

‘Insular isles, insular speech’? Language change in the Shetland Islands

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Summary

The Shetland Isles, a group of islands settled in the North Sea approximately halfway between Norway and Scotland, are perhaps popularly best known for ponies, sheep dogs, and knitwear. Considerably less well known is the fact that the isles are also home to a highly distinct local dialect. The Shetland dialect constitutes a form of Lowland Scots but also displays a significant Scandinavian component. This is attributable to Shetland's history: the isles were settled by Vikings around 800AD and a Nordic language - first Old Norse and later Norn - was spoken there up until about the 18th century. As for many local speech forms, however, there are strong signs that the Shetland dialect is undergoing drastic change; arguably, it is even in rapid decline. The aim of this essay is to provide an accessible introduction to the Shetland Isles, their settlement and linguistic history, and the complex local language situation. Furthermore, some of the discourse surrounding current language change, involving both local and non-local contributors, is reviewed. Recent empirical research, which provides important clues to the future of the Shetland dialect, is also discussed, as well as its various implications.

Keywords: The Shetland Isles, Language change, Shetland dialect, Scots

1. Introduction

To many people who have not had the pleasure of becoming more intimately familiar with them, the Shetland Islands, or simply ‘Shetland’, often seem to be associated primarily with matters such as Shetland ponies, Shetland sheep dogs, and knitwear. Perhaps less well known is the fact that a highly distinct local dialect is also spoken on the isles. Over the last hundred or so years the dialect has attracted the interest of a number of scholars, and from a Scandinavian perspective it is of particular interest since its broadest forms still reveal traces of Norn, the Nordic language once spoken on Shetland. At present, however, there are indications that both the local dialect and the local language situation are undergoing significant change; related issues are not only the topic of academic research but also a matter for debate and concern within Shetland society. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to present an overview of the Shetland Islands and its language situation, and to provide a discussion of current linguistic developments.

2. The Shetland Isles: the northernmost part of Scotland and the UK

As may be seen from Figure 1, The Shetland Islands are located in the North Sea, geographically about halfway between Scotland, Norway, and the Faroe Islands. Shetland belongs to Scotland, and is grouped with the Orkney Islands (with which Shetland is sometimes confused by those less familiar with the general region!)

into ‘Scotland’s Northern Isles’; as such, Shetland also constitutes the northernmost part of the UK. Although Shetland consists of about 100 islands, 15 of which are currently inhabited, it is geographically dominated by its largest island, referred to as ‘Mainland’. Lerwick, Shetland’s largest town, is situated on the east coast of Mainland. The current population is a little over 22,000, and approximately one third reside in Lerwick (General Register Office for Scotland 2010). The most important local industry is fishing and fish farming; North Sea oil and gas also constitute major sources of income and have contributed greatly to Shetland’s economic prosperity since the early 1980s.

As to the earliest settlements on Shetland, there is archeological evidence of both Mesolithic (ca. 4320–4030 BC) and Neolithic (ca. 3400 BC) human activity. A later group of inhabitants are usually characterized as ‘Picts’, although little is known about them, or indeed the language they spoke. Starting from about 800 AD, Shetland was invaded and settled by Vikings, who primarily came from Norway. These brought the language Old Norse to Shetland, from which a local form, ‘Norn’, subsequently developed. Shetland was under Norwegian and subsequently Danish rule until 1469, when it was signed over by the Danish king to Scotland as part of a dowry. Incidentally, a small political group in Shetland has recently tried to question whether this hand-over ever legally came into effect. On the whole, however, such claims have received limited attention. In any case, the change to Scottish rule had a number of significant effects upon Shetland. For instance, land ownership had previously followed Udal Law; this meant that farmers owned their own land, and after their death it was divided among their offspring. However, Scottish lairds (‘lords’) now gained possession of much of the land in Shetland, and farmers were made tenants. Furthermore, a language shift took place. Norn, which was still classifiable as a Nordic language, was gradually replaced by Lowland Scots. Significant scholarly inquiry and a fair amount of debate has been devoted to the nature and timing of this shift (e.g. Rendboe 1987; Barnes 1998; Wiggen 2002; Millar 2007, 2008; Knooihuizen, 2009). Currently, the most prevailing view seems to be that the last native speakers of Norn died out in the late 18th or possibly early 19th century, although some suggest a somewhat later date. A crucial point to keep in mind, thus, is that even the broadest forms of the local Shetland dialect that may be heard today constitute forms of Lowland Scots – *not Norn* – which is one reason why academic linguists increasingly tend to apply the term ‘Shetland Scots’.

Over the last thirty years or so, Shetland society has witnessed a number of changes, many of which have likely had an impact on the local linguistic situation. A pivotal event was the coming of the oil industry, beginning in the late 1970s. As a result, large numbers of people from the Scottish mainland and elsewhere in the UK came to Shetland. This immigration trend has continued more recently due to further expansions of the gas industry. In more marginal numbers, Shetland has also attracted incomers from the rest of Britain who are motivated by quality-of-life factors or a desire to retire in the isles. The expansion of the EU has also led to an influx of Eastern Europeans. The general effects of

globalization are also evident in Shetland, and every summer large numbers of visitors and tourists embark upon the isles. These are some of the main changes and developments that tend to enter into discussions regarding the increasing influence of Standard English in Shetland and the supposed decline of the local dialect (Sundkvist 2011a).

Figure 1. Map of the Shetland Islands within Northwest Europe



(The World Factbook 2009. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2009. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>)

3. The language situation in Shetland, with reference to Lowland Scotland

In order to appreciate the language situation in Shetland, and to be able to follow the discussion of its current developments, some background information about the situation in Lowland Scotland more generally is required, where Lowland Scotland is loosely defined as the non-Gaelic part of the Scottish mainland. The situation in the Lowlands, however, is highly complex and notoriously difficult to account for without some degree of over-simplification. Nevertheless, a first approximation usually builds upon the idea of a speech range. For this range, there are two poles or end points; the one in the ‘broader’ or more localizable

direction is traditionally labelled ‘Scots’, and the one in the opposite, less localizable, more standardized direction, as ‘Scottish Standard English’ (SSE) (cf. Aitken 1984). As to Scots, it may arguably be classified as an independent Germanic language, possessing its own range of regional dialects; accordingly, it is listed within *The European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages*. Alternately, Scots may be subsumed under the label of ‘English’; in that case ‘Scots’ refers to a set of highly distinct regional dialects of English associated with Scotland. From a historical perspective, Scots achieved the status of official and literature language of Scotland from about the 14th to the 17th centuries. It failed to maintain this status due to several factors. Scotland was unified with England through the Union of Crowns (1603) and Union of Parliaments (1707), and as a result the significance and impact of Standard English increased in Scotland. Furthermore, the Bible was not translated into Scots; instead an English version was used for both ministerial and educational purposes (Romaine 1982; McClure 1994). Turning to the other end of the speech range, Scottish Standard English is commonly defined as Standard English as spoken in Scotland. While it may in principle display regionalisms on all linguistic levels (lexis, syntax, morphology, phonology), its vocabulary and grammar is comparatively similar to Standard English as spoken in other parts of the world. However, it is typically pronounced with a range of more or less localizable Scottish accents (Abercrombie 1979; Wells 1982), which are often perceived as fairly distinctive to those who are not so familiar with Scotland.

So far, then, the discussion has been limited to the definition and characterization of the two poles, or idealized end points, for the speech range; daunting complexity, however, emerges when attempting to account for the variation that may actually be observed within this range. It is true that, in some cases, the variation between Scots and SSE may be fairly distinct and abrupt; for instance some speakers, especially in rural localities, may be able to code-switch between Scots and SSE. More commonly, however, and especially around Scotland’s urban centers such as Edinburgh and Glasgow, the distinction is significantly less clear. There will be various and frequent transferences from both poles into the speech form displayed at any given time, which, then, provides strong arguments for treating the speech range as a continuum.

Returning to Shetland, the general concept of a bipolar range, with Scots and SSE as endpoints, may similarly be applied. As for Lowland Scotland, however, a number of questions immediately arise, not least regarding the nature of the variation within this range. At least until recently, most Shetlanders spoke a local form of Scots – referred to as ‘Shetland dialect’, ‘Shetland Scots’, or among Shetlanders themselves simply as ‘Shetlan’’. Most Shetlanders were also able to adopt, approximate, or approach the other endpoint, SSE; this ability would have developed from various pressures and factors, perhaps most importantly the school system and any length of time spent outside Shetland. The choice between speaking ‘Shetlan’ or ‘English’ was typically governed by functional aspects. Shetlanders would normally speak the dialect among themselves; however, to

outsiders, who do not themselves speak the dialect, its broadest forms would not be used but a form of, or adaptation towards, SSE. In fact many older Shetlanders still consider it impolite to speak ‘dialect’ to outsiders, for the comprehension difficulties it may cause. Conversely, however, Shetlanders would not normally speak ‘English’ or SSE among themselves; on the contrary, using English with other Shetlanders was traditionally regarded as ‘putting on airs’.

At present the nature of the end point in the Scots direction varies among Shetlanders depending on factors such as the speaker’s age, regional origin within the isles, and place(s) of residence during his or her life time. The nature of the endpoint in the SSE direction varies both between individuals and between categories of Shetlanders depending on similar factors; in addition it is affected by whether the person has lived outside Shetland for an extended period of time, or has had extensive contacts with non-Shetlanders for other reasons, most commonly through their occupation. Turning to the nature of the variation within this range, matters of course again get more complex, and further variability becomes obvious. Some Shetlanders are able to switch relatively distinctly between Shetland dialect and SSE, in a manner reminiscent of code-switching (Catford 1957; Melchers 1985). Other individuals, or categories of Shetlanders, however, will display more transference or mixing between the two end points (Johnston 1997).

To sum up, despite the considerable complexities involved and the many qualifications required, the language situation in Shetland, at least until recently, could in a simplified way be characterized as follows. Most, if not all, Shetlanders spoke Shetlan’ (Shetland Scots, Shetland dialect) among other Shetlanders. The majority was also able to adopt a speech form towards SSE, typically when addressing an outsider; this speech form, however, would vary depending on the individual and the type of Shetlander: middle class Lerwegians with frequent contacts with outsiders may display a local variety of SSE (Sundkvist 2007, 2011b) whereas rural Shetlanders often show considerable transference from Shetland Scots. Significantly, however, there are various signs that this situation may currently be changing, perhaps even drastically so.

4. Signs of and evidence for language change

In fact one does not have to spend very long in Shetland, interacting with locals, to realize that a common impression among many Shetlanders themselves is that the local language situation is changing. One opinion often expressed is that the Shetland dialect is in general decline. Motivated partly by such concerns, in 2004 the Shetland Arts Trust organized the Dialect 04 conference, billed as ‘a two day conference and public debate on the development of Shetland dialect’ (Shetland Arts Trust 2004). Following this event, the organization *Shetland ForWirds*¹ was formed, which has since worked actively to promote the status and use of local

¹ The name ‘Shetland ForWirds’ is a play on words: ‘ForWirds’ may be interpreted either as ‘forwards’ or ‘for words’.

dialect in Shetland society in a range of ways (<http://www.shetlanddialect.org.uk>); in addition, this group of committed individuals has graciously provided help and assistance to a number of researchers working on Shetland speech, and enabled them to gain access to members of the Shetland community in ways which would otherwise have been very difficult.

Perhaps not so surprising, comments by ordinary Shetlanders are often aimed at the younger generations. A common one is that many teenagers or children do not speak ‘Shetlan’ anymore (to be understood as ‘Shetland Scots’, under the definitions outlined in the previous section); rather, some of them simply seem to use a form of English all the time. While such remarks could perhaps in principle be recognized and even discounted as the general type of complaint which older generations sometimes make about the speech of younger ones (and not only in Shetland of course!), they are in fact beginning to receive some level of support.

A few observers have offered comments which are generally consistent with this view. While not directly investigating current language change in her research, Dutch linguist Klaske van Leyden, for instance, suggested that societal changes in Shetland had:

(...) led to an unprecedented levelling of the local varieties, and it appears that among school children and teenagers a type of Standard English – rather than local dialect, or even Scots – is rapidly becoming the norm (van Leyden 2004:18)

Similarly, John Magnus Tait, an author and linguist who was born in Shetland, claimed that:

In the main town of Lerwick in particular, traditional Shetlandic has been replaced in the speech of the younger generation not, as many had predicted, by a reduced dialect consisting only of altered English words, but simply by standard English spoken with a Shetland accent. In other words, in Lerwick it is not only the vocabulary, but also the grammar and phonology of Shetlandic which is - even in the speech of children of Shetlandic-speaking parents - giving way to standard English (Tait, unpublished).

And, furthermore, that:

This means that whereas thirty, or perhaps even twenty, years ago Shetlandic was the native speech of almost all Shetlanders, it is now rapidly becoming a rural dialect. The numerical concentration of monolingual English speaking children in Lerwick means that a decreasing percentage of Shetland children now speak Shetlandic, though most will understand it (Tait, unpublished).

Although several research projects have been carried out on Shetland speech within the last three decades, the first large-scale investigation directly focusing on language change was conducted only fairly recently. In a study by Jennifer Smith and Mercedes Durham, of the Universities of Glasgow and Aberdeen in Scotland, three generations of speakers from the main town of Lerwick were interviewed: ‘older’ (70+), ‘middle’ (45-55), and ‘young’ (17-21) (Smith and

Durham 2011). In each case, they were interviewed by a middle-aged Shetlander, who spoke Shetland dialect during the interviews. Putting aside many of the details and complexities, the results may be summarized as follows. The old and middle-aged groups displayed firm maintenance of Shetland Scots; for the youngest group, however, a more complex picture emerged. While the results of course revealed variability, to a considerable extent, members of the young group tended to cluster around the two poles of the speech range: one subgroup displayed a speech form similar to that of the older and middle-aged participants, i.e. Shetland Scots (for convenience, these will be referred to here as ‘Broad Young’); a second subgroup displayed a speech form closer to SSE (for convenience: ‘Standard Young’).

A second study was initiated by the same research team to assess the linguistic competence of the younger group of Lerwick people with regard to the speech range that exists within the Shetland community as a whole (Smith and Durham 2012). The ‘Broad Young’ (who used Shetland Scots in the first study) were re-interviewed by an outsider who did not speak Shetland dialect but Standard English; conversely, the ‘Standard Young’ (who displayed a speech form towards SSE in the first study) were re-interviewed by a Lerwegian of their own age who used Shetland Scots. While, again, putting aside much of the complexity, the following was observed: the ‘Broad Young’ tended to adopt a speech form towards SSE (in response to the outsider interviewer); the ‘Standard Young’, however, did *not* adopt Shetland Scots (as may perhaps have been expected in response to the ‘Broad Young’ interviewer). What these results seem to suggest is that the ‘Broad Young’ group command a broader range of speech forms, spanning from Shetland Scots to SSE, which is basically in line with traditional descriptions of the language situation in Shetland; in contrast, the ‘Standard Young’ group appear to command a narrower range of speech forms. Arguably, Smith and Durham’s results constitute the first evidence for a ‘monolingual SSE-speaking group of Shetlanders’ (cf. Smith and Durham 2011; Smith and Durham 2012).

5. Conclusion

The local dialect spoken in the Shetland Isles is a highly distinctive form of Scots. Over the years it has attracted the attention of several scholars, including those from the Nordic countries who have aimed to uncover its traces of Norn, the extinct Nordic language once spoken on Shetland (cf. Jakobsen 1908-1921; Melchers 1983). As will become evident to anyone who visits the isles and interacts with locals, the question whether the Shetland dialect is currently in decline is of concern and a topic of debate within Shetland society. While many have voiced opinions to this effect, until recently there was very little objective evidence available since few academic studies had dealt directly with this topic. However, results from Shetland’s main town, Lerwick, now provide some support for the idea that significant change is taking place, at least within the Lerwick community (Smith and Durham 2011; Smith and Durham 2012). Perhaps most

strikingly, a young group of native Shetlanders who only speak a form of SSE may also have been identified. Needless to say many issues remain to be investigated, and further research will no doubt follow. One question is whether the pattern displayed by the young, monolingual SSE-speaking Lerwegians may only be encountered in Lerwick or also in rural localities. Looking into the future, further questions include: will the pattern displayed by this particular group become more general within the next generation of Lerwegians, and, if so, to what extent will rural communities within Shetland resist this change? While the linguistic change in Shetland obviously provides an interesting case-study for us as researchers and linguists, from which further insight into theoretical issues concerning language variation and change may potentially even be gained, two points are perhaps worth remembering. From a Scandinavian viewpoint, the current change will almost certainly lead to a continued reduction in the number of linguistic features that may offer clues about Norn and the Norn-Scots shift; and to many Shetlanders, a drastic decline in Shetland Scots, were it to take place, would no doubt be felt as a considerable loss to the identity and heritage of Shetland.

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