Language contact in Shetland Scots and Southern Irish English

DREW NEVITT

Some influences from Norn and Irish Gaelic

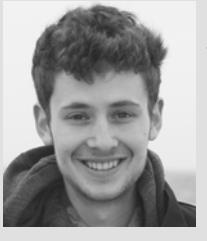
Introduction

English is a product of contact with other languages (Hickey, 2010a). This essay explains the major effects of language contact on the languages or dialects involved, using examples from Shetland Scots, which has been influenced by contact with Norn, and from Southern Irish English (S.I.E.), which has been influenced by contact with Irish Gaelic. The focus is on the borrowing of lexical items between Norn and Shetland Scots and of grammatical features between Irish Gaelic and S.I.E.[1] The essay begins with a brief overview of language contact in general and then give examples of the effects of contact from each dialect. Throughout the essay the claim is made that language contact is an ongoing and fluid process and that the examples given merely illustrate the effects of contact necessitated by the particular situation in question, not universal effects of language contact.

Overview of language contact

According to Thomason (2001: 1), '[nontrivial] language contact is the use of more than one language in the same place at the same time [when] at least some people use more than one language'.[2] It is not possible to touch on every possible linguistic outcome of languages in contact, as they are quite numerous (Thomason, 2001). Rather, the focus is on the aspects of contact that are most relevant to the dialects mentioned above. The following paragraphs explain the phenomenon of language shift, the fact that nearly all features of language can be shared through contact and the assertion that contact has always been an important factor in the development of languages.

When languages are in contact, one possible result is language shift (Thomas, 2001: 12; Hickey, 2010a: 151–3). Language shift does not necessarily entail a change in the empirical structure of the language; rather, the prestige associated with one language in a certain area becomes associated with another language. This often leads to the increased use of the now dominant language and the decreased use of the now subordinate language (Hickey, 2010a). If the shift is so extreme that the subordinate language ceases to be spoken, language death is said to have occurred (Thomason, 2001: 12).[3] For example, Norn died out in Shetland and Orkney after a language shift instituted Scots as the new language of prestige (Millar, 2008: 240–1; 2010: 26). However, this is not always the case. In many instances, the languages in contact merely influence each other (Stalmaszczyk, 2005), often exchanging or adapting features by means of borrowing (Danchev, 1988; Hickey, 2010b).[4] Irish Gaelic, for example, existed healthily alongside English for centuries, exerting its influence (Edwards, 1984; Stalmaszczyk, 2005).



DREW NEVITT is a fourth-year undergraduate Linguistics major and Philosophy minor at Macalester College, located in St. Paul, Minnesota. One of his academic pursuits is studying the syntactic structure of the Germanic languages, and he was awarded a research grant by Macalester for the summer of 2014 to further this interest. Drew spent the spring semester of 2014 abroad at the University of Edinburgh, where he took a course on the current and historical dialects of English in Britain and Ireland. Email: dnevitt@macalester.edu

doi:10.1017/S0266078414000534
English Today 121, Vol. 31, No. 1 (March 2015). Printed in the United Kingdom

In both cases, the English dialect in question has been influenced by the substrate language (Hickey, 2010b), though in different ways and to different degrees.

In order to properly vet the examples given below, it is necessary to establish that almost any feature of language can be borrowed; that is, that languages in contact can influence nearly any aspect of each other.[5] Thomason (2001: 11) makes the assertion outright: 'All aspects of language structure are subject to transfer from one language to another, given the right mix of social and linguistic circumstances'. She goes on to cite various counterexamples to claims that some linguistic features categorically cannot spread from one language to another, reaching the conclusion that there are no such features (Thomason, 2001: 63–5). This sentiment is echoed by Danchev (1988: 38). Although Hickey seems to generally agree that most linguistic features are borrowable, he identifies several that he claims tend not to be borrowed (Hickey, 2010a: 161; 2010b: 13). However, the features he lists are beyond the level of detail of this essay, and it is beyond our scope to weigh in on these claims. Therefore, the majority expert opinion will be accepted, and, for the purposes of this essay, any linguistic feature will be considered eligible for borrowing.

Since any aspect of language can potentially be borrowed, the influence of contacting languages on each other is clearly far-reaching. Indeed, it seems a mistake not to take seriously, if not to downright assume, that almost any given language has at some point been influenced by language contact. As Thomason (2001: 10) has it, '... language contact is the norm, not the exception'. This sentiment is echoed by Robinson (1992), who begins his book by postulating linguistic contact (which he refers to simply as borrowing) as one of the primary means by which languages develop.[6] And since this is the case now, it is intuitively plausible that it has also been so for much of linguistic history. In other words, it seems likely that language contact has been among the driving forces behind linguistic development ever since communities with different languages first began coming into contact. It is important to bear in mind that this omnipresence of language contact operates equally within English as in other languages. It therefore follows that the examples of contact given below may be extended to other dialects of English where merited by the sociolinguistic situation. To reiterate a portion of the introduction, the nearly omnipresent force of contact continuously acts on languages, but in a highly contextual way; that is, the actual effects are unique to each situation, being dictated by a variety of factors, such as economic and military power, populations of speakers and institutional support for one or more of the languages (Thomason, 2001: 20–22, 79–85).

Lexical borrowing

A number of Norn words have been added to the Shetland Scots lexicon through borrowing. This section, in addition to providing a brief sociolinguistic history of the two languages, outlines two studies that describe this borrowing and explains how the examples given demonstrate the process of contact-induced lexical borrowing.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was probably a high degree of bilingualism between Scots and Norn in Shetland (Barnes, 1984). Norn was essentially moribund there by the beginning of the nineteenth century (by rough consensus) (Knooihuizen, 2008: 102). However, its influence on Scots, which became the only commonly spoken language in Shetland (Barnes, 1984), could still be seen during this period of waning, primarily in the form of lexical borrowing (Millar, 2008: 253).

The first study discussed here was conducted in 1774 by Low, whose goal was to collect Norn loanwords from speakers of Shetland Scots (Low, 1879). Table 1 contains a small sample, consolidated in Knooihuizen (2008). It should be noted that, because Low apparently collected these words while at sea, the words his speakers produced were likely restricted to the group of 'noa', or non-taboo, words. Shetland fishermen and seafarers, like many other nautical cultures, had a set of words known as 'haaf' words that would not be spoken at sea for fear of bringing bad luck upon those on board the vessel (Knooihuizen, 2008: 106–7).

Table 1: Norn loanwords in Shetland Scots (Knooihuizen, 2008: 105)

Norn	English
bodin, knorin	boat
coust	bread
hoissan	haddock
kurin	cow
ugan	cap
mostin	mast

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078414000534 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The second study was conducted by Jakobsen, who collected a large number of Norn words that still existed in Shetland Scots in 1893 (Knooihuizen, 2008). Jakobsen (1897: 10) notes that '… a great number of them are not actually in daily use and only remembered by old people'. Table 2 contains several of these words, which Jakobsen (1897: 14–31) implies could occur with relative freedom in the speech of those who use them. However, some other Norn loanwords are constrained in where they could occur. One such example is *hofuð* (meaning head), which at the time 'only survive[d] in place-names in the derivative form …, applied to a headland' (Jakobsen, 1897: 14–15). Similarly, the Norn word *koll-r* (meaning the part of the head covered with hair) was still occasionally found in Scots, but only in compound words (Jakobsen, 1897: 15).[7]

Shetland Scots provides further evidence that the effects of language contact are unpredictable and highly context-dependent. A common generalization about contact-induced borrowing is that the longer two languages are in contact (assuming non-trivial contact, most likely involving bilingual speakers), the more types of items or categories will be borrowed (Danchev, 1988; Thomason, 2001). However, there is little evidence of substantial borrowing into Shetland Scots from Norn other than lexical items, despite their apparent centuries of contact.[8] This does not mean that this general model of what to expect should be thrown out, but only that it should not be rigidly adhered to. This strengthens my claim that language contact is fluid and can manifest itself in various ways.

We have seen that a number of lexical items found in various stages of Shetland Scots originated in Norn, having been brought into the former via borrowing. Given the close contact of these two languages in Shetland, the best conclusion is that the borrowing was caused by this contact. Shetland Scots therefore serves as a prime example of contact-induced lexical borrowing in bilingual situations, as well as of how contact influences the lexicons of many varieties of English. Once again, it should be emphasized that the borrowing between Norn and Shetland Scots is merely one instantiation of language contact, one that has taken form as sociolinguistic conditions have permitted, and that such borrowing is likely to happen wherever languages are in contact, in conformity with the sociolinguistic factors unique to each contact situation.

Table 2: Norn loanwords in Shetland Scots that occurred freely among older speakers (Jakobsen, 1897: 16, 18, 19, 25, 31)

Norn	English
sæta	to waylay
klibber	wooden pin
birtik	brightness
kesshie	basket
föger, faig(-er)	sun
dyrðill	tail of a sheep

Grammatical borrowing

Southern Irish English has borrowed several grammatical features from Irish Gaelic. In addition to providing a brief sociolinguistic history, this section outlines two studies of such features.

English and Irish Gaelic in the south of Ireland existed in more or less a state of bilingualism from the beginning of the twelfth century until the middle of the nineteenth century (Edwards, 1984: 481; Hickey, 2007: 135), after which point only a very small and dwindling number of monoglot Gaelic speakers remained (Edwards, 1984: 483).[9] Gaelic held prestige status in Ireland until the beginning of the seventeenth century, when it was superseded by English and began to lose ground (Edwards, 1984: 480–1). As we should by now expect, this period of heavy contact resulted in significant borrowing and is largely responsible for the distinctive varieties of English that comprise today's S.I.E. (Stalmaszczyk, 2005; Hickey, 2007; O'Keeffe & Moreno, 2009).

A study conducted in 2009 by O'Keeffe and Moreno examines the pragmatics of the well-documented *be* + *after* + *V-ing* construction in S.I.E. This construction is also known as the immediate perfect by Hickey (2007: 144). According to O'Keeffe & Moreno (2009: 517), it 'roughly equates to the present perfect aspect in Standard English'. It is most likely derived from a similar form in Gaelic, where the immediate perfect aspect is formed using the preposition *after* (O'Keeffe & Moreno, 2009). The authors argue that this form was incorporated into and remains in S.I.E. 'because it has acquired pragmatic specializations which do not have an equivalent in the Standard English form' (O'Keeffe & Moreno, 2009: 517); that is, the immediacy implied in the Gaelic form cannot be equalled by any form in Standard English, not even by inserting *just* between *have* and the past participle in the present perfect aspect (O'Keeffe & Moreno, 2009:

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078414000534 Published online by Cambridge University Press

521). Example 1 illustrates the immediate perfect in Gaelic and S.I.E. along with its closest translation in Standard English, the *present perfect + just* construction.

Example 1: Immediate perfect aspect in Gaelic and S.I.E. (Hickey, 2007: 144; O'Keeffe & Moreno, 2009: 521)

a.	*Tá*	*mé*	*tar éis*	*an nuachtáin*	*a léamh*
V +	S +	Prep. +	N (O) +		part.-V
IS -	I	AFTER	THE NEWSPAPER		READING

'I've just read the paper'

b. *She is after spilling the milk*
'She has just spilled the milk'

A second study deals with the syntax and semantics of what the author terms the GET constructions of Gaelic and S.I.E. (Nolan, 2012). The GET constructions consist of two polysemic forms of the verb *get* (*faigh* in Gaelic) (Nolan, 2012: 1115), one of which indicates that the construction contains a change of state and the other of which indicates that the construction contains a recipient (Nolan, 2012: 1111, 1114). As with the study by O'Keeffe and Moreno, the author argues (among other points) that these constructions in S.I.E. are borrowings from Gaelic based on the existence of nearly identical forms in Gaelic and the prolonged contact of Gaelic and English in Ireland (Nolan, 2012: 1111, 1113). Examples 2 and 3 illustrate the basic forms of these two structurally identical constructions in Gaelic and S.I.E.[10]

Example 2: Recipient GET construction (Nolan, 2012: 1127)

Fuair	*sé*	*cupla*	*scannradh*
Get-PST	3SG.M	several:DET	frights:N

'He got several frights'.

Example 3: Passive GET construction (Nolan, 2012: 1143)

Fuair	*sé*	*é*	*féin*	*fliuch*
Get-PST	3SG.M	3SG.M.ACC	RFX	wet:Adj

'He got himself wet'.

As with Norn and Shetland Scots, we have seen grammatical features that originated in Gaelic occurring in S.I.E., and given the prolonged contact between the two languages the best explanation for this parallelism is contact-induced borrowing. In the process, we have shown that borrowing is not restricted to lexical items, although there has certainly been much lexical borrowing from Gaelic into S.I.E. (Nolan, 2012). These two grammatical categories serve as examples of how categories may be borrowed between languages. Which particular categories (or words or any other features) actually get borrowed depends on a variety of sociolinguistic factors. In other words, each language contact situation is unique, but some form of borrowing is quite likely.

Summary

This essay has briefly shown the effects of language contact on the lexicon of Shetland Scots and on two grammatical features of S.I.E., the immediate perfect aspect and the GET constructions. Using these examples, it has been demonstrated that the effects of contact depend strongly on the sociohistorical context of each contact situation and that no two instances of contact necessarily yield the same outcomes. The author hopes to have supplied reason to view language contact as an important and dynamic component of English today.

Notes

1 Phonological borrowing is not discussed at any point. See References for reading on the phonological effects of language contact.
2 A discussion of where to draw the line between a language and a dialect is beyond the scope of this essay. For the purposes of this essay, the linguistic varieties in question (Norn, Irish Gaelic, Shetland Scots and Southern Irish English) are all considered distinct languages in relation to one another. However, when Shetland Scots or S.I.E. are contrasted with other varieties of Scots or English respectively, they may be referred to as dialects.
3 Thomason's succinct definition of language death serves nicely: '... the disappearance of one of the languages' (2001: 12).
4 In addition to borrowing, 'transferring', or the exchange of broader or self-reinforcing categories, often occurs in situations of contact (Hickey, 2010b: 11). See this source for further discussion.
5 Contact-induced change is also known as 'interference' (Thomason, 2001: 61).
6 Robinson's *Old English and its Closest Relatives* focuses exclusively on the Germanic languages, but there is no reason to believe that he would not support borrowing as a key cause and means of linguistic change in a more universal sense.
7 For a discussion of the cause of these constraints, see Millar (2008: 252–3; 2010: 26–7).
8 See Millar (2008) for a discussion of other borrowings from Norn. There is no mention of structural borrowing (Millar, 2008: 252–4).
9 The fact that there were bilingual speakers is particularly relevant when discussing grammatical borrowing because many scholars believe that '... the borrowing

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078414000534 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of 'systemic' material – inflections, grammatical forms, sentence structures – can only occur via bilinguals' (Hickey, 2010b: 8).

10 Notice that *get* is used in the same ways in Standard English. Nolan defends his claim that these constructions are indeed Gaelic borrowings by citing several variants in S.I.E. that do not occur in Standard English (Nolan, 2012: 1142–5).

References

Barnes, M. 1984. 'Orkney and Shetland Norn.' In P. Trudgill (ed.), *Language in the British Isles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 352–66.

Danchev, A. 1988. 'Language contact and language change.' *Folia Linguistica*, 22, 37–54.

Edwards, J. 1984. 'Irish and English in Ireland.' In P. Trudgill (ed.), *Language in the British Isles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 480–98.

Hickey, R. 2007. 'Southern Irish English.' In D. Britain (ed.), *Language in the British Isles*. 2nd Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 135–51.

—. 2010a. 'Contact and change.' In R. Hickey (ed.), *The Handbook of Language Contact*, pp. 149–69. Online at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/book/10.1002/9781444318159> (Accessed March 29, 2014).

—. 2010b. 'Language contact: Reconsideration and reassessment.' In R. Hickey (ed.), *The Handbook of Language Contact*, pp. 1–28. Online at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/book/10.1002/9781444318159> (Accessed March 28, 2014).

Jakobsen, J. 1897. *The Dialect and Place Names of Shetland*. Lerwick: T. and J. Manson.

Knooihuizen, R. 2008. 'Fishing for words: The taboo language of Shetland fishermen and the dating of Norn language death.' *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 106(1), 100–13.

Low, G. 1879. *A Tour Through the Islands of Orkney and Schetland: Containing Hints Relative to their Ancient, Modern, and Natural History, Collected in 1774*. Kirkwall: W. Peace.

Millar, R. M. 2008. 'The origins and development of Shetland dialect in light of dialect contact theories.' *English World-Wide*, 29(3), 237–67.

—. 2010. 'The death of Orkney Norn.' *Scottish Language*, 29, 21–34.

Nolan, B. 2012. 'The GET constructions of Modern Irish and Irish English: GET passive and GET recipient variations.' *Linguistics*, 50(6), 1111–61.

O'Keeffe, A. & Moreno, C. P. A. 2009. 'The pragmatics of the *be + after + V-ing* construction in Irish English.' *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 6(4), 517–34.

Robinson, O. W. 1992. *Old English and its Closest Relatives: A Survey of the Earliest Germanic Languages*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Stalmaszczyk, P. 2005. *Celtic Presence: Studies in Celtic Languages and Literatures: Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Cornish*. Łódź: Łódź University Press.

Thomason, S. G. 2001. *Language Contact*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078414000534 Published online by Cambridge University Press