The Shetland Islands: globalisation and the changing status of Standard English

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A new approach to the study of Shetland English

Introduction

This article serves as a commentary on the current position of 'Standard English' in the Shetland Islands, the northernmost part of the British Isles. Experience gained during linguistic fieldwork over a ten-year period suggests that there is a need to re-examine this issue, not least in view of societal changes. It will be argued that Shetland is by now a locality of relevance for those with an interest in standards of English, as well as Scots, and suggestions will also be made regarding potential future directions for research into Shetland English.

The Shetland Islands

The location of the Shetland Islands, or simply 'Shetland', within the North Sea may be seen in Figure 1. Shetland belongs to Scotland and tends to be grouped together with the Orkney Islands – which are located considerably closer to the Scottish mainland – into the 'Northern Isles'. Further inspection of the map, however, reveals that Shetland is about as close to the two cities of Bergen, Norway and Torshavn, Faeroe Islands, as to the city of Aberdeen in Scotland.

Most accounts of Shetland's history point towards the Picts as the first inhabitants. Beginning around 800AD, however, the islands were settled by Vikings, primarily from south-west Norway. The islands remained under Danish-Norwegian rule until 1469, when they were ceded to Scotland as part of a dowry. This eventually led to an immigration wave from the Scottish mainland. While, of course, very little is known about the language spoken by the Picts, Viking settlers spoke Old Norse. From Old Norse, a local form subsequently developed; it has come to be known as 'Norn', although, confusingly, this term is sometimes also applied to modern Shetland dialect, with which it obviously cannot be equated. The switch to Scottish rule eventually led to a language shift from Norn to Scots, although the timing and nature of the shift is a matter of ongoing debate (Rendboe, 1987; Millar, 2008; Knooihuizen, 2009).

Today Shetland is a highly prosperous society, with an unemployment rate well below the Scottish national average. The main sources of income are oil, gas, and fishing. In addition, fish farming, fish processing, sheep farming, and tourism provide significant revenue. Many

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Figure 1. Map of the Shetland Islands and North-West Europe

Shetlanders are also employed within schools, health and social care, and the highly developed inter-island transportation system. Shetland's main industrial and commercial centre is Lerwick, commonly referred to as Shetland's 'capital'. Shetland's population is nearly 22,000, with approximately 7,000 residing in Lerwick (General Register Office for Scotland, 2010). The population rose sharply around 1980 as a result of the oil boom, when people especially from mainland Scotland, England, and elsewhere in the UK found work in Shetland. While the flow of incomers triggered by the oil industry subsequently levelled out, more recent developments such as the expansion of the European Union have contributed to an influx of Eastern Europeans, especially Poles and Hungarians, attracted by job opportunities for instance within the construction business and hospitality sector, among other fields. In addition, Shetland has a small population of South-east Asian origin. From an outside observer's perspective, perhaps the most salient characteristics of modern Shetland society are the economic prosperity, the strong sense of community, and the great awareness of its Scandinavian heritage, while being firmly integrated into Scottish society.

The linguistic situation: 'Scots', 'Scottish Standard English' and 'Shetland English'

The linguistic situation in Shetland is best accounted for by using Lowland Scotland as a starting point, which, roughly, means the non-Gaelic part of mainland Scotland. The Scottish Lowlands are commonly characterised as a bipolar language continuum, in which 'Scots' and 'Scottish Standard English' (SSE) constitute the two poles. There is no consensus regarding the language status of Scots: it is considered by some to constitute an autonomous Germanic

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Table 1: Lexical and grammatical features of Shetland dialect/Shetland Scots

LEXIS

- Words frequently used: *bairns* 'children', *big* 'build', *braaly* 'pretty, fairly' (e.g. 'braaly good'), *eenoo* 'just now' (e.g. 'bye eenoo!'), *gant* 'yawn', *greet* 'cry', *hae* 'have', *ken* 'know', *kirk* 'church', *maet* 'food', *muckle* 'large', *peerie* 'little', *taatie* 'potato', *twarttree* 'some', *uncan* 'strange, unknown'
- Words particularly associated with nature and a traditional way of life: *böd* 'fisherman's booth', *bröl* 'bellow', *crö* 'sheep fold', *grind* 'gate', *mooratoug* 'ant', *mudjick* 'midge', *neb* 'beak', *voe* 'inlet of the sea'

GRAMMAR

Verbs

- Perfective 'be': *I am heard it* 'I have heard it'
- Regular forms for some verbs that are irregular in StE: *teached* 'taught', *catched* 'caught'; for some irregular verbs, other forms than in StE: 'begin': *begin – begöd – begöd*, 'cast': *cast – cöst – cassen*
- Progressive form of stative verbs: *I'm no caring!* 'I don't care'

Pronouns

- T-V distinction for second person singular: *du* (informal) vs. *you* (formal)
- *Dey* 'they', *dem* 'them', *wis* 'us', *wir* 'our', *wirs* 'ours'
- *yun* 'that': *yun man* 'that man', *yun's yun* 'that's that'
- Definite article: *da* 'the': *Da Shetland dialect* 'the Shetland dialect'; the definite article is also used in some expressions such as *da day* 'today', *da moarn* 'tomorrow'

Nouns

- Irregular plural forms for some nouns: *shön* 'shoes', *een* 'eyes'

Prepositions

- *abun* 'above', *fae* 'from'

Negation

- *no* 'not': *I'm no bothered*
- *nae* 'no': *There's nae milk left*
- Negative particle *-na* used with auxiliary verbs: *canna* 'cannot', *dunna* 'do not', *wudna* 'would not'

(See further Graham, 1999; Robertson & Graham, 1991; Millar, 2007)

language, and, in fact, was recently listed within *The European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages*; others, however, regard it as a group of highly distinctive dialects of English (cf. e.g. McClure, 1994; Wells, 1982). At any rate, the linguistic features distinguishing a traditional Scots dialect from Standard English concern all levels: lexis, syntax, morphology, and phonology. Scottish Standard English, on the other hand, is usually defined as Standard English as spoken in Scotland. McArthur (1979: 50), for instance, describes it as 'a more or less homogeneous range of nationally acceptable norms of spelling, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, which is in turn one variety of World Standard English'. While it may differ from Standard English as spoken in, say, England and America regarding lexis, syntax and morphology to some extent, the most significant differences concern phonology. Between the two end points of 'Scots' and 'Scottish Standard English' there also exists a complex and variable range of intermediate speech forms, which is rather challenging to account for. On the whole, the contrast between Scots and SSE may be well marked in rural localities, with speakers choosing between the two in a manner of code-switching. In urban regions, however, the distinction is typically fuzzier, and speakers may often 'drift' gradually within the continuum (Aitken, 1984).

The same set of terminology may be applied to Shetland. A local dialect of Scots is spoken; as is

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common, it will be referred to as 'Shetland dialect', although alternative terms include 'Shetland Scots', 'Shetlandic', and 'Shetlan' – the latter used primarily among Shetlanders themselves. Some of its characteristic lexical, grammatical and phonological features are summarised in Tables 1 and 2. At the opposite end of the continuum, SSE may be found. However, the term 'Shetland English' will also be introduced. While it clearly refers to speech forms towards the 'English' end of the speech spectrum, it is intended to potentially also include forms that may display a somewhat greater amount of localisms than SSE, and to signify that some of these may in fact be Shetlandisms rather than more general Scotticisms.

The traditional view of Shetland society and Shetland English

Looking at the map in Figure 1, it is not difficult to see why Shetland has often been described as an 'isolated' and occasionally even 'intensely insular' society (Johnston, 1997: 449). No doubt, Shetland's relative, and during some periods rather considerable, geographical isolation has played a significant role in the development of modern Shetland. It has contributed to the formation of strong social networks and sense of community. It is a partial explanation for the relatively higher degree of maintenance of Scots in Shetland, in comparison with many parts of mainland Scotland (McClure, 1994). Intra-island isolation within the Shetland archipelago itself is probably an important factor behind the great regional variation within Shetland dialect (cf. Mather & Speitel, 1986). However, Shetland's 'insularity' is oftentimes given further significance; it is put forward as an explanation not only for the strong position of Scots but also the supposedly marginal status of Standard English in Shetland. Such accounts tend to stress the point that Scots is the primary speech form, used among virtually all Shetlanders (Johnston, 1997), and view the local form of English as representing an adaptation made by essentially Scots-speaking people in response to outsiders within a more or less foreign situation.

During interviews conducted by Scandinavian scholars Gunnel Melchers and Arne Kjell Foldvik throughout Shetland between 1980 and 1984,[1] one Shetland man summarised the overall principle governing the use of English as:

> Shetland Man [SM_1]: *We're trying to speak English to anybody that spoke English to us*.
>
> Interviewer [I]: *Like Swedes and Norwegians, who turn up*?
>
> SM_1: *I would naturally speak English to them, if they were speaking English to me*.

The use of English when speaking to outsiders is mostly attributed to the avoidance of comprehension difficulties. Shetlanders, especially those of an older generation, hence also consider it a matter of politeness to use English in such circumstances:

> SM_2: *You see, when we were young it was considered bad manners to speak Shetland to somebody who was a stranger, you know. So we all had to speak English to them*.

The older generation commonly point to the school system as a contributing factor in the development of bilingual/bidialectal competence. Some even reported that the use of English in school was strictly enforced at one point:

> SM_3: *I wouldn't say it was King's English, but it was English that was taught in the school here. There was no way that we could ever have said anything in the dialect at the school here.*

On the other hand, the use of English among fellow Shetlanders was very much frowned upon and considered pretentious, and has even acquired a local term:

> SM_4: *And if you met a stranger from outwith Shetland, you never used your dialect. But among yourselves, it was very much not the done thing, to speak in English. That was called 'knappin'*.

In agreement with such remarks, the traditional view of 'Shetland English' is that it primarily represents a temporary adaptation rather than a more established form or 'variety' of English. Johnston (1997: 449) possibly provides the most explicit statement to this effect: 'localised dialect is thus used by nearly everyone to insiders, and mixed lects to outsiders, with the proportion of SSE forms increasing with greater formality and among high-status speakers'. However, this assumption is also revealed by the use of terms such as 'adapted dialect' for what Shetlanders would be speaking to a non-Shetland interviewer (e.g. Melchers, 1983).

In fact, Shetlanders' own views of their spoken English would often seem to support such suggestions. Older, rural Shetlanders sometimes made comments indicating a certain degree of perceived unnaturalness in using English. As the issue of

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code-switching was brought up, one man suggested that it required a considerable effort:

> I: *But you're not doing it in a way consciously? I mean, it's sort of automatic, or?*
> SM_5: *No, to speak English, we've got to think, all the time too. It's so much different that we've got to, we try to speak English. If you hear us hesitating, it's finding the English word, you see.*

Somewhat self-deprecating comments are sometimes made by Shetlanders regarding their spoken English. As an example, when asked to reflect upon the mode of speech he was currently using, one interview subject responded:

> SM_6: *We're trying to speak our best English just now. Which is not very good either.*

Although it has never been directly investigated to what extent there is an accepted notion of a 'Shetland English' among Shetlanders themselves, a survey conducted in 1983 at the Anderson High School in Lerwick revealed that the pupils' attitudes towards English as spoken by Shetlanders were not entirely positive. While the most common answers to the question: 'What do Shetland people speak when they don't speak dialect?' were 'English' and, secondly, 'Scottish', the pupils also responded: 'a put on Mainland English' and 'they imitate English (. . .)'; in addition, somewhat derogatory descriptions were given such as: 'broken English', 'not proper English', 'weird English', 'English of a sort', and 'an attempt at English' (Melchers, 1985: 97–8).

Shetlanders 2011: intensely insular, essentially Scots-speaking?

The overall impression conveyed by the foregoing account would seem to be that Shetlanders display firm maintenance of Scots among themselves; however when addressing an outsider, they attempt to code-switch, which requires a certain effort for some, and results in a fuzzy set of approximations towards Standard English, rather than a 'variety' of English. Is this still an accurate view? In order to address this issue, some of the traditional assumptions about Shetland society must be re-evaluated.

To begin with, the view of Shetland as an essentially isolated and insular society needs to be somewhat modified. The physical communication links are excellent; there is a daily ferry service connecting Shetland with Aberdeen, and the extensive inter-island bus and ferry communication systems are probably second to none. Each year Shetland receives an increasing number of visitors, in the form of regular tourists, cruise ship passengers, attendees at music and cultural festivals, and participants in educational summer schools. As a result, the town of Lerwick displays a cosmopolitan character, especially during the summer months. As to electronic communication, Shetland is on a par with the rest of Europe. For instance, in preparation for a regional survey in 2010, many informants in rural localities could best be contacted via email; one person residing in one of the most remote islands also expressed surprise at the fact that, unlike her, I was not on Facebook, which would have made it so much easier for us to keep in touch, she stressed.

While these factors may all have an impact on the language situation, the main question of course concerns the potential effect of the large number of incomers to Shetland, beginning about 1980 as a result of the oil boom. As recently as 1997, it was reported that:

> Even the large influx of outsiders on Shetland due to the oil boom is felt to be something temporary, which will leave a more modernised and prosperous but essentially locally oriented society in its wake. In an atmosphere like this, it is clear that the associations of the Insular Scots dialects, as local identity markers and real media of communication, not just a source of interesting words, remain largely intact.
>
> (Johnston, 1997: 449)

While the current facts regarding this matter remain to be established through empirical research, suffice it to say that many Shetlanders express a different view. A common opinion voiced for instance by parents and school staff is that some children whose parents are from Shetland, but who attend school classes that include a significant number of pupils whose parents are not, tend not to speak Shetland dialect, even in other circumstances. In their view, Shetland *bairns*[2] are in such cases adapting to the incomers, rather than the other way around, which results in a form of English being spoken.

Again, it must be stressed that most of the empirical evidence regarding the language situation in Shetland remains to be collected. Nevertheless, based on experience gained over a ten-year period, the following characterisation may be offered for Shetland as of 2011. As regards adult Shetlanders, most are clearly still bilingual/bidialectal, with Shetland dialect being the speech form used among other Shetlanders. Relatively clear-cut examples of code-switching may be

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Table 2: Phonological features of Shetland dialect/Shetland Scots

Vowels

- Front rounded vowels [ø ~ y ~ ɵ] in words such as *bröl* 'bellow', *do*, *she*; *good*, *boot*
- Diphthongisation in words such as *bed* and *men*: [bɛ^{i}d], [mɛ^{i}n]
- Additional distinctions among front vowels compared to StE or SSE: *feet* /i/ ≠ *beat* /e/ ≠ *bait* /eː/ ≠ *pet* /ɛ/
- Lexical distribution of stressed vowels different from StE/SSE: *about*, *loud* /u/; *away*, *take*; *top*, *off, long* /a/; *die*, *fly*; *well* (adv.), *dead* /i/; *coat*, *coal* /ɔ/ (rather than /o/; however: *boat*, *foal* /o/); *but*; *put*, *foot* /ɪ/

Consonants

- No contrast between <wh-> and <qu-> sequences; in some regions they are pronounced as /hw/ (*white*/*quite* /hwait/), but in others as /kw/ (*white*/*quite* /kwait/)
- In some regions, absence of /dʒ/ in word-initial position: *gin* = *chin* /ʧ-/
- TH Stopping: *den* 'then', *dat* 'that'
- Until recently, /kn-/ onsets: *knee* /kni/. Today, however, this feature is sharply recessive or even obsolete
- Velar fricative /x/: *loch* 'lake', *broch* 'prehistoric stone tower'
- (Historical) L Vocalisation: *all* 'aa', *fall* 'faa', *salt* 'saat'
- Trilled R, which is becoming increasingly rare in Scotland, may still be heard

(See further Mather & Speitel, 1986; Johnston, 1997; Tait, 2000)

observed for instance when a Shetlander interrupts a conversation with a non-Shetlander and answers a telephone call from a fellow Shetlander. When interacting with outsiders, they may sometimes initially switch to Standard English and later, gradually or less so, return to Shetland dialect, presumably after increased familiarity. However, for the main town of Lerwick matters are a little different. Among middle-class Lerwegians at least, there is now also an established local form of Scottish Standard English, which is typically used with non-Shetlanders. The transference of lexical and grammatical features from Shetland dialect is significantly more limited than for rural Shetlanders, and it would seem hard to maintain the view that this speech form merely represents a set of 'mixed lects' or fuzzy adaptations. Furthermore, there is clearly a recognisable local Lerwick accent, or norm for the pronunciation of SSE (Sundkvist, 2007).

The final question, then, is what is happening among the younger generation. At least two observers have suggested that, in Lerwick at least, an increasing number of children are monolingual speakers of 'Standard English' (Tait, 2000: 83; van Leyden, 2004: 18). Tantalising clues were recently provided by the first large-scale variationist study undertaken in Shetland (Smith, 2009). Three generations of Lerwegians were recorded, in each case using a middle-aged Shetlander as an interviewer. While the older and middle generations displayed firm maintenance of Scots/Shetland dialect, the results from the youngest generation were more complex. According to Smith (2009: 29), there was '(…) extreme linguistic heterogeneity across individuals, with expanded use of dialect forms by some speakers and almost complete rejection by others'. In her view, 'This results in a form of Scottish Standard English being spoken with little or no local variants used by some and dialect forms used even in excess of the older generations by others' (2009: 29). The results showed (i) that there was a trend towards clustering around the Scots vs. SSE poles, with some linguistic variables displaying more gradualness than others; and (ii) that speech forms towards SSE were used by some young Lerwegians when speaking to a fellow Shetlander, albeit one of a different generation. As pointed out by Smith (2009: 29), the interpretation of these findings is not clear; they may reflect changes in the speech form ('the dialect is dying'), or simply a change in code-switching conventions ('children remain bilingual/bidialectal but use English also with some Shetlanders').

Conclusion

This paper does not deny the maintenance of Shetland dialect, at least in rural localities. Nor does it deny the obvious fact of Shetland's relative geographical isolation, and to some extent greater sense of self-containment than other parts of Scotland. However, it stresses the following. First, Shetland is by now a significantly less

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'insular' and much more integrated, even globalised, society than previously. Shetlanders, especially Lerwegians, therefore enter into increasingly wider communication networks, involving both temporary and more long-term interactions with people from outside Shetland. Partly as a result of this, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that a form of Scottish Standard English may now be identified in Lerwick, alongside Scots.

Despite the significant number of high-quality research projects conducted in Shetland, many of the crucial facts regarding the current language situation remain to be established. What is called for in order to bring the study of Shetland speech to the next level is an attempt at gaining increased ecological validity. Researchers have mostly started with an assumption of the speech forms in use, and then considered more or less natural ways to elicit these; most have sought after 'genuine', 'broad', or traditional Shetland dialect (e.g. Mather & Speitel, 1986; Melchers, 1983), with the exception of Sundkvist (2007), who shifted the focus to SSE. Despite the obvious methodological challenges, efforts should be made to study Shetlanders in a range of communicative situations in which they naturally find themselves, and then account for the speech forms displayed. Such an approach must also be based on a realistic view of the current 'linguistic ecology', and it is in this context that Shetland's insularity needs to be deemphasised. Only then will we be able to assess the current position and status of 'Shetland English' within modern Shetland society. ■

Notes

1 All quotes were extracted from interviews conducted by Gunnel Melchers and Arne Kjell Foldvik between 1980 and 1984. I am very grateful to Gunnel Melchers for granting me access to the recordings.
2 *bairns* 'children'

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