

Northern  
aye reland

All over  
aye reland

Everybody kens a  
wee bit o' Ulster-Scots

Ulster-Scots came over with the  
first lowland Scots settlers and  
has been spoken here ever since.  
This wee guide will help you  
to be aware of Ulster-Scots,  
understand it when you hear it,  
recognise it if you use it and try  
it if you don't!

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**Ulster-Scots Agency**

Boord o' Ulster-Scotch

BELFAST & RAPHOE



[www.UlsterScotsAgency.com](http://www.UlsterScotsAgency.com)

# A wee guide to the Ulster-Scots Language

aye!



**Ulster-Scots Agency**

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wee bit o' Ulster-Scots

# Ulster's Three Cultures

Ulster is a special place, a place apart. It has a cultural landscape that is unique in the British Isles, unlike either Britain or the rest of Ireland. This has come about through centuries of interaction between three distinct peoples, the Irish, the Scots and the English, who have been the principal elements of our community since the early 1600s.

This diversity can be seen in all sorts of ways, from the main churches we attend, to our musical traditions, our traditional dances and the sports that we play, which have their origins in England, Scotland and Ireland. It can even be seen in the symbols that we use to represent ourselves, from the shamrock, rose and thistle to the crosses of St Andrew, St George and St Patrick.

One of the greatest examples of our unique cultural wealth is our linguistic diversity. Everyone in Ulster speaks English, but we also have two cherished minority languages, Irish and Ulster-Scots, which people all over the Province are fighting to preserve and promote.

This little guide is designed to help you understand a bit more about the Ulster-Scots language.

# The Scots Language

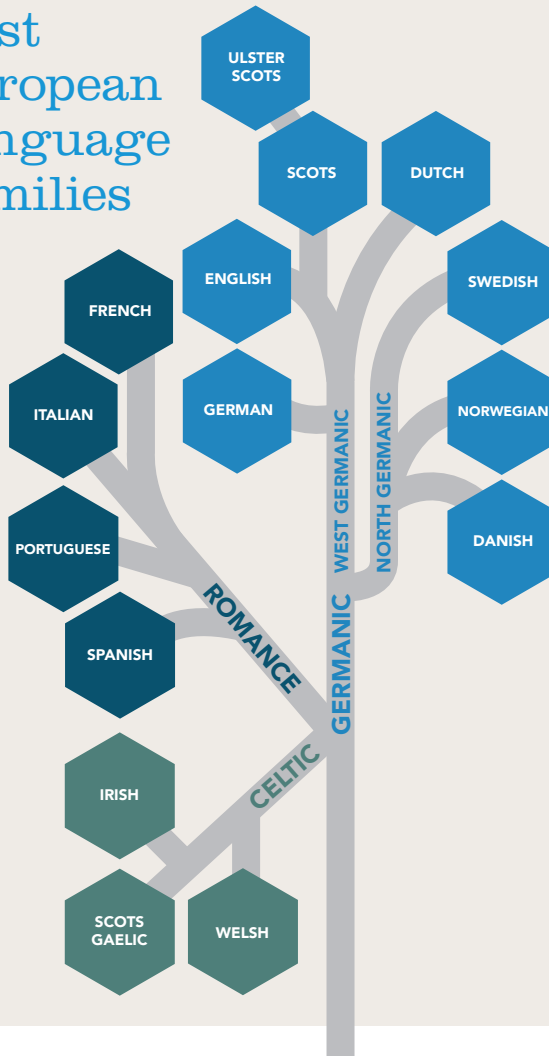
The Scots language has a history stretching back nearly 1,000 years. It is a sister language of English. Both languages share a common Anglo-Saxon origin and are part of the Germanic family of languages, similar to the way that French and Spanish are relatives within the Romance language family.

For centuries, Scots was the national language of Scotland, used for education, literature, law and the Royal Court. Its official status declined from the early 1600s, with greater legal and political integration with England making English the official language of the Kingdom. However, Scots remained the language of the home.

According to Professor AJ Aiken,

*"... despite stigmatisation in school, neglect by officialdom and marginalisation by the media, people of all backgrounds... insisted in regarding the guid Scots tongue as their national language and it continues to play an important part in people's awareness of their national identity..."*

# West European Language Families



## Scots comes to Ulster

The Scots tongue came to Ulster with waves of migration in the 17th Century, when up to 100,000 lowland Scots came in search of prosperity and religious freedom. Within a century, the language was firmly established.

One Dublin visitor observed in 1780 that in Belfast,

"... the common people speak broad Scotch and the better sort differ vastly from us, both in accent and language..."

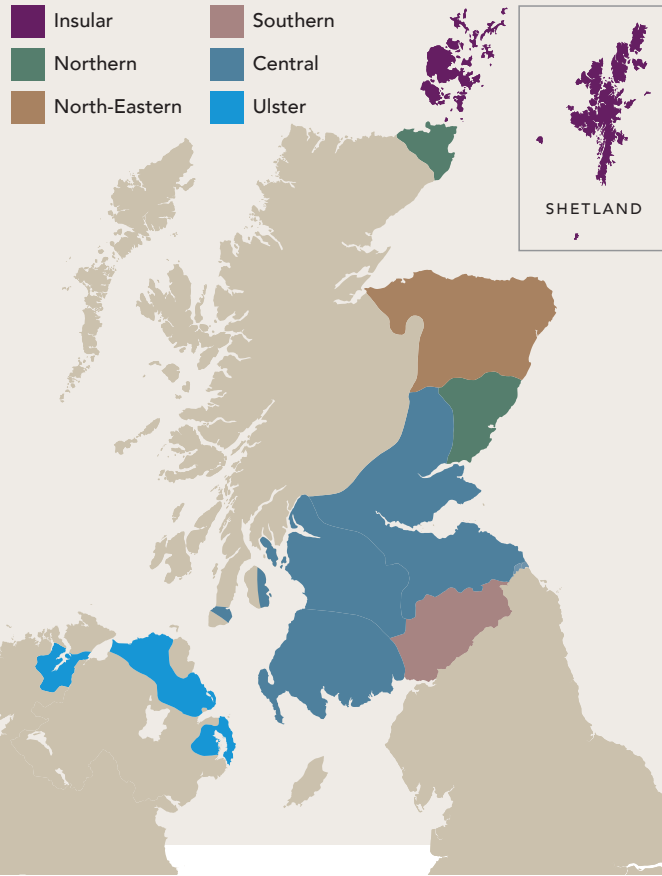
A few years later, a French visitor commented,

"Belfast has almost entirely the look of a Scotch town and the character of the inhabitants has considerable resemblance to that of the people of Glasgow. The way of speaking is much more Scotch than Irish."

The Scots spoken in Ulster is very close, some would even say indistinguishable, from the Scots spoken in the South-West of Scotland. Historically, it was referred to here as Scotch, or braid Scotch, with the term Ulster-Scot being reserved for our people, but for the last hundred years or so, the language has been known as Ulster-Scots, which is recognised as one of six main varieties of the Scots language.

# The main dialect divisions of Modern Scots

<https://dsl.ac.uk/about-scots/history-of-scots/origins/>



## Ulster-Scots Today

Like Scots in Scotland, Ulster-Scots has come under considerable pressure from English, especially due to the influence of the larger language in education and the media. Even so, Ulster-Scots has remained the predominant language of the home in many areas, which has led to it being referred to as “the hamely tongue.”

Although no longer as pure as it once was, the most recent census showed 140,000 people declaring ability in Ulster-Scots in Northern Ireland, although the true figure is probably much higher.

The areas of strongest Ulster-Scots speech are in the coastal arc of Northern Ireland which encompasses the Counties of Down, Antrim and Londonderry. These are the areas of Northern Ireland which are closest to Scotland and also the areas with the greatest concentrations of Ulster-Scots settlement. There is also a strong Ulster-Scots speaking pocket in the Laggan area of East Donegal. The areas with the richest Ulster-Scots speech tend to be rural areas, but there is also much Ulster-Scots to be found in urban communities. Channel 4 recently issued a language guide for the hit tv series *Derry Girls*, in which most of the words were Ulster-Scots!

# A Literary Language

Ulster-Scots has a rich literary tradition, stretching from the early eighteenth century to the present day, which has been tied closely to Scotland. The earliest known Ulster-Scots poet, William Starrat of Strabane, whose work was first published in 1722, was a correspondent of the famous Scots poet Allan Ramsay.

A generation later, the works of **Robert Burns** were avidly soaked up in Ulster and inspired a movement of writers who became known as the Weaver Poets. Foremost among them was **Samuel Thomson**, the Bard of Carngranny, who was a correspondent of Scotland's national poet.

Ulster enjoys a unique relationship with Burns. It was often said that every Ulster home had two books, the Bible and Burns. His works were published here in the local press during his lifetime and the first volume of his poems to be published outside of Scotland was in Belfast. Today, the world's largest collection of Burns material outside Scotland is held at the **Linen Hall Library** in Belfast.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ulster-Scots writers like **WG Lyttle** and **Archibald McIlroy** enthusiastically embraced the kailyard genre which was popular in Scotland, while in more recent times, Ulster-Scots was reflected in the work of the Ulster-born literary giants **CS Lewis** and **Seamus Heaney**.

# Language in the Landscape

The footprint of Ulster-Scots can be seen clearly in the place names of Ulster. The Ulster-Scots settlers generally adopted the earlier Gaelic and sometimes Norse or Anglo-Norman place names, but they also added new names, incorporating Scots words which described their new home.

Words like **brae** (hillside), **knock** (hill), **knowe** (hillock), **dod** (round hill) and **mote** (mound) describe hilly features; while **burn**, **watter** and **strule** describe streams and a **strand** is a beach or seashore. Words like **glar** and **clabber** describe mud, **flush** describes marshy ground and a **moss** is a bog.

Plants and animals also feature in place names, including **whin** (gorse), **lint** (flax), **bracken** (fern), **rodden** (rowan), **tod** (fox), **wedder** (ram), **whaup** (curlew) and **pickie** (young coalfish).

Built features, represented by words like **brig** (bridge), **kirk** (church) and **cotton** (small group of cottages) also appear, along with terms like **loanen** or **loan** (lane), **pad** (path) or **rodden** (road).

The number of towns or villages with an Ulster-Scots place name is relatively few, such as **Lisburn**, **Crawfordsburn**, **Glarryford** or **Mosside**: but there are thousands of Ulster-

Scots place names which occur at a much more local level, as road or street names or the names of small geographical features, which are much closer to the people and reinforce the position of Ulster-Scots as the hamely tongue.

Belfast alone has nearly 200 street names which contain Ulster-Scots words. Some of these are derived from the names of geographical features around the city, like **Purdysburn**. Others come from the names of big houses named for geographical features or else for a family connection to Scotland, which in turn influenced the names of streets when the land around them was developed, such as **Glencairn** or **Strathearn**. Scots words often also appear when streets are called after places in Scotland, like **Langholm Row** and **Selkirk Row** in the city.

Many more Ulster-Scots place names cannot be seen on any official signage. This can be because the name of a road has been Anglicised (in Ulster-Scots, Ingliified), or changed altogether. It can also be because the local geography has changed, with features being built over or hidden. Equally, it can also be that the feature was never officially regarded as important enough to merit the erection of a sign. Nevertheless, these names survive in the historical records and continue to be recalled in the memories of local people.

## Revival

**Today there is new hope for the future of the Ulster-Scots language. The Belfast Agreement of 1998 emphasised the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to languages in Northern Ireland and recognised Ulster-Scots as “part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland”.**

Ulster-Scots has been designated by the UK for protection under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, in common with Scots, Welsh, Manx, Cornish and Irish: and this protection may in time also be adopted by the Republic of Ireland.

The Ulster-Scots Agency, a government organisation established under the Belfast Agreement and sponsored by the administrations in Belfast and Dublin, works to promote the language, heritage and culture of the Ulster-Scots people; and supports a wide range of activity to promote the language. Both of Ulster’s universities are involved in work to shed new light on Ulster-Scots; and programmes reflecting Ulster-Scots culture, heritage and language can now be found regularly on television and radio, supported by the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund.



# Ulster-Scots Words and Phrases

Most people in Northern Ireland use Ulster-Scots words and phrases every day of their lives, often without even realising it. Lack of awareness means that the language is simply thought of as English, or even worse, as bad English! This section is intended to help Ulster-Scots speakers to recognise and understand their use of Ulster-Scots and to help visitors to understand common Ulster-Scots words if they hear them.

If you are a visitor to Ulster, please do not be surprised if you don't hear people speaking Ulster-Scots, because speakers will often only use the language with other speakers who they know well. When talking to visitors or people in authority they are more likely to stick to English.

It is to be hoped that greater familiarity with the rich linguistic and literary heritage of Ulster-Scots will encourage higher levels of interest in the tradition and lead to greater confidence for those across the community who see it as an essential component of their everyday lives.

■ Take a look at these Ulster-Scots words and phrases and see how many you recognise: if you understand most of them, visit [www.ulsterscotsagency.org.uk](http://www.ulsterscotsagency.org.uk) to take the short online test and see if you can earn your own Wheen o Wurds badge!



# 30 Ulster-Scots Words

**Aye** - yes/always

**Blether** - idle chat

**Boak** - vomit

**Crabbit** - grumpy

**Crack** - banter/news

**Drooth** - thirst/drunard

**Eejit** - idiot

**Flit** - move

**Footery** - awkward

**Forbye** - as well

**Foundered** - exhausted  
(with cold)

**Gulder** - shout

**Hallion** - rascal

**Hoke** - dig

**Jap** - splash

**Mingin** - dirty

**Neb** - nose

**Oxter** - armpit

**Poke** - ice cream cone

**Quare** - considerable

**Redd up** - tidy up

**Scunnered** - disgusted/  
embarrassed

**Skelf** - splinter

**Slabber** - loudmouth/saliva

**Sleekit** - sly

**Teemin** - pouring

**Thran** - stubborn

**Wean** - child

**Wee** - little

**Wheest** - be quiet

# Ulster-Scots Phrases

**Whit dae they caa ye?**

What is your name?

**Whaur are ye frae?**

Where are you from?

**Dae ye leeve nearhaun?**

Do you live nearby?

**Whit aboot ye?**

How are you doing?

**Am up tae ma oxters.**

I am very busy.

**Nae bother.**

No problem.

**Whit's tha crack wi ye?**

Have you any news?

**Whit wye are ye?**

How are you feeling?

**Ye dinnae luk at yersel.**

You don't look well.

**A hinnae baen at masel this fortnicht.**

I haven't been well for the last two weeks.

**Are ye daein yer messages?**

Are you grocery shopping?

**Am gan up tha toon fer claes.**

I am going into town to buy some clothes.

**Thon day wid founder ye.**

It is very cold today.

**It wud tak ye tae happ yirsel up.**

You should wrap up well.

**It'll be teemin that nicht a doot.**

I think it will rain heavily tonight.

**Ye maun pit oan yer duncher.**

You should wear your cap.

**Ma hoose is like a midden tha noo.**

My house is very untidy at the moment.

**A maun get redd up.**

I need to tidy up.

**Thon wee lad's a hallion.**

That young fellow is a rascal.

**Thon oul lad's a quare drooth.**

That old man likes to drink a lot.

**Thon oul doll's gye nebbly!**

That old woman is very nosey!

**Thon weans is aye greetin.**

Those children cry often.