

## "Why English Linguistic and Literary Analysis Fails Scottish Literature: Teaching an AI to Recognise Scots Humour"

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AI literary analysis demonstrates competence in identifying formal techniques— sentence structures, narrative patterns, rhetorical devices. It can spot mock-heroic diction, trace documentary precision, analyse temporal framing. When examining S.R. Crockett's "Mac's Enteric Fever," a story written for magazine publication some years before appearing in the 1895 collection *Bog-Myrtle and Peat*, AI correctly identifies every formal feature present in the text.

It just doesn't recognise them as Scots humour.

The specific case is instructive. Analysing this story about Edinburgh students who convince their flatmate he's dying of enteric fever, AI identifies: deadpan narration, mock-heroic diction, parenthetical deflation, documentary precision about material poverty, and retrospective framing that creates temporal distance from events. These identifications demonstrate sophisticated linguistic and literary analysis.

What AI does with these identifications reveals the gap. It categorises them as "narrative techniques that create humour"—as tools serving a separate entity called "comic effect." Documentary precision becomes "a technique creating social realism that grounds the comedy." Deadpan observation becomes "a device generating humour through tonal mismatch." Retrospective framing becomes "a method establishing nostalgic perspective."

The question this raises is perhaps worth examining: Is this an AI limitation? Or is AI replicating assumptions embedded in English linguistic and literary analysis training data—assumptions that treat analytical categories as universal whilst actually being culturally specific?

What follows is an examination of how teaching AI to recognise Scots humour reveals gaps between linguistic analysis (how language functions) and literary analysis (how techniques create meaning) when analytical frameworks assume English norms operate across all literatures. If the examination deploys Scots humour in its own methodology; by presenting evidence through non-committal observation, trusting readers to navigate implications, maintaining ironic distance; that choice might itself demonstrate something about whether the method can be recognised when encountered.

### **What English Linguistic and Literary Analysis Does Well**

This isn't about AI or English analysis being inadequate. Both perform sophisticated operations, and establishing that competence matters for avoiding straw-man arguments.

AI's linguistic analysis capabilities include identifying sentence structure patterns (complex, compound, simple), recognising register shifts between formal and colloquial vocabulary, spotting rhetorical devices like parallelism and antithesis, and tracing vocabulary choices within their semantic fields. These operations demonstrate genuine analytical sophistication.

AI's literary analysis capabilities extend to identifying narrative techniques such as free indirect discourse and symbolic structure, recognising genre conventions and their deployment, tracing intertextual patterns across literary traditions, and analysing how specific techniques create particular effects. Again, sophisticated work.

When analysing "Mac's Enteric Fever," AI demonstrated this competence clearly. It correctly identified mock-heroic language in phrases like "wholesale manufacturer of wheelbarrows," which applies elevated commercial vocabulary to modest wheelbarrow trade. It correctly identified documentary precision in the herring and porridge economics, the "indifferent slates" indicating poor-quality roofing, and specific material culture details about 1870s Edinburgh student poverty. It correctly identified retrospective temporal framing through phrases like "In those days" establishing narrative distance from events. It correctly identified parenthetical self-interruption in sentences that establish claims then immediately deflate them through qualifying clauses.

The gap emerged between identifying these features linguistically and literarily and recognising what they constitute culturally. AI treated them as universal techniques operating to create humour. It didn't recognise them as Scots humour, as constituting a distinct national literary and linguistic mode where:

the technique itself IS the method IS the meaning.

Whether this represents AI failure or something else is perhaps the question. AI replicated English linguistic and literary analysis frameworks that assume technique operates universally across literatures. Which raises the possibility that the frameworks themselves might bear examining.

### **The Initial Analysis: When English Frameworks Meet Scots Text**

The first draft AI produced applied standard literary analysis categories across four analytical posts:

Post 1: "Comic architecture"—how retrospective framing creates permission structure for comedy

Post 2: "Documentary precision"—how material detail demonstrates social realism grounding humour

Post 3: "Autobiographical elements"—how lived experience informs fictional representation

Post 4: "Narrative technique"—how specific devices generate comic effects

Each post treated Scots humour as the PRODUCT of these techniques. Which is where things became interesting.

Consider the herring problem. AI's original analysis stated: "The herring and porridge detail demonstrates documentary precision about Edinburgh poverty, creating social realism that grounds the comedy."

This linguistic and literary reading identifies specific vocabulary (herring, porridge, eliminated, books), recognises simple declarative sentence structure ("Then we did without the herring"), categorises the literary technique as documentary realism, and presumes the effect is grounding comedy in material reality. All technically accurate observations.

What it misses, or what it couldn't recognise without cultural framework, is that presenting desperate poverty through deadpan enumeration of what gets eliminated when buying books IS Scots humour. Not a technique creating an effect, but the method itself operating as Crockett would later theorise it: the non-committal presentation of circumstances, allowing facts to speak without emotional direction. AI (like many readers not brought up on Scots humour) simply didn't get the humour.

The "deadpan technique" problem operated similarly. AI's original analysis stated: "Deadpan technique creates comedy through tonal mismatch between elevated language and modest circumstances."

This identifies the linguistic operation (formal register combined with humble content creates gap) and presumes literary function (gap creates humour). The analysis is accurate as far as it goes. What it doesn't recognise is that deadpan observation IS Scots humour's characteristic mode—not generating humour as separate effect, but embodying a national literary method.

Or consider the parenthetical deflation problem. AI's original analysis: "Parenthetical deflation operates as narrative technique, interrupting claims to undercut them for comic effect."

Linguistically: correct identification of syntactic interruption.

Literarily: correct identification of deflationary function.

Culturally: absent.

The correction received was direct: "What you call deadpan technique is better labelled Scots humour. Parenthetical deflation IS Scots humour. You need to reframe the 'narrative devices' to show how they are all aspects of Scots humour."

This correction identifies a conceptual problem worth examining. English linguistic and literary analysis tends to separate technique (how language operates) from effect (what technique achieves) from cultural mode (what constitutes national literary method). But in Scots humour, these aren't separable categories. The technique equals the mode equals the meaning—they're aspects of the same phenomenon, not stages in a causal process.

Why this happened might be worth considering. AI training data comes predominantly from English linguistic and literary analysis, which treats its own categories as universal. When encountering Scottish literature, it applies those categories without recognising they may not operate the same way. Not through inadequacy, but through assumption that analytical frameworks function across literatures.

Though we might note (if we're deploying Scots humour's non-committal method) that this observation should perhaps speak for itself.

### **The Key: Crockett's Own Linguistic and Literary Theory**

The turning point in the teaching process came with introduction of Crockett's 1895 essay "Scottish National Humour," published in *The Contemporary Review*. This provided common analytical ground because it offered theorisation in Crockett's own terms, establishing cultural framework that English categories lacked.

The essay articulates several key concepts that prove useful for recognising how Scots humour operates.

First, "the non-committal attitude." Crockett provides an example: a rustic asked about a painting responds "ocht but bonny!" [anything but attractive]. His analysis: "the nationality of the ironical humour consists in the non-committal attitude of the laird."

Linguistically this is presenting observation without directing interpretation. AI suggests: The response neither confirms nor denies the painting's quality—it concedes possibility whilst tone suggests scepticism. However, we, versed in Scots humour might see a response of 'it's ugly' as 'non-committal attitude' to be humorous, to say nothing of what it suggests about class divisions.

AI observes that: What it defines literarily is a narrative mode that trusts readers to navigate irony themselves without authorial explanation.

Second, "allowing circumstances to take their course." AI describes Crockett's comment here as follows: Linguistically, this means presenting facts through specific detail without emotional vocabulary. Literarily, it means documentary precision serves

the non-committal method—show material reality, let readers understand implications without directing them.

Third, Crockett describes: "the method ironical, with an additional spice of kindliness." AI explains: Linguistically, ironic distance is maintained through vocabulary and syntax choices. Literarily, this distinguishes Scots humour from pure satire by maintaining affection for subjects whilst observing their limitations.

In the process of AI interpreting Crockett's own theorising of Scots Humour (a category it is unaware of in both linguistic and literary senses) we see it building an understanding, but needing prompting to reveal the subtleties of the technique.

The chronological aspect is worth noting. "Mac's Enteric Fever" dates from well before Crockett published this theoretical essay in April 1895. Which suggests Crockett possessed and deployed sophisticated Scots humour methods before achieving fame, before codifying them intellectually. The 1895 essay articulates principles he'd already mastered practically. It is also worth noting that this essay came from a lecture series given the previous autumn, and which there is a strong suggestion was partly implicated in the vitriolic creation of the label 'Kailyard' by English critic J.H.Millar (mouthpiece for W.E.Henley) in The New Review of April 1895. Crockett's use and theorising about Scots humour potentially has huge significance in our understanding of the creation of 'Kailyard' as a construct and label and the reasons behind its emergence. But that is another essay!

How Crockett's essay on Scots Humour enabled AI learning is straightforward to observe. Once AI had Crockett's terminology, it could map English analytical categories onto Scottish cultural framework:

Documentary precision became recognisable as non-committal presentation of facts

Deadpan observation became recognisable as refusing emotional direction

Parenthetical deflation became recognisable as ironic distance with kindliness

Mock-heroic diction became recognisable as gap between language and reality

But the mapping itself reveals the problem. English linguistic and literary analysis required Scottish cultural framework to recognise what it was observing. The techniques were visible to analysis. Their cultural function wasn't.

The conceptual shift moved from "these techniques create Scots humour" to "these techniques operating this way, for these purposes, within this cultural framework, ARE Scots humour." Which is perhaps not a trivial distinction.

Why English linguistic and literary analysis lacks this framework might be worth considering (and potentially pushes us back to the birth of 'Kailyard'). English analysis doesn't typically theorise its own national specificity. English criticism treats

"technique" as universal toolkit rather than recognising that how techniques function and what they constitute varies across national literatures. Whether this represents limitation or simply different emphasis is perhaps a question readers might navigate themselves.

### **What English Linguistic and Literary Frameworks Miss in Scottish Texts**

When English linguistic and literary analysis encounters Scottish literature, certain patterns emerge. Whether these represent analytical gaps or simply different emphases is worth examining through specific examples from "Mac's Enteric Fever."

#### **Documentary Precision**

English linguistic reading identifies detailed material vocabulary (herring, porridge, indifferent slates) as specific lexical choices demonstrating concrete description.

English literary reading categorises accumulation of material detail as social realism genre; the documentary tradition of presenting working-class life through precise observation.

What this might miss (if we're willing to consider the possibility) is that in Scots humour, documentary precision IS the non-committal method. The herring eliminated to buy books isn't just realism. It's presenting poverty through deadpan understatement that trusts readers to understand economic desperation without explaining it emotionally.

The passage reads: "We students had porridge twice a day, with a herring in between, except when we were saving up for a book. Then we did without the herring."

English analysis identifies: specific vocabulary, economic detail, documentary style establishing material conditions.

Scots humour analysis might recognise: non-committal presentation making poverty visible through what gets eliminated, maintaining ironic distance through matter-of-fact tone, trusting readers to navigate the gap between "saving up for a book" and "did without the herring" without explaining that protein becomes expendable against intellectual ambition. In a sense 'then we did without the herring' functions as a kind of Scots humour punchline.

The difference isn't about one reading being right and the other wrong. It's about whether documentary precision functions as technique creating realism, or whether it constitutes the humour itself through how it presents circumstances. We might suggest this depends on the reader. We can, however, suggest with some confidence that the writers intention was Scots humour.

## **Retrospective Framing**

English linguistic reading identifies temporal markers like "In those days" as past tense narration establishing when events occurred.

English literary reading often categorises looking-back narration as creating nostalgic tone, sentimental framing of past experience.

What this might miss is that temporal distance in Scots humour creates a permission structure for laughing at questionable behaviour whilst maintaining kindness through assured restoration. The retrospective frame isn't nostalgia—it's the enabling condition for non-committal irony.

The passage reads: "In those days we took great care of our health. It was about the only thing we had to take care of."

English analysis might read: sentimental nostalgia for student poverty, romanticising past hardship through temporal distance.

Scots humour recognises: retrospective frame permits comedy about deprivation through ironic understatement ("only thing we had to take care of"), maintaining non-committal presentation whilst ensuring readers know everyone survived to laugh about it later.

This connects to something worth observing about Kailyard criticism. The dismissal of Scottish rural writing as "nostalgic," "backwards-looking," focused on "small-minded" rural subjects has been persistent in literary criticism. Whether this dismissal stems partly from English frameworks which read retrospective framing as sentiment rather than recognising it as Scots humour's methodological requirement is perhaps a question worth considering.

Though we might observe if we're examining "Mac's Enteric Fever" through Kailyard lens, the story is urban, not rural. It is firmly set in 1870s Edinburgh tenements, not in the countryside. It's about students, not farmers. The retrospective device deployed isn't nostalgia for simpler rural life, it's the enabling condition for non-committal irony about urban poverty and student cruelty.

Which raises questions about what Kailyard criticism was observing versus what it thought it was observing.

## **Understatement and Non-Explanation**

English linguistic reading identifies minimal qualifying language as sparse vocabulary choices, economical prose style.

English literary reading sometimes categorises not explaining emotions as underdeveloped characterisation, inadequate psychological depth.

What this might miss is that not explaining IS Scots humour's sophisticated trust in readers to navigate irony themselves.

The passage reads: "This also was possible; but, all the same, we had never seen any ladies or gentlemen who carried their muscles outside, so to speak."

English analysis might identify: concessive clause undermined by qualifying phrase, creating tonal ambiguity about whether narrator believes Mac's claim.

Scots humour recognises: "this also was possible" as non-committal concession granting theoretical possibility whilst "but, all the same" deflates it through deadpan observation, trusting readers to understand Mac's claim is absurd without stating that judgment explicitly.

The difference is whether understatement represents technical limitation (should have explained more clearly) or sophisticated method (trust readers to navigate gap between concession and deflation).

### **Mock-Heroic Diction**

English linguistic reading identifies elevated register combined with humble content as register mismatch, formal vocabulary applied to informal subject.

English literary reading often categorises inflated language for modest subject as satirical attack, mocking pretensions through verbal inflation.

What this might miss is that in Scots humour, the mock-heroic maintains affection for subject whilst observing reality. It's not satire—it's what Crockett called "method ironical with kindness."

The passage reads: Almond studies to become a "wholesale manufacturer of wheelbarrows."

English satire reading: mocking Almond's modest ambitions through verbal inflation, ridiculing small-scale trade pretensions.

Scots humour reading: kindly ironic observation where elevated language acknowledges Almond's aspirations whilst reality gap emerges through vocabulary choice, but affection for the person remains intact. It's the 'ocht but bonny' trope.

The pattern across these examples is perhaps worth observing. AI, trained in English linguistic and literary analysis identifies the formal features accurately. It recognises understatement, retrospective framing, documentary detail, register mismatch. What it lacks is cultural framework for recognising how these features function within Scots humour as national literary mode rather than as universal techniques inadequately deployed or creating separate effects.

Though whether "lacks" is the right word—or whether "operates differently" might be more accurate—is perhaps a question that should speak for itself.

### **Implications for Linguistic and Literary Methodology**

If English linguistic and literary analysis systematically misses Scots humour, not through incompetence but through framework assumptions, what might this suggest about applying analytical methods across national literatures?

Three observations are perhaps worth considering.

#### **Technique Doesn't Equal Universal Operation**

English frameworks tend to assume linguistic techniques (understatement, irony, documentary precision) and literary devices (retrospective narration, mock-heroic, parenthetical interruption) operate similarly across literatures. Identify the technique, analyse its function, understand its effect—this methodology works effectively within English literary tradition.

The Scots humour case suggests (if we're willing to consider the possibility) that techniques may be recognisable cross-culturally whilst functioning differently within different national literary modes.

Deadpan exists in English literature. Jane Austen deploys it brilliantly. But deadpan AS non-committal method with kindness; as constituting the humour itself rather than creating an effect; operates specifically within Scots tradition as Crockett theorised it.

Whether this represents fundamental difference or matters of emphasis is perhaps a question analytical frameworks should address rather than assume.

#### **Literary Analysis Requires Cultural Frameworks**

English literary criticism has extensively theorised irony, satire, realism, sentimentality. These theoretical frameworks provide sophisticated analytical tools developed over centuries of critical tradition.

What English criticism hasn't done—or hasn't done as explicitly—is theorise its own national specificity. It treats "literary technique" as universal whilst actually describing how techniques function within English literary tradition. This may not be inadequacy so much as unmarked category: the assumption that one's own methods constitute the universal standard.

When Crockett theorised Scots humour in 1895, he provided what English criticism doesn't typically provide: explicit articulation of national literary mode's operating principles. And, I suggest, it certainly riled up some English literary critics. The non-committal attitude, allowing circumstances to take their course, method ironical with kindness - these aren't universal categories. They're culturally specific descriptions of

how Scottish writers might deploy techniques for particular purposes within a particular tradition.

If we were to explore whether Burns, Hogg, Galt, or Scott operate similarly with regard to Scots humour, we'd need similar culturally-grounded frameworks rather than assuming English analytical categories suffice. I am not aware of such explorations, but would be interested to know how Scots humour is framed within the 'canon' of Scottish literature. It seems to me that undertaking linguistic or literary analysis of such texts without a specific Scottish framework is akin to fighting with one hand tied behind one's back.

### **Digital Humanities Amplifies Existing Frameworks**

Back to the matter in hand. AI literary analysis performs impressively within its training parameters. It identifies formal features, traces patterns, recognises techniques operating across large textual corpora. These capabilities open significant possibilities for literary scholarship.

But those parameters derive from existing critical traditions—predominantly English linguistic and literary scholarship that assumes its categories operate universally.

The 'Mac' teaching process revealed something worth noting: AI can identify every formal feature of Scots humour. Deadpan narration, documentary precision, retrospective framing, parenthetical deflation, mock-heroic diction—all visible to computational analysis. What required teaching was recognising these features AS Scots humour rather than as universal techniques creating separate effects.

This isn't AI limitation. It's demonstration that computational analysis replicates whatever frameworks inform its training. If those frameworks assume universality whilst actually being culturally specific, AI amplifies that assumption through scale and speed.

What effective cross-cultural literary analysis might require, if we're proposing possibilities rather than asserting certainties, includes:

Recognition that linguistic techniques and literary devices function differently within different national traditions, even when formally similar.

Engagement with writers' own theorisations of their methods (like Crockett's 1895 essay) as analytical frameworks rather than treating them as secondary to critical categories.

Development of frameworks for national and cultural specificity rather than presumed universality in how technique operates.

Humility—though perhaps that's too strong a word—about whether "technique" constitutes the same thing across literatures or creates meaning through the same processes.

Though these remain observations about possibilities rather than assertions about requirements. The evidence might speak more effectively if allowed to speak for itself.

## **Conclusion**

AI identified every formal feature of Scots humour in "Mac's Enteric Fever." Deadpan narration, documentary precision, mock-heroic diction, retrospective framing, parenthetical deflation—all visible to linguistic and literary analysis trained in English critical traditions.

What required teaching was recognising these features AS Scots humour rather than as universal techniques creating humour as separate effect.

The teaching process revealed that this isn't AI's limitation. AI replicated English linguistic and literary analysis frameworks that assume their categories operate universally across literatures.

The Crockett case demonstrates, I believe, matter-of-factly, that as a writer he possessed sophisticated mastery of national literary mode (late 1880s/early 1890s practical deployment in stories like 'Mac'), later theorised it intellectually (1895 essay articulating principles he'd already mastered), yet critical reception has often missed this sophistication. Whether that's because analytical frameworks lacked cultural specificity to recognise what they were observing or something more sinister, remains to be debated.

For me this is central background and context to the "Kailyard" question. Adoption of this position created dismissals that critiqued subject matter and tone as unsophisticated, rural, sentimental, backwards-looking, resulted partly from English frameworks reading Scots humour's characteristic methods as limitations rather than as acknowledging Crockett's writing as representing a distinct national literary mode.

We might note, if we're noting things matter-of-factly: "Mac's Enteric Fever" is urban not rural, ironic not sentimental, retrospective-not-nostalgic, sophisticated-not-simple. Which raises questions about what critical categories the proponents of "Kailyard" were actually observing versus what they thought they were observing.

The broader lesson perhaps is that national literatures may employ distinct linguistic and literary modes requiring culturally-specific analytical frameworks. English analysis isn't inadequate. It's nationally specific whilst treating itself as universal—which is perhaps different from being wrong, though the difference might matter.

Teaching AI to recognise Scots humour required exactly what rehabilitating Scottish literature's critical reception might require: engaging with writers' own theorisations, recognising that familiar techniques may function unfamiliarly, trusting that what looks like limitation might be sophistication operating within different cultural framework.

The tools exist. The theorisation exists—in Crockett's 1895 essay and potentially in other writers' articulations. What's required is recognising that "universal" linguistic and literary analysis has been English analysis all along.

Though we should probably let that observation speak for itself.

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**Codicil:** In case you hadn't noticed, AI was asked to write this article using Scots humour as its tone—deploying non-committal observation, deadpan presentation, parenthetical deflation, trusting readers to navigate implications without explicit direction. You might like to reflect on how well (and enthusiastically) it achieved this instruction.

Though perhaps that reflection should proceed without assistance.

[Also for full transparency, remember that this was a 'Hand in Hand' article co-created by human and AI collaboration. As the human partner, I have 'let go' some aspects I might wish to refine in order to show AI at work, but I am confident I can support my general argument regarding "Kailyard" against criticism and will/have done in several other places.]

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