English Dialects in Modern British Fiction

"Ach Crivens": The Language of the Wee Free Men

04 March 2008

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Semester: 4

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Content:

1. Introduction

"Nae King! Nae Quin! Nae laird! Nae master!"

Terry Pratchett, *The Wee Free Men*

In his novel *Carpe Jugulum*, British fantasy author Terry Pratchett introduces a race of little men that we come to know, among other names, as (Pratchett 2000: 182/183) "Nac mac Feegle", in this paper referred to as *Nac Mac Feegle* or *Feegles.*

The Feegles play an important role in Pratchett's children's book series around Tiffany Aching (Pratchett 2004 – 2006). What makes them interesting for linguistic studies is their very unusual, artificial language (herein referred to as *Feegle Language*).

The aim of this paper is to analyse Feegle Language, concentrating on the lexicon, to find out how Feegle Language is composed, which words from which language are used, and how it develops in the course of the four books.

The analysis is mainly based on *The Annotated Pratchett File* (APF), which, though it is no scientific work and should therefore be viewed critically, gives valuable hints made by native speakers about the origin of words and phrases. The information taken from the APF is confirmed by other works such as *The English language in Scotland: an introduction to Scots*, *Varieties of English Around the World: Glasgow* and *Urban Scots Dialect Writing* for information on Scots and Glaswegian; *Celtic Presence* for information on Gaelic and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* for background and

historical information. Dictionaries used for the analysis are listed in the "Reference" section.

2.   Language Composition / Definition of Terms

According to Pratchett (2005, extras: 11), the Nac Mac Feegle "speak a mixture of Gaelic, Old Scots, Glaswegian, and gibberish."

Feegle Language is mainly based on Scots; Scots "loan words" provide for the largest part of its vocabulary by far. This is what probably caused the APF (Breebart 2005: 118) to say that the "Feegles speak a version of Scots", which is, in fact, not entirely true. The Feegles speak an **artificial** language containing many features of Scots.

Before Feegle Language is analysed more closely, the terms "Gaelic", "Old Scots" and "Glaswegian" should be defined.

Gibberish, obviously, needs no explanation.

2.1. Gaelic

Gaelic is a Celtic language of the Goidelic branch, also referred to as Q-Celtic because the Indo-European labio-velar /kʷ/ remained a velar stop in this branch of Celtic whereas it became a labial stop in the so-called P-Celtic or Gallo-British.

Common Gaelic can be geographically divided into two subgroups: Western Gaelic (Irish) and Eastern Gaelic (Scottish Gaelic and Manx Gaelic). (Stalmaszczyk 2005: 13/14)

Since Feegle Language is largely based on Scots, as will be discussed below, it is assumed in this paper that the Gaelic words included in this language have their origin in Scottish Gaelic.

2.2. (Old) Scots

Jones (2002:1) defines Scots as *"the principal linguistic medium of face-to-face communication used by the vast majority of speakers who live within the boundaries of Scotland today."*[1] He admits, though, that the question of defining Scots is much debated and that there are more current definitions, such as the language widely known as Lowland Scots or Lallans (which he criticizes as "artificial and reconstructed").

It has been discussed for a long time if Scots should be regarded as a language or merely as a dialect (Jones 2002:2). Though he does not give a definite answer to this question, he seems to be in favour of the 'dialect' theory.

The question whether Scots or, accordingly, Feegle Language is a language or a dialect will not be discussed in this paper. Feegle Language is artificial, anyway, and probably hardly spoken or written except in Pratchett's books (and by Pratchett's fans, occasionally).

Old or, as it is mostly referred to, Older Scots is the language that was spoken in Scotland from the first records to the seventeenth century (Jones 2002:95). By 1500, it had become the official language in Scotland, replacing Gaelic (Jones 2002:96).

2.3. Glaswegian

Glaswegian, also called "Glasgow patter", is the dialect spoken in the region in and around the city of Glasgow. It is, essentially, a variety of Scots (Macafee 1983:7), more precisely, a variety of West Central Scots (Hagan 2002:87), modified by the impact of other languages,

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[1] italics taken over from original source

mostly during the time of industrial revolution when Glasgow became an industry town, attracting immigrants (Hagan 2002:87/88).

"He spoke differently, too, more clearly and slowly than the others" (Pratchett 2004: 173). According to the Cambridge Encyclopedia (Crystal 1996: 330),

> the rise . . . of urban dialects [resulted] in a distinction between 'guid Scots', spoken in rural areas, and 'gutter Scots', . . . with the speech of working class Glasgow commonly cited as a prime example.

Feegle Language in general is relatively close to Glasgow patter, i. e. to 'gutter Scots', whereas the gonnagle, who comes from another clan, speaks what Breebart (2005: 135) calls "Ayrshire burr": his language contains very few words that would be marked 'slang' by a dictionary, and he can easily be understood by speakers of Standard English (such as Tiffany, and probably the majority of readers).

3.   Lexicon of the Feegle Language

"'You have a dictionary, I believe,' she said. 'A strange but useful thing for a girl to have.'"   Terry Pratchett, *Wintersmith*

3.1. General Usage of Words

The author provides two short glossaries at the beginning of his last two books (Pratchett 2005: 5/6 and 2006: 3-5), probably to help his young readers to understand what is being said.

The appendix of this paper contains a table which gives a close analysis of this glossary, comparing it to the CSD (Mairi 1999) and other sources.

Other characteristical words and phrases used by the Feegles are

Gaelic:[2]

Uskabarch	usquebae, usquebaugh: uisge beatha → whisky (Mairi 1999)
Cailleach	old woman
Tir-far-Thiónn	literally translated "Land over [word that does not exist]" The intended meaning "Land Under Wave" would be "Tìr-fo-Tonn" (MacLennan 1979) a place in Irish mythology comparable to Atlantis (Breebart 2005)
Cailey	ceilidh → literally: visit Scots: informal social gathering (Mairi 1999)

Scots or Glaswegian:[3]

Yez lukin' at a faceful o'heid!	Glaswegian greeting (Breebart 2005)
Chymie	Jimmy → name used for addressing a stranger
bogle	an ugly or terrifying ghost or phantom

As can be seen from this analysis and the table in the appendix, the lexicon is largely, but not entirely similar to that of Scots. It particularly contains many words that are considered slang, but not actually swear words.

3.2. Names

3.2.1. Collective Names

The race of the Nac Mac Feegle is known by many other names:

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[2] definitions from MacLennan (1979) if not noted otherwise
[3] definitions from Mairi (1999) if not noted otherwise

PICTSIES (Pratchett 2000: 183): A pun on the Picts, who inhabited Scotland in the time before the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons (Crystal 1996: 6), and pixies.

WEE FREE MEN (Pratchett 2005: 1): 'The Wee Frees' is a Glaswegian name for the Free Church of England (Macafee 1983:31).

PERSON OR PERSONS UNKNOWN, BELIEVED TO BE ARMED: The author plays with legal language here; Feegles fear lawyers (Pratchett 2004:104).

THE LITTLE MEN: Allusion to the poem "The Fairies" from William Allingham:

"Up the airy mountain, down the rushy glen
We dare not go a-hunting for fear of little men"

(Breebart 2005:68)[4]

GNOMES: refers to their size and elfish nature; it is mentioned several times throughout the books that Feegles are, technically, fairies.

3.2.2.Individual Names

"That's No'-as-big-as-Medium-Sized-Jock-but-bigger-than-Wee-Jock-Jock, mistress,' said "No'-as-big-as-Medium-Sized-Jock-but-bigger-than-Wee-Jock-Jock. 'Ye were one Jock short"

Terry Pratchett, *The Wee Free Men*

Feegle names are, with rare exceptions, formed according to two patterns:

1. adjective attribute (often of size) + name: Big Yan, Big Aggie, Wee Angus, Wee Mad Archie, Wee Dangerous Spike, Slightly Mad Angus, the above-mentioned No'-as-big-as-Medium-Sized-Jock-but-bigger-than-Wee-Jock-Jock and many others

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[4] compare Pratchett 2004: 212

2. name + "the" + substantive attribute: William the gonnagle, Hamish the aviator

The most prominent exception is the "big man" Rob Anybody, whose naming does not follow these patterns but is, as the author points out, a pun in itself if read as an instruction (Pratchett 2005: 39).

"There's no' that many Feegle names, ye ken, so we ha' to share." (Pratchett 2004: 178) The list of names read out by the lawyers (Pratchett 2004: 338) suggests this, too. There are three variations of Angus (not even including Slightly Mad Angus who is introduced in Pratchett 2006) and three more of Archie. Another shared name seems to be William, in at least three variations: Duft Wullie, William the gonnagle, Awfully Wee Billy Bigchin.

4. Development of the Feegle Language

> *"He understands evera word I say!'*
> *'That's amazing, because I don't,' said Tiffany."*
>
> Terry Pratchett, *Wintersmith*

I noted during reading that Feegle Language becomes more "understandable" during the books, i. e. it approaches Standard English. Compare "Bae, yon snae rikt speel, y'ol behennit!' (Pratchett 2000) to "But I fear ye're right, Wullie" (Pratchett 2006).

This is mostly due to the fact that unlike "Carpe Jugulum", the later books are written for children and have to be understandable to them, and that the Feegles play a major role in these books, other than the minor part in *Carpe Jugulum*, so that understanding their conversations is essential for understanding the plot.

5.   Conclusion

"Oh waily, waily, waily! She's got the knowin' o' the speakin'!"

Terry Pratchett, *Wintersmith*

Feegle Language can ironically be described as a "Scots Miscellaneous". Yet it is, as mentioned above, **not** Scots and not exactly a variety of Scots. Many influences from other languages play a role in Feegle Language; particularly Gaelic influences are noticeable.

But it is, of course, closer to Scots, particularly to urban working class varieties, than it is to any other language. It is, in a way, a British perception of Scots.

This paper could, of course, only give a very brief overview, merely the surface of the language. Due to the restricted time frame, I had a closer look at lexicology only. A structural analysis of Feegle Language grammar remains still to be done: is it closer to English or to Scots, does it follow any rules at all?

Many other questions remained unanswered, e. g. what does "Nac Mac Feegle" mean?

6.   References

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[5]-7 imprints of HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

7. Appendix

Feegle word	Definition according to		Annotations/Other sources
	Author's glossary	**Concise Scots Dictionary (CSD)**	
Bigjobs	Human beings	Jobs (pl): excrements	
Big Man	Chief of the clan …		
Blethers	Rubbish, nonsense	Rubbish, nonsense	
Boggin'	To be desperate, as in "I'm boggin' for a cup of tea."	To work in wet surroundings	Glasgow: smelly (Macafee 1983:156) Probably, the author did not have either of these definitions in mind
Bunty	A weak person	A hen without a rump; a short, plump person	
Cack yer kecks	… to put it delicately … to be very, very frightened …	Cack: void human excrement	Reminds of the German slang word "kacken" meaning quite the same
Carlin	Old woman	Old woman	Also written in the CSD as carline, carling
Cludgie	The privy	A W. C.	Regarded as slang

Feegle word	Definition according to		Annotations/Other sources
	Author's glossary	Concise Scots Dictionary (CSD)	
Bigjobs	Human beings	Jobs (pl): excrements	
Crivens!	A general exclamation …	Also criffins: expressing astonishment, possible source: "Christ fend us"	
Dree [one's] weird	Face the fate that is in store for [one]	Endure one's fate	
Een	Eyes	Eyes	Plural of ee – eye
Eldritch	Weird, strange. Sometimes means oblong, too, for some reason	1) Belonging to or resembling the elves or similar beings 2) Weird, strange, unearthly	No indication why it should mean oblong or where in the books it has this meaning
Fash	Worry, upset		
Geas	A very important obligation …		According to the Gaelic Dictionary: spell, taboo, charm
Gonnagle	The bard of the clan …		Probably a hint to the poet William McGonagall (Breebart 2005:135)
Hag	A witch of any age		
Hag o' hags	A very important witch		
Hagging/Haggling	Anything a witch does		

| Feegle word | Definition according to | | Annotations/Other sources |
	Author's glossary	Concise Scots Dictionary (CSD)	
Bigjobs	Human beings	Jobs (pl): excrements	
Hiddlins	Secrets	Hiding places; concealment, secrecy	
Kelda	The female head of the clan		Clear mountain spring, source of life (Breebart 2005:135)
…			
Mudlin	Useless person		No indication where this meaning comes from
Pished	… "tired"	Pish = piss	It is clear from the context that "pished" equals the slang word "pissed" for "drunk" (Pratchett 2005:221)
Schemie	An unpleasant person		A pejorative term for an inhabitant of a housing scheme (Breebart 2005:135)
Scuggan	A really unpleasant person	Scug: take shelter from, avoid	I do not know if there is a connection ("scuggan = someone to "scug"), but it is possible

Feegle word	Definition according to		Annotations/Other sources
	Author's glossary	Concise Scots Dictionary (CSD)	
Bigjobs	Human beings	Jobs (pl): excrements	
Scunner	A generally unpleasant person	A person who causes disgust or dislike	
Ships	Woolly things … [sheep]	Schips: sheep	The spelling without <c> does not occur in the CSD
Spavie	See Mudlin	A human rheumatic disease	No obvious connection; if there is a link, it would have to be very interesting
…			
Steamie	… a kind of sauna …	A public wash-house	
Waily	A general cry of despair	Waile / wyle / wylie: An instrument for twisting ropes from straw	See spavie Probably comes rather from Standard English "to wail"

"I see you's done wi' the writing, so we'd best be goin'."

Terry Pratchett, *The Wee Free Men*