Dialect Research in Orkney and Shetland after Jakobsen

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It has fallen to this present writer to follow after men of the stature of Jakob Jakobsen and Hugh Marwick in the academic study of the dialects of Orkney and Shetland. This might be more than daunting, were it not that each generation can claim to live in a climate of opinion not wholly of its own choice or creation. Thus, when a new investigator knows that he is simply an appointed field-worker — a member of a team — for a detailed academic project like the Linguistic Survey of Scotland, he can feel supported by the creative thought not only of the Survey itself, but of an interlocking series of Departments like Phonetics, General Linguistics, and English Language, within the University of Edinburgh.[1])

[1]) The Linguistic Survey of Scotland is a research department in the University, directed by Professors Angus McIntosh (English Language), Kenneth Jackson (Celtic) and David Abercrombie (Phonetics). It began its work in 1950 and is in two sections, Lowland Scots and Gaelic. Its Lowland Scots section has the task of investigating the dialects of Orkney and Shetland. Work on the lexis, in Scots, has been carried out by two postal questionnaires which are now being edited for publication. Phonological work is being done by fieldworkers. This article will touch briefly on both of these aspects. There are, of course, others (grammar, for instance), which still await detailed investigation.

It is, perhaps, characteristic of modern scientific method that the herculean, individual tasks of the past are now divided and sub-divided with clear demarcations.[1]) In linguistics, any mixing of approach — description, history, comparative study — is properly criticized.[2]) Jakobsen's main concern, of course, was with lexis. But he was much more than simply a lexicographer, and it can be argued, *a fortiori*, that lexicography itself has a built-in prejudice in favour of extra-linguistic matters.[3]) Furthermore, it is possible to find in his work not only the conventional phonological statements of his time, but also (were they displayed more adequately) the significant distributions of linguistic geogragphy. Again, it was possible for one of the best known contemporary books[4]) on interference phenomena, in an extensive exemplification of languages which have been influenced, to cite Jakobsen's »Det Norrøne sprog på Shetland« as its only entry under »Norse«.

Nevertheless, his approach if all-embracing was also antiquarian. How conscious he was of his duty first of all to collect the rapidly diminishing number of Norse words in the dialects, can be remarked in all his published works on Orkney and Shetlend, but chiefly perhaps in the Dictionary[5]) Chapter III, in his assessment and categorisation of these words, and Capter II where he deals especially with his field techniques — »evening visits . . in order to become acquainted with the older words and expressions

1) cf. Hans Reichenbach »The Rise of Scientific Philosophy«, p. 117 — »Scientific work is group work«.

2) See e. g. Fries and Pike »Coexistent Phonemic Systems« *Language* 25, p. 29 cf. Professor Strevens's review of P. L. Henry »An Anglo-Irish Dialect of North Roscommon« *Archivum Linguisticum* vol. 10, p. 63.

3) Yakov Malkiel »Pattern of Progress in Romance Linguistics« *Romance Philology* Vol. V (1951) p. 290.

4) Uriel Weinreich »Languages in Contact«.

5) »An Etymological Dictionary of the Norse Language in Shetland« i. e. The English edition of the »Etymologisk ordbog over det Norrøne Sprog på Shetland«.

... It was of special importance to get the rarer words brought out«. And so on.

The first point, then, which must be urged is that contemporary work in Orkney and Shetland aims not at antiquarianism or even collection, but at description of an »état de langue« deemed to exist sufficiently statically to allow synchronic observation for its own sake and at a given point of time. The need for such observation was apparent in Jakobsen's time. He spoke, for instance, of »en temmelig lang overgangstilstand, i hvilken både det gamle og det nye var omtrent ligelig repræsenteret, det nye dog ... især ved de almindeligste og i daglig tale oftest brugte ord og derfor givende sproget mere og mere karakteren af en lavskotsk dialekt«.[1]) Clearly, a *collection* on the scale of Jakobsen's cannot now be undertaken. It was, to use a phrase of André Martinet's, one of the historical articulations of linguistics and is now completed, once for all time. What contemporary linguists must set out to be is not »antiquarians looking for rare survivals [but] ... interested in characterising as a whole the form of speech they are faced with«.[2]) They are faced, at this moment, with a form of speech in Orkney and Shetland which has suffered much of the anglicisation predicted for it by Jakobsen as far back as 1897 in his »Norrøne Sprog«. And outside of the dialects altogether, they are faced with new methods in agriculture, in public communication, and widespread standardisation in fishing methods and boat types. In these circumstances modern linguists continue, indeed, to be interested in survivals, but in a significantly different way. They are interested chiefly in the way in which these have entered into the structure of the observed language and their function in it. Built-in prejudices nowadays tend to be intra-linguistic rather than extra-linguistic.

[1]) »Nordiske Minder, især sproglige, på Orknøerne« *Svenska Landsmål* 1911 p. 329.

[2]) André Martinet »Dialect« *Romance Linguistics*, vol. 8, p. 2.

There is an interesting passage in »Nordiske Minder« which seems to suggest that Jakobsen was aware of such an approach. »Af megen interesse er det også«, he wrote after discussing some other matters, »at studere udviklingsgangen i nornsprogenes langsomme uddøen, at iagttage hvilken art ord er bukkede under samt, så vidt det lader sig gøre; i hvilken rækkefølge, og hvilken art ord er bevarede, samt hvorfor. Her findes psykologiske momenter, som kan give os forklaring«.[1]) These »psykologiske momenter« are not, of course, very easy to find; and the handling of words which have disappeared is, as Jakobsen notes, wholly contingent. But, in his own day, he was able to suggest a structure where haaf-names »consisting of ordinary Norse words ... having become obsolete in the daily conversational language, were retained at the haaf as lucky words, while substituted Scotch or English words were used at the fireside«.[2]) That is to say, the interference in vocabulary from Scots and English was not merely *substitution*, but, in the process, some older words were transferred to a different fuctional sphere.[3]) In pursuing a parallel theme fifty years after his time, in evaluating the function of words which have succumbed and words which survive, in probing the extent of Norse, Scots and English, (areas both of geographical extent and of common social intercourse) — all this demands an investigation of considerable density. This the Linguistic Survey of Scotland would claim to give. It should also be noted that since the same set of words is used for Scotland as a whole as for the Northern Islands very considerable comparison is possible. Furthermore, another dimension can be added, in that the »usual local word« was asked for first, followed by the »less common local word«. There are not many words where easy and direct comparison between Jakobsen's

1) »Nordiske Minder« loc. cit. p. 332.
2) »The Dialect and Place Names of Shetland«, p. 30.
3) cf. Weinreich op. cit. p. 54.

work and the later work of the Survey is possible, but the equivalent of the expression »to be in the sulks« is one. The comparison is significant and revealing. The Survey's files show, for the great bulk of its informants in Shetland, some form like »idda dorts« or »taen da dorts«, as the »usual local word«. (The exceptions are Fair Isle and Whalsay. Fair Isle gave »Shü's in a Trums« or »Shü's trumsin« and Whalsay »She's doon apun it«). For the »less common word« Mid Yell gave »She's teen a stoit« and added as even less common »Trumaket«, »Tullyet«, and »Dounset«; Ulsta gave »Taken the frimps«; Sandness »She has a snudd upon her«; Skellister »I da Twirms«; Tingwall, »Shü's slebbin«. Jakobsen, in his »Dialect and Place Names of Shetland«,[1]) gives a variety of words for all this including the »less common words« just mentioned. We are thus indebted to him for a very considerable list, and even their distribution can be roughly sketched from the localities given in the Dictionary. But what we do *not* know from him is the expression »idda dorts« etc., its varieties and distributions. Of course, this was not his business, but obviously the citations of his contemporaries, or near-contemporaries, like Ellis, Wright (but Wright borrows from Ellis) or the early work of the Scottish National Dictionary, are too meagre for our purpose. The Linguistic Survey's two lexical questionnaires, by operating with a very limited number of words (no more than 200 for each) probably achieves a sufficient density of coverage to make this lexical aspect of linguistic geography significant and workable.[2])

[1]) p. 38.

[2]) cf. K. G. Spencer »The Lapwing in Britain«. In 1953 Spencer asked, by correspondence, for the local name for lapwing throughout Britain. He used a single informant for Shetland who wrote that the various dialect forms cited by Edmonston and Saxby »are definitely not in use today«. The Linguistic Survey also in 1953 had 34 informants in Shetland and out of these 5 returned the dialect forms (as either »common« or »less common« local words) denied to Spencer — e.g. »Teewheep«, »Tieve's Nicket«, etc.

Phonology

The use of phonological systems by the Survey has been emphasised in one or two places and is, perhaps, fairly widely known.[1]) It is necessary to remember that in counting the number of stressed vowels in a given structural position (say, before the consonant t), differences in distribution over the vocabulary can nevertheless yield the same inventory. This is saying no more than that diachronic reflexes show themselves in the lexis and that synchronic description simply counts the score.[2]) Thus, for example, the inventory of the stressed vowels before t in the dialects of North Ronaldsay and Deerness, in Orkney, is the same (an 11-vowel system), but in North Ronaldsay »fat« and »fault« (»faut«) fall together and in Deerness they do not; but in Deerness »bait« and »met« have the same vowel, and in North Ronaldsay they do not. So the inventory remains the same, but the distribution different. Nevertheless, the inventory is still a unifying mental counter. The reason for this development of the use of phonological systems is simply that accurate, constant and measurable characterisation is required, especially for comparison of dialects. Hans Kurath has spoken of the *unequal* value of »phonemic, phonic, and incidental [sc. distributional] heteroglosses ... in determining the degree of difference between dialects and in evaluating the relative importance of the boundaries between speech-areas«.[3]) Each of these can be

[1]) See especially Augus McIntosh »Introduction to a Survey of Scottish Dialects« pp. 56 ff. and J. C. Catford »Vowel Systems of Scots Dialects« *Trans. of the Philological Society* 1957 p. 107.

[2]) See W. G. Moulton, »The short vowel system of Northern Switzerland: a study in structural dialectology« *Word* 16 (1960) p. 175, and cf. Ernst Pulgram, »Structural Comparison, Diasystems, and Dialectology« *Linguistics* 4 (1964) p. 70.

[3]) Hans Kurath and Raven I. McDavid Junr. »Pronunciation of English in the Atlantic States«, p. 2. Recently P. L. Henry has suggested that phonological criteria are »The most reliable and satisfying basis for

used, and has been used with varying success in Orkney and Shetland in an attempt to delimit dialect areas. An early and elementary sketch of such a delimitation was made for Orkney by using phonic phenomena shown in familiar diminutive word endings.[1]) Thus, in Orphir Mary was said to be »Merrick« and William »Wullock«, In Evie and Rendall, »Merro« and »Willa«. In Utterstown (Stromness) »Willa«, in Firth »Merroo«. The same sort of limited observation could be made for Shetland by dividing it into kw or hv areas (i. e. where words like »quite« and »white« become homophonous, either with kw or hv. This would also apply, incidentally, to dialect areas in Iceland). Phonic phenomena, like the centralisation of some rounded back vowels in Fair Isle, or the labialisation of velar fricatives in Sanday and Shapinsay could also be used in this way.

Dr. Hugh Marwick, of course, included in his »Orkney Norn«[2]) a valuable but necessarily sketchy synoptic tabulation of some territorial differences in Orkney vowel distributions. Jakobsen, for Shetland, gave a very brief statement on »Dialect Differences of Pronunciation« in §42 of The Dictionary. His introductory statement to Chapter V on »Phonology« spoke of the confusion in the phonology of Norn words due to »the strong Scottish influence . . . which has made the vowel-systems very diversified«. But his analysis of this follows the conventional formula: To O. N. . . . corresponds Sh. . . .

It is necessary to bear these considerations in mind, for the dialects of Orkney and Shetland can each be divided internally (generally into a North Isles Mainland division) not necessarily by using phonic phenomena, or even phone-

identifying and delimiting dialects« »Anglo-Irish word Charts« »Ulster Dialects« p. 148. He is not, of course, here comparing the heteroglosses suggested by Kurath, but Phonology, Accidence, Syntax, Vocabulary. cf. Gauchat »Gibt es Mundartgrenzen«. Arch. für neu. Sprach. 111 p. 377.

1) »Parish Dialects« *Orkney and Shetland Miscellany* vol. 1. p. 162.

2) p. 228.

mic inventories, but by noting differences in distribution. The case of stressed vowel + t has already been given as an exemplification of the difference between the dialects of North Ronaldsay and Deerness. But this particular structural position will not, inevitably, be the best for all demonstrable purposes. It was, of course, used exclusively by Mr. Catford to demonstrate the theory that a 12-vowel system may have been current for 16th century metropolitan Scots, and transplanted to Shetland at the time of Scots settlement. In fact, the dialects of Shetland are all – except Fair Isle – of such 12-vowel systems. Those of Orkney vary, both in inventory and in distribution, but 12-vowel systems exist there too. These will be examined presently, but some other structural positions will also be noticed, namely, stressed vowels before l (where, in certain circumstances, this consonant becomes noticeably palatalised).[1]) This position, in fact, will demonstrate most clearly the internal divisions just referred to, and by using distributional criteria.

The case of Fair Isle (an 11-vowel system) can be examined by setting out two or three other Shetland systems in tabular form:

[1]) The consonants d and n might also have been used here, where the same phenomena might have followed. For the sake of brevity only l will be tabulated. The palatalisation is, of course, not found in Scots mainland dialects and must be assumed to be of Norse origin.

	FETLAR	FAIR ISLE	BIGTON
BEET	i	i	i
BEAT	e	e	e
BAIT	ɛ:	æiᵊ	e:
MET	ɛ	ɛ:	ɛ
FAT	a	a:	a
FAUT	ä:	ɑ:	ɑ:
POT	ɒ		ɒ
BOAT	o:	o:	ɔ:
BUT	ɔ̣	ɒ̣	o
ABOUT	u	u	u
BIT	ɛ̣̣	ɛ̣̣	ɛ
BOOT	ø	y	ø

It will be seen from this that, in Fair Isle, »faut« and »pot« have the same vowel. In fact [ɑ:] is distributed quite widely — it appears in »coat« and »throat« as well as »knot«, »note«, »cot«. Its main effect, systemically, is that it reduces the 12-vowel system by one.

Fetlar is a North Isles type. This can be compared with Bigton, a Mainland type, (still using stressed vowel and t) by a phonic criterion. Thus, in the above table it will be observed than for Fetlar, and in terms of actual vowel quality, the [ɛ:] in »bait« is the long of [ɛ] in »met«; but, for Bigton, the vowel in »bait« is [e:] which is the long of [e] in »beat«.[1]) To define these types more specifically, Skerries must be added to Mainland. Fair Isle (and also Whalsay),[2]) as an inspection of the table will show, has a particular development to a front rounded vowel with off-

1) Other phonic differences will also be noticed. The front rounded vowel in Fair Isle »boot« etc. is noticeably closer than either Fetlar or Bigton. In this Fair Isle is to be aligned with dialects of the West of Shetland.

2) Neither Skerries nor Whalsay has yet been fully investigated.

glide in »bait« etc. In any case, since it produces an 11-vowel system it must stand outside this general dichotomy by other than simply phonic criteria.

The dialects of Orkney, it has been noted, vary in vowel inventories, and are susceptible, therefore, of categorisation by this criterion. Consider the following tabulation (stressed vowel + t):

North *South*

	WESTRAY	NORTH RONALDSAY	STRONSAY	BIRSAY	DEERNESS	ORPHIR	SOUTH RONALDSAY	RACKWICK
BEET					i			
BEAT					e			
BAIT	ɛˑə	eˑ	ɛˑə	ɛˑə	ɛ.ə	ɛˑɪ	ɛˑɪ	eˑɪ
MET	ɛ	ɛˑ	ɛ			ɛ	e	ɛ
FAT		æˑ	ä	aˑ	a	a	a	a
FAUT					aˑ	aˑ	aˑ	aˑ
POT	ɒɪ	ɒ		ɒ	ɒ	ɒ	ɒ	ɔɪ
BOAT		ɒˑɪ			ɔˑə	ɔˑə	oˑə	oˑə
BUT					ʌ			
ABOUT					u			
BIT					ɛ̈			
BOOT			ë		ø			

The interest here is obviously in the middle of the table, for »beet«, »beat«, »but«, »about«, »bit« and »boot« show little to remark save that [ë] and not [ø] is used in Stronsay. More precisely, it is used in only one dialect, for the Rothiesholm area of the island also gives [ø], although this dialect is by now rather archaic and the form is recessive.

One clear division in the table is between those dialects which differentiate fat/faut and these which do not. This division is, in general, between a Mainland and South Isles type *versus* a North Isles type, with Birsay, at the western extremity of Mainland, going with the North Isles. Deerness, at the eastern extremity, is aligned with the Mainland/South Isles type. Orphir and Rackwick show 12-vowel systems, but South Ronaldsay does not, for the [e] of »met« is, in fact, the same as in »beat« (or, to give an exact minimal pair, as in »mate«). Phonically, the quality of Rackwick and North Ronaldsay [e·] in »bait« corresponds to the Bigton, (i. e. Shetland, Mainland) type, whereas the others correspond to the Shetland North Isles type.

The structural position of vowel and l can now be briefly noticed. Here, as was suggested previously, distribution is all-important. The following table will suggest that, for both Orkney and Shetland, the distribution of [i] and [e] over the vocabulary can reveal a distinct pattering into North and South types. It should be noticed that, for Orkney, North Ronaldsay, in spite of its actual geographical position, is to be included in the *south* type, and Deerness (East Mainland) in the *north* type. In Shetland, Fair Isle must be included in the north type.

SHETLAND			ORKNEY	
N.	*S.*		*N.*	*S.*
FETLAR GLOUP FAIR ISLE	WALLS BIGTON		STRONSAY DEERNESS WESTRAY	N. RONALDSAY S. RONALDSAY LONG HOPE BIRSAY
i	i	HEEL	i	i
i	e	HEAL	i	e
i	e	ALE	i	e
i	e	BEAL	i	e
i	e	MEAL	i	e
i	e	KALE	i	e

In this article, it has been thought proper only to report on some of the date in the Linguistic Survey's possession. Hence, not much has been said as commentary or interpretation. The data — files, transcriptions and recordings — are, however, open to scholars who may wish to use them for application to their own particular problems. Much more requires to be done. The Survey has not yet, for example, developed a unified technique for the presentation of intonation,[1]) although a fairly large amount of tape-recorded material is available for preliminary investigation on these lines. Nor has it exploited to any extent the interesting possibilities for prosodic analysis outlined and exemplified from the East Coast of Scotland by Trevor Hill.[2]) Breathy voice in North Ronaldsay (with interesting, if very vestigial links in Shetland), the »set« of a raised velum with homorganic plosives for Shetland, parts of Orkney and parts of Caithness, pharyngealisation in Fair Isle in some vowels

[1]) cf. Jakobsen »Nordiske Minder« loc. cit. p. 328.

[2]) Trevor Hill »Phonemic and Prosodic Analysis in Linguistic Geography« *Orbis XII* (1963) p. 449.

and consonants which correspond to Mainland palatalisation — these may, in fact, be susceptible of such treatment.

All this is for the future. The present concrete task, which is now well advanced, is the editing of a selection of approximately 70 items from the first lexical Questionnaire for publication. In this, most of the lexical material for Orkney and Shetland will be included. Thus, a new essay and a new interpretation in a continuing theme will, it is hoped, be able to take a proper place alongside the old.

ÚRTAK

The Linguistic Survey of Scotland (Málfrøðistovnur Skotlands), ein kanningardeild av Edinborgar lærda háskúla, starvast m. a. við rannsakan av bygdarmálum Orknoya og Hetlands. Kanningarnar verða gjørdar bæði viðvíkjandi orðatilfari og ljóðskipan. Henda grein er um partar av báðum. Umráðandi var hjá Jakob Jakobsen at savna inn so nógv, hann var mentur, av hinum norrøna orðatilfarinum, og arbeiði hansara kann verða rópt fullgjørt. Málfrøðistovnur Skotlands roynir nú at fáast við Orknoya- og Hetlandsmálið *sum heild,* og sum tað er vorðið í dag við øllum árinum úr skotskum, enskum o. s. fr. Eitt serstakt drag (sum Jakob Jakobsen eisini gjørdi vart við) er *nútíðar nýtslan* av norrønum orðum í orðatilfarinum.

Í ljóðlæruni verður ljóðskipanarlagið nýtt av stovninum, og máløkini kunnu verða skrásett eftir talinum á sjálvljóðum (í eini ávísari ljóðfestingarstøðu). Vanliga finna vit 12-sjálvljóðalag, men valdøki greina seg í summum landspørtum frá hesum. Yvirlitstalvurnar eru ætlaðar at sýna hetta, og tær eru ætlaðar at sýna hini skiftandi ljóðligu sambondini, sum kunnu verða nýtt. Á henda hátt verða sjálvljóð framman fyri t og l sýnd. Hin síðsta talvan leggur fram munin á *nýtslubýtingini* av summun sjálvljóðum í ymsum orðum bæði í Orknoyggjunum og í Hetlandi.