Shetland speech today

David D. Murison

The historical outlines of the contacts between Scandinavia and Scotland in the Middle Ages are now well-known though details, especially from the Scottish side, have still to be filled in. After three centuries of possession of the Western Isles of Scotland and of Caithness the Norsemen lost their grip in the 13th century, ironically enough as a result of the pressure from the south of their long-lost cousins, the Normans, with their feudal system. The Sinclairs became firmly planted in the secular and ecclesiastical seats of power in Orkney (and Shetland) in the 1380's and there was undoubtedly a steady stream of Scotsmen infiltrating into the isles for at least two generations before they were pledged to the Scottish crown in 1469. Thereafter while the Norse laws and legal system were kept and native administrators of it continued, taxation and the economic system which included the tenure and produce of the land fell under the control of the Scots, an arrangement which led to much oppression, serious grievances, and great activity in the Courts of the Earldom from the prosecutions by the officials and the protests and pleas by the long-suffering tenants.

The imposition of courts in which a foreign tongue is the official speech is of course the classic method of establishing a new language, as French superseded Anglo-Saxon

in post-Conquest England and Anglo-Saxon similarly ousted Gaelic from the Lowlands of Scotland in the same period. It was a stark necessity for the Shetlanders themselves to learn as much Scots as they could to defend their rights and liberties in the Baron's Courts. Documents for this early period in Scots-Shetland relationships are scanty. The first Scots one dates from 1525, and these gradually increase in frequency throughout the century. Protests came to a head in 1576 and a Royal Commission was appointed to investigate the misgovernment and took evidence from many inhabitants, some at least of which must have been given in Scots and is preserved in the Commission's report. The Court Books themselves have been preserved for the years at the beginning of the 17th century and even allowing for the fact that they were written in Scots by a Scots clerk, there is surprisingly little trace of the vernacular language of the country in them. Naturally the Norse legal terms survive like *airff* (erf), *domra* (dómrof), *foud* (fogeti), *lawrichtman* (lǫgrettumaðr), *odal* (óðal), *ranselman* (<rannsaka), *saxteraith* (settareiðr), *schuynd* (sjónd, sýn), *upgestry* (cf. Faer. uppgávumaður), *wattle* (veizla), though it can be seen that there has been some adaptation of the forms to Scottish phonetics. Norse methods of agriculture and landholding, weights and measures, food and domestic articles also survived the coming of the Scots and have in many cases even yet not entirely died out, e. g. *bland* (blanda), *bucht* (Dan. bugt), *bismar* (bismari), *kassie* (kassi), *kenningmerk* (kennimark), *leispund* (líspund), *meill* (mælir), *pennyland, pundar* (pundari), *scattald* (<skatt), *setting* (séttungr), *skeo* (Norw. skjaa), *ure* (øre), *wodmal* (vaðmál). What remained almost entirely unaffected by the newcomers were the place-names, compounded in the typical Norse fashion, with elements like *bister* (bólstaðr), *field* (fjall), *gard* (garðr), *ness, setter* (sætr), *sta* (staðr), *ting* (þing), *voe* (vágr, though also Scotticised to *Waa, Wall), wick* (vík). This of course repeats the pattern over most of Western Europe where

Celtic place-names have survived into French, German, English and Scots.

Somewhat later in the 17th century we have various ecclesiastical documents, mainly minutes of the Presbyterian Kirk Session, which from their nature are nearer to the people and their day-to-day life than the records of the Earl's courts, but even here the Norse words are surprisingly few, as *geo* (gjá), *scroo* (skrúf), *pobie* (papi), *voir* (vár).

Most of the records mentioned above are admittedly from the central and southern part of Shetland where the Scots are known to have first settled and undoubtedly the influence of the English Bible was already beginning to make itself felt on Shetland speech as it had been doing on Scots for three generations.

The most likely inference from all this is that in the central and southern parts of Shetland at least the majority of the people were bilingual by the 17th century and it is significant that the last MS. in Norwegian written in Shetland (from Unst) is dated 1607, though trading and social contacts with Norway were still flourishing. It is hardly possible to overestimate the influence of the Church in the Scotticising of the speech of the islands. The post-Reformation records show that a great many of the ministers in Shetland parishes came from Scotland and all of them would in any case as University graduates be Scots speakers, and there is a tradition that one Magnus Manson, presumably from his name a Shetlander, who had been appointed to the Church in Unst, was sent to Norway to learn the language in order to perform his parochial duties, from which we infer that the south of Shetland had already forgotten its old speech while the Northern Isles had not yet acquired the new. This accords with the fact that the majority of fragments of Norn rhymes, riddles and the like and a considerable portion of the material collected by Jakobsen for his Dictionary came from Unst and the other

North islands, Yell and Fetlar. What seems to have happened is that the more fertile parts of the mainland and the richer islands were taken over by Scots settlers and the rest was left to be possessed in monolingual isolation by the Norse.

Yet another element in the speech pattern of Shetland comes into play in the early part of the 17th century when the Dutch set up herring fishing stations in Bressay and across the sound the town of Lerwick grew up as a market for the Hollanders. By 1630, an informant quoted by Sibbald, who compiled a geographical account of Scotland, takes note of the language situation: "The Natives ... are descended from the Norwegians and speak a Norse tongue corrupted among themselves, which is now much worn out ... Because of their Commerce with the Hollanders, they promtly speak Low Dutch.« And he continues, speaking of a northern parish, "All the inhabitants seldom speak other [than Norwegian] among themselves, yet all of them speak the Scots tongue more promptly and more properly than generally they do in Scotland", this last suggesting a formal grammatical knowledge of Scots acquired in the parish schools established by the Kirk.

Incidentally the contribution to the Shetland vocabulary of "Dutch", which connotes Low German (from the Hansa trade with Hamburg and Bremen) as well as the later Netherlandish, has still to be investigated with the same thoroughness as Jakobsen studied the Norse element and indeed in this respect some of Jakobsen's etymologies may well have to be revised. Some obvious Dutch words he records are *alikruki*, shellfish, *bløv*, to die (blijven), *bugdalin*, packing in a ship's hold (buikdenning), *dolhoit*, a stupor (dolheid), *dwars*, athwart, *frow*, *gilder*, *gudling* (guilder, gulden), *kloint*, a lump (klont), *kracht*, strength, *krank*, ill, *krook*, jar (kruik), *laar*, sea boot, *leppel*, spoon, *maat*, friend, *mallemok*, petrel, *pier*, seaworm, *pram*, ship's boat, *yagger*, pedlar (jager).

Evidence for colloquial speech in Shetland is extremely scanty till the early 19th century when an account of a storm about 1817 is recorded verbatim from the lips of a Fedeland fisherman by Hibbert in his decription of Shetland; later, in 1836, a letter written in Shetland purporting to be from a man in Unst to a friend in Liverpool was printed in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. By and large the language in vocabulary and syntax is Scots. There is of course a considerable number of Norn words like *biudi* (byða), *capistane*, (kǫppusteinn), *ela* (íli), *ferdamett* (ferðarmatr), *fram humlaband* (homluband), *kaib* (keipr), *measkie* (meiss), *nebert* (niðurburður), *ouse* (ausa), *pakki*, *smuk* (smokkr), *spaarl* (sperðil), *tuag* (<þufr) – all of course relating to the ordinary life and occupations of the Shetlanders.

A feature of both passages is the ejaculatory parenthesis, euphemistically averting bad luck and the evil eye, imprecatively calling mischief down on someone else or making an asseveration in the form of a conditional curse, as "gude luck sit in his face," "sae micht I get health as I think," "ill sicht be seen upo dat face," "na gude ken o me as I ken no." Though in this particular example there is a good deal of jocular exaggeration, this kind of speech was familiar in the earlier part of this present century as is illustrated in J. Inkster's *Mansie's Röd*, generally considered to be a classic of Shetland prose.

Much of this can be explained in terms of folk-lore rather than philology, and in the need of folk-speech to be dramatic and emphatic. The apotropaeic expressions are in the same category as the very large number of sea taboo words recorded by Jakohsen in which the ordinary land term must not be used at sea but has its equivalent sea term used to mislead the evil spirits that might wreak mischief on the boat, its crew or its catch, as *bennihoose* (church), *dronger* (cow), *farr* (boat), *flukner* (hen), *foodin* (cat), *genger* (horse), *gloam* (moon), *heima* (wife), *krammer* (cat), *snegger* (horse),

upstander (minister). It will be noticed that the sea equivalent is here (and in most other cases) of Norse origin and a further grammatical characteristic of these taboo words is the frequency of the survival of the Scandinavian suffixed article in the Scotticised from as in *klovin*, tongs (klovinn), *eldin*, fire (eldinn), *birtin*, fire (birtinn), *fyorin*, shore-bait (fjáran), *fyandin*, devil (fjandinn). Apparently the evil spirits were Scots who could be hoaxed by the unfamiliar Norse name!

Norse too is the usage, much more flexible than in Scots, of prepositious as adverbs, especially in the cases of *at*, *til* and *up*, where Shetland has improved on Norwegian in the number of possible locutions with various verbs, like *draw*, *come*, *geng*, *lay*, *set*, etc. On the other hand the Shetland vowel system is based on Scots, particularly the Scots of the Tay and Forth areas from which the first lot of settlers seem to have come to Shetland. As regards consonants palatalisation, as in Norwegian, is universal in Shetland, though not uncommon in Scots also, but palatal *l* and *n*, no longer surviving in Scotland, is heard everywhere in the islands.

Perhaps the oddest feature of colloquial Shetland speech is the use of the pronouns. In form these are Scots, though the form *shu*, which appears alongside *shö*, appears to be from the Old Norse demonstrative *sú*. Hibbert and the writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* remark on the absence of the neuter pronoun *it*, although in fact it does occur once or twice in the passages they quote.

Yet it is certainly true that the commonest pronoun is *he* used equally for personal and impersonal or inanimate objects, especially in reference to weather and predicatively. Association with Norwegian where *det* would normally be used, hardly explains this. Nor again does Norse explain such usages of the so-called ethic dative as in "du's been *dee* a dim" (you have been a long time), "he'll be *him* a banks-gaet" (he'll be as far as the cliffs), "haddin *'im* a

wark" (making a fuss), which in any case is not found in our earlier examples of colloquial speech. Here again we must presume a peculiar Shetland analogical development, based probably on the regular grammatical construction of such reflexive sentences as "set du dee doun" (sit down), and serving to give animation to the colloquial or folk speech. This too must be treated as a stylistic development, not a historical relic.

We see then that Norwegian must have started to decay about 1500, by 1600 most people may have been bilingual, though Norwegian was still the ordinary day-to-day speech especially in the Northern Isles, by 1700 Scots was universal with Norse lingering on till about 1750 in rhymes, riddles, proverbial tags, etc. Jakobsen's great work was to record fully and faithfully what was left of it.

ÚRTAK

Hitt norrøna haldið á landsynningspartinum av Skotlandi var farið at vikna í 13. øld, og skotar høvdu sett búgv í Hetlandi og Orkneyggjunum eini tvey ættarlið, áðrenn hesir oyggjaflokkar 1469 vórðu latnir skotsku krúnuni í veður fyri heimanfylgju. Norrønar lógir og norrøn lógarumsiting vóru framvegis í gildi, men hinir skotsku jarlarnir fingu ræði á fíggjar- og skattaviðurskiftunum. Jarlarnir settu á stovn sínar lensrættir, har málið var skotskt fyrst og fremst aftan á byrjanina av 17. øld. Orðatilfarið, ið hoyrdi til landbúnað, vegan og mát, matvørur og heimabúnyttur, helt í stóran mun á at vera norrønt, og tað eru staðanøvnini enn í dag. Í sunnara partinum og miðjuni av Hetlandi man meginparturin av fólkinum hava verið tvímæltur um ár 1600, serstakliga av kirkjuávum, men hinar fruktarringaru norðaru oyggjarnar varðveittu norskt til fyrst í 18. øld, og Jakob Jakobsen fekk savnað inn nógv brot av skjøldrum og gátum har fyri bert tveimum ættarliðum síðani. Ein annar táttur av Hetlandsmálinum, sum eigur at verða kannaður gjøllari, er ávirkanin úr hálendskum og lágtýskum frá Hansahandlinum og sildafiskiskapinum í 17. øld.

Fyrstu frágreiðingarnar um hitt talaða málið í Hetlandi eru frá o. u. 1820. Um tað mundið eru mál- og ljóðlæra reint skotskar, men orðatilfarið er í mongum førum norskt enn. Í tjóðminnum er væl eftir í

vælsignandi tiltøkum og í illbønum, í orðum sum bert máttu verða søgd á sjógv, í miklari nýtslu av persónsfornøvnum í sambandi við livleysar lutir, í etiskum hvørjumfalli og øðrum óregluligum ella ikki-mállæruligum máliskum. Bragdið hjá Jakob Jakobsen var, at hann so út í æsir fekk savnað eitt mál, har søgulígir viðburðir og árin úr tjóð-minnum eru blandað saman í merkisverdan mun.

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