattering or garrulous person, a fool, a halfwit

*From The Chambers Concise Scots Dictionary*

# Tha Boord o Sabotashin' Irish Language Fundin'

MEENISTER, -WHIT'S THE POINT O' US  
TALKIN' LIKE THIS IF WE CANNAE STAMP  
BROON HANDIN OER £6 MILLION ?!

HOWL' YER  
WHEEST YE  
HAVERIN' HINNIE!  
THERE'LL BE NAE  
ACT I TELL  
YE! ...

...NOO-PIT ON  
ANITHER ANDY!  
STEWART TAPE.

PAW BROON  
NAE FRIEN  
O OORS

HAWICK BALLS

Map o' an auncient  
Non Irish Land

NOT  
ULSTER

ULSTER

# Northern aye reland

# All over aye reland

Everybody kens a  
wee bit o' Ulster-Scots

An answer to the ten biggest  
myths that have been spread  
about the Ulster-Scots language,  
which for years have caused  
people to be embarrassed  
or fearful about embracing,  
enjoying and sharing Ulster-Scots.

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