# THE SCOTS – NORTHERN ENGLISH CONTINUUM OF MARKING NOUN PLURALITY

JOANNA KOPACZYK

*Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań*

## 0. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present an analysis of nominal plural markers within the language continuum on both sides of the Solway-Tweed line in the period between the late 14th – early 16th centuries.

The Scots – English border in the Middle English period certainly was an area of political tension and one could infer that in the linguistic domain certain mechanisms must have operated as well. For instance, one of the phenomena which seem to be natural in these socio-political circumstances, would be the strife to mark own identity also in language. However, one should avoid jumping to conclusions in the case of Scots and its southern neighbour. In order to study grammatical features of the area it is necessary to incorporate its history in the analysis.

## 1. Historical sketch

The Anglian tribes, who had raided the British Isles in the 6th century, established a kingdom of Northumbria north of the river Humber but their settlement is also confirmed for the area north of the Tweed and Cheviot Hills, e.g., in place-names in *-ton*, *-ham* or *-ing* (see, e.g., Murison 1979: 3). After Scandinavian raids on the southern part of Northumbria (Deira) and the final submission of the Danes to the English king Edward in the 10th century, the Scottish kingdom north of the Solway-Tweed line recognised (at least theoretically) English supremacy. In the later course of the century, in 973 AD, the lands of Northumbria were passed into Scottish hands by the English king and the new Scottish subjects were promised that they would keep their traditions, laws, and what is most important, language.

What we now call Scots, as opposed to Scottish Gaelic or Scottish English, is actually the language of the descendants of the Anglian people. Its usage was promoted by the Anglophile royal family in Scotland and enhanced by the numerous Saxon, Flemish and Norman-French refugees and settlers. South of the border, the Northumbrian Old English dialect transformed into a northern dialect of Middle English, losing, however its strong position and importance. On the north side of the Solway-Tweed line, the development was into a national variety, and a literary standard. This process of differentiation was prompted in the first place by Scottish contact with French and Latin, whose influence differed in scope from similar processes operating in England. Secondly, Scotland possessed its distinct legal institutions and ecclesiastical system, which also had its impact on language. The last but not least factor would lie in political tensions with England, warfare and a growing notion of own Scottish identity. Therefore, the former Scottish dialect of Northumbria started to diverge from its southern relative and, as Murison observes: "the years 1460-1560 can be considered the heyday of the Scots tongue as a full national language showing all the signs of a rapidly developing, all purpose speech ..." (1979: 8-9). Nevertheless, as Murray (1873: 5) aptly notices in his valuable analysis, very often "a community of name conceal[s] actual difference, [just like] a diversity of names disguise[s] an identity of fact", the latter being an adequate description of Older Scots and Northern Middle English. These two seemingly different variants with different names, used in two hostile kingdoms, were in fact very similar and intelligible.

Still, it is a common practice to describe Older Scots grammar by relating it to Middle English (most commonly to the southern variety) and on this basis to establish the so-called diagnostic features, helpful in tracing down texts or deciding on their "Scottishness".

The features usually analysed on the level of morphology include (Kniezsa 1997: 42): present indicative 3rd sg. in -is/-es, nomen agentis in -ar (e.g., millar), the comparative of adjectives in -ar (e.g., lattar), past and past participle in -yt/-ed, past participle in -yn/-en, genitive plural in -is, -ys/-es, -'s, to which one can by analogy add the nominal plural marker in -is, -ys/-es. It is interesting to see how the nominal plural was marked in the 14th-16th centuries on both sides of the Solway-Tweed line, within a variety arising from common roots, but at that time starting to diverge in two different directions.

Therefore, the present paper concentrates not so much on the comparison of this aspect in Scots and English, but rather examines the issue with reference to Older Scots and its close relative – Northern Middle English.

## 2. Distribution of regular nominal endings

The nominal plural paradigm was simplified to a great extent in Middle English. On the basis of a-stem strong masculine Old English nouns the so-called

regular ending developed, different though for English and Scots (for Scots see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Nominal endings in Older Scots (King 1997: 160)

|  | singular | plural |
|---|---|---|
| nominative/oblique | kingø | kingis |
| genitive | kingis | kingis |

In the present paper, the focus is not on Middle English versus Older Scots but rather on how the Northern Middle English variety resembled Older Scots in marking plurality.

The {S} morpheme as a regular plural marker could have been realised in various ways in Middle English. The orthographic alternants naturally varied from place to place but the question is whether the phonological realisations were different as well. In the area of interest for this paper, there were two basic forms -is, -ys vs. -es. As those forms were found in unstressed syllables, it is justifiable to accept Minkova's claim (1991: 121) that <i> may have marked a raised schwa in the vicinity of nasals and dentals. These consonants were acting as a raising environment, to which Lass (1976: 79, 185) adds also alveolars (references based on King 1997). This fact would remain in agreement with Fisiak's statement that Middle English possessed two vowels in unstressed positions, namely /i/ and /ə/ (1968: 46). According to King (1997: 161), "Scots apparently generalised /i/ [which was a raised /ə/] ... in unstressed positions while Northern English ... used both /ə/ and /i/ interchangeably". In the analysis below these claims shall be confronted with textual data, based on *LALME*.

### 2.1. Data analysis

A great shortcoming of the otherwise invaluable evidence provided by *LALME*, lies in an unsatisfactory amount of texts from the Scottish Border counties: east Dumfriesshire, Roxburghshire, Selkirkshire and Berwickshire. Each of the counties is represented by only one source text and one Linguistic Profile derived from it. For Dumfries and Roxburgh the texts come from the late 14th century, for Berwick – mid-15th, and for Selkirk – early 16th century. On the other side of the Solway-Tweed line we have Cumberland with 28 dated texts covering the period from the early 15th to early 16th century, and Northumberland with 15 texts, from the late 14th to early 16th century. Apparently, the texts from Scots counties exhibit a lot of similarities in marking nominal plurals, despite the fact that they were compiled at different points of a 150-year time span (see Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of nominal plural endings in Southern Lowlands (based on *LALME*).

| County | *-is/-ys* | *-es* | *-eʒ* | *-s* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dumfries (1386) | **1** | (1) | (1) | ((1)) |
| Roxburgh (1398) | **1** | (1) | 1 | ((1)) |
| Berwick (1438-1442) | **1** (1) | ((1)) | ((1)) | |
| Selkirk (1503-1515) | **1** ((1)) | ((1)) | | |

Table 3. Distribution of nominal plural endings in Cumberland (based on *LALME*).

| Years | Number of texts | *-es* | *-es** | *-eʒ* | *-s* | *-is/-ys* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 14th c. (2 half) | 0 | | | | | |
| 15th c. (1 half) | 16 | **9** (1) ((1)) | **5** (2) ((4)) | ((1)) | **2** (1) ((3)) | **4** (4) ((2)) |
| 15th c. (2 half) | 10 | **7** ((2)) | **3** | (1) ((1)) | **2** (1) ((1)) | **4** (2) ((3)) |
| 16th c. (1 half) | 2 | | **1** (1) | **1** | (1) | (1) |
| Total | 28 | **16** (1) ((3)) | **9** (3) ((4)) | **1** (1) ((2)) | **4** (3) ((4)) | **8** (7) ((5)) |

\* an abbreviated form

For Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5 single brackets mean that a given form was used in a text as a secondary variant, and double brackets signalise that an ending was rare. In all texts *-is/-ys* nominal plural marker dominates clearly. In Berwick *-ys* appears also as a secondary variant and in Selkirk as a tertiary one. Nevertheless, there is some influence of the southern *-es* type, also with <*-eʒ*> spelling, which might suggest a voiced final consonant. These forms, however, were used occasionally or seldom. The unanimity of the four Scottish texts, written, what is more, at different points of one and a half century, allows a statement that nominal plural ending in *-is/-ys* was a characteristic and dominant inflection used in the Border counties from the 14th into the 16th century.

In the case of Cumberland, due to a greater number of source texts, we can arrive at a more comprehensive picture of nominal endings (see Table 3). Of course the figures in all tables do not sum up to 100% because in one text the scribe may have used more than one variant with the same preference, treated in the Tables as a separate entry.

For the lack of texts from the end of the 14th century this row is left empty. The relatively high figures for *-es* and *-is/-ys* in the first half of the 15th century suggest, though, that these endings must have developed much earlier. There is one more frequent ending, an abbreviated form *-es*, analysed by *LALME* as *-es* on the basis of predominant variants. In *LALME*'s editorial practice

> ... a given sign of abbreviation is always expanded in the same way. Thus the abbreviation of the noun plural suffix appears always as italicised *-es* [in this paper *-es*], never as *-is* or *-ys*. This involves departure from the traditional rendering of Scots texts, where the expansion is nearly always *-is*; but it would be wholly misleading to imply a difference between mediaeval English and Scots practice on this point, with *-es* giving way to *-is* north of the Border, when all that is at issue is the variant national practices of *modern scholars* [emphasis mine] (vol. 1: xvi).

We may assume that the scribe intended *-es* there because this was the most frequent ending, but we cannot be sure whether or not he really meant *-is*. If this was the case, the whole picture would need reorganisation. Nevertheless, there is one argument for *LALME*'s analysis, namely that none of the Scots writers (see Table 2) used abbreviations for nominal plural marker, which suggests that the practice was more popular in the south and the abbreviation was used to mean *-es*.

Northumberland presents a slightly different choice of endings (Table 4).

Table 4. Distribution of nominal plural endings in Northumberland (based on *LALME*).

| Years | Number of texts | -es | -es | -eʒ | -s | -is/-ys |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 14th c. (2 half) | 2 | 2 | ((1)) | 1 | | 1 ((1)) |
| 15th c. (1 half) | 7 | 4 | 2 | 1 (2) | 2 (2) | 6 |
| 15th c. (2 half) | 5 | 2 | ((1)) | ((1)) | 2 (1) | 1 ((1)) |
| 16th c. (1 half) | 1 | 1 | | | | 1 |
| Total | 15 | 9 | 2 ((2)) | 2 (2) ((1)) | 4 (3) | 9 ((2)) |

In Northumberland the *-es* variant is steadily used throughout the period and it comes only as the main choice of the scribe. Interestingly, the *-is/-ys* form has scored the same total figure, its usage, however, seems to fluctuate (greatest number for the 1st half of the 15th c.) and the ending comes sometimes as a tertiary choice. Obviously, the forms in *-eC* are predominant but the Scots variety with a raised /ə/ marks its strong position in Northumbrian texts, too.

To achieve a better and comparative picture of the situation, in Table 5 the figures for Northern English counties were summed up (disregarding, however, rare variants) and the percentage of texts exhibiting a particular inflection was counted.

Table 5. Distribution of nominal plural endings in northern counties of England (based on *LALME*).

| Years | Number of texts | -es | -es | -eʒ | -s | -is/-ys |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 14th c. (2 half) | 2 | 100% | | 50% | | 50% |
| 15th c. (1 half) | 23 | 56.5% | 30.4% | 4.4% | 17.9% | 43.5% |
| 15th c. (2 half) | 15 | 60% | 20% | | 26% | 33% |
| 16th c. (1 half) | 3 | 33% | 33% | 33% | | 33% |
| Total | 43 | 58.1% | 25.6% | 7% | 18.6% | 39.5% |

In the last row, the percentage of occurrences in texts from the whole period was counted.

According to the above analysis, it is apparent that the *-es* ending was predominant in the area bordering on Scotland, although at the same time the typically Scottish ending did not come much shorter. Its usage was relatively high within the time-span analysed, and perhaps the slight decline towards the 16th century is a signal of its decreasing popularity because of a stronger position of the English standard.

The *-s* ending, implying an absence of the vowel in the {S} morpheme, also appears in Northumbria and Cumberland, but is not yet generalised to the whole paradigm. In Scottish borderline counties this ending is very weakly represented in texts of the period quoted in *LALME* (see Table 2).

3. Distribution of irregular plurals

The rest of possible plural markers are commonly called "irregular" plurals. In this category there are several subdivisions:

a)   *-en* plurals, stemming from Old English weak nominal paradigm,
b)   mutative plurals, marking plurality with a *i*-umlaut root vowel mutation;
c)   "zero" plurals, some stemming from Old English strong neuter paradigm, some lost endings due to schwa-loss but did not enter the regular paradigm;
d)   *r*-plurals, from Old English *r*-paradigm;
e)   plurals with final voiced fricative + {S};

Unfortunately *LALME* does not provide much data on the distribution of particular items, with the exception of *eye-eyen*. The analysis is therefore based on other sources (Murray 1873; King 1997; Wright 1905; *A dictionary of Older Scottish tongue* [*DOST*] and *The Scottish national dictionary* [*SND*]).

a) The first subcategory, *-en* plurals, was kept relatively long in the south of England, in the north, however, most nouns had entered the regular paradigm by the late 13ᵗʰ century, leaving only three items: *ey-eyn*, *schui-schuin* and *ox-oxin* (and their orthographic variants) (Murray 1873: 158). Each of these is backed up with textual quotes in *DOST*, also for various orthographic variants. Grant and Dixon (1921: 79) also give *hosen*, *treen*, *turven* and *breeken*, unattested, however, in both *DOST* and *SND*. The three lexical items mentioned earlier survived in Scots dialects until now in an unchanged form, even though in England only *oxen* is left.

b) Apart from these mutative plurals which were retained also in Middle English, in Scots the pair *brother-brether* survived as well and is considered a distinctive feature (King 1997: 162). Additionally, Scots shares the *cow-ky* variant with Northern England, but not with the standard.

c) The subcategory of zero-plurals abounds in animal names, which are shared by Middle English and Older Scots, e.g., *deir*, *schepe*, *hors*, etc. (King 1997: 162; Ekwall 1975), to which for the north only one should add *nowt* 'cattle', *gayt* 'goat' and *greyce* 'pig' (Murray 1873: 160). Measures of time and space would constitute another semantic field here, just to quote the typically Scots examples: *yere*, *nicht*, *monith* (for time); *mile*, *ynsch*, *yeard* (for space) (for more see Murray 1873: 161-162).

d) There were two vocabulary items on the territory of Scotland stemming from Old English *r*-paradigm. The first, *childer*, was used alongside a double plural *childryn* and *childryng*, the latter two (together with their spelling variants) being called by *DOST* "peculiar to Scots". The second, *cair* 'calves', was used simultaneously with a regular *-is* plural but survived in dialects even until now. Grant and Dixon (1921) add also *breer* – not to be found in *DOST*.

e) The last subcategory to be considered here has phonological and orthographic bases. Certain nouns ending with a voiceless fricative would change the final consonant into its voiced counterpart when a plural inflection was added. In Older Scots, alternating variants can be found, e.g., *wyffis/wyvis*, *neiffis/neves*, etc. (King 1997: 162), the difference from English being in the {S} morpheme, its spelling and implied realisation, rather than in the phenomenon of voicing.

## 4. Conclusion

To conclude, when analysing features of Older Scots in comparison with English, one should be careful not to generalise findings also to the northern English variety. To quote McArthur, "life is demonstrably a continuum and it is only a matter of procedural convenience to cut it up into manageable chunks" (1979: 53). The speech of northern English territories bordering on Scotland has the

same roots as Scots, and in the period until the mid-fifteenth century is not different enough to call it a different language (in linguistic terms, of course). When it comes to the regular plural marker in the period of the late 14ᵗʰ – early 16ᵗʰ centuries, Scottish texts are more homogenous, whereas in texts coming from the other side of the Solway-Tweed line scribal choices vary more, with a preference for *-es* almost equal with Scottish *-is/-ys*. In irregular paradigms certain individual lexical items pertain to Scotland only, and some are shared on both sides of the Border, though not with Standard English.

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