

JAKOB JAKOBSEN AND THE NORN LANGUAGE OF SHETLAND

Michael P. Barnes

For Shetlanders, the name of the scholar in whose memory this centenary lecture is being given carries strong connotations of a Scandinavian linguistic heritage. Jakob Jakobsen and Norn, to quote the words of the popular song (though forsaking the benefit of rhyme) ‘go together like a horse and carriage’. This juxtaposition of scholar and phenomenon therefore seems a natural choice for today’s lecture topic. But as well as summarising Jakobsen’s achievements in Shetland, and in a modest way attempting a reevaluation of his work on Norn, I shall try to take a slightly broader view of the man and a more critical one of Shetland’s linguistic heritage. What images does the name Jakobsen conjure up outside these islands, and what is, or was, Norn?

It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves at the outset that Jakobsen was a Faroeman. Brief accounts of his life and work have been furnished by Matras (1957; 1973) and Grønneberg (1981). What neither of these scholars do, however, is to make clear how widely perceptions of Jakobsen differ depending on one’s perspective.

To the academic community at large he is a Norse philologist who contributed valuable material of particular help in understanding the origins and development of large numbers of individual Scandinavian words. The pages of etymological dictionaries such as Torp 1919 and de Vries 1962 bear ample testimony to the impact of his research in this area.

In Faroe, Jakobsen, or ‘Jákup doktari’ as the Faroese themselves often say, is a figure of enormous stature, held in great esteem and affection. And this is scarcely surprising when one reviews the contribution he made to the study of his native language and culture. At a time when Faroese was almost exclusively an oral medium, he performed several prodigious feats of composition and publishing — indeed in some respects it would not be inappropriate to call Jakobsen ‘the father of modern written Faroese’. He was the compiler of the vocabulary volume of *Færøsk Anthologi* (Hammershaimb 1891) — an extensive collection of ballads, legends and related material — and it is that vocabulary which forms the basis of the current Faroese-Danish dictionary (Jakobsen and Matras 1961), of which the recent Faroese-English dictionary (Young and Clewer 1985) is in large part a translation. Jakobsen also collected and edited a vast corpus of Faroese legends and folk-tales (Jakobsen 1898-1901), published a volume of pre-Reformation documents relating to Faroe (Jakobsen 1907), and wrote a historical and literary study of the legendary Faroese character Páll Nólsoy (Jakobsen 1908-12). For this last work, considered by some to be his greatest, he was obliged to create single-handed a Faroese scholarly idiom; previously the language of scholarship in

the islands had been exclusively Danish. Further contributions Jakobsen made to Faroese studies were in the fields of place-names and orthography. As a champion of orthographic reform, it must be said, he achieved very little, but that is a fate he shares with many, including no less a controversialist than Bernard Shaw. For both practical and pedagogical reasons Jakobsen wanted to remove the Icelandic and etymological garb in which written Faroese had been clothed since the middle of the nineteenth century and bring spelling more into line with pronunciation. However, his proposals, first made in 1889, met with vehement opposition, and although he adapted his own spelling in various ways, few of his fellow-countrymen were in the end prepared to follow him. In spite of this set-back, Jakobsen was and remains a towering intellectual figure in his native Faroe — best known there, understandably, as the scholar who strengthened respect for the Faroese language and played an important part in equipping it to deal with the demands of the modern world.

Jakobsen, then, is a man with a considerable and varied reputation. Naturally enough, it is his work on ‘the Norn language of Shetland’ that looms largest in the minds of the people of the Northern Isles, but before proceeding to consider that aspect of his career, it was fitting, I felt, that I should place on record here a brief acknowledgement of his many other achievements and offer thereby some indication of his considerable scholarly versatility.

As is well known, Jakobsen first arrived in Shetland in the summer of 1893. Here he remained for almost two years, working with single-mindedness and dedication to record every remnant of Norn he could find. Words, phrases, snatches of conversation, proverbs, rhymes, riddles, place-names — as well as other, less conspicuous items — all were carefully noted down and discussed. Although he made two further brief visits to Shetland, in 1905 and 1912, it was in the years 1893-5 that the bulk of the work of collection was accomplished. (An account of Jakobsen’s activities in Shetland can be found in Grønneberg 1981.)

Following this initial stay, Jakobsen began to issue the results of his research in both learned and popular form. More or less complete bibliographies of his published works can be found in Jakobsen 1957 (251-3) and Joensen *et al.* 1964 (265-7), while Grønneberg 1981 (87-9) separates from the rest those items that deal with Shetland and Orkney. Here it will be sufficient to mention his doctoral thesis, *Det norrøne sprog på Shetland* (1897a), the two popular lectures, *The Dialect and Place Names of Shetland* (1897b), the pioneering *Shetlandsøernes stednavne* (1901) — the English-language version of which (*The Place-Names of Shetland*, 1936) is now happily reprinted as part of the centenary celebrations — and the monumental two-volume *Etymologisk ordbog over det norrøne sprog på Shetland* (1908-21) and its English translation *An Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland* (1928-32, reprinted 1985 by the Shetland Folk

Society). The doctoral thesis, the place-name volume and the dictionary can without doubt be classed as landmarks in the history of Scandinavian philology; the two popular lectures, for their part, provide entertaining and lucid summaries of the author's most important discoveries for the lay reader.

In casting round for a fair measure of Jakobsen's achievement I have found comparison of the post-language-shift documentation of Norn with that of Cornish particularly illuminating. Both languages appear to have died — in the sense of losing their last native speakers — in the final quarter of the eighteenth century. Insofar as one can assume that elements of a language will live on for a while after the disappearance of native competence, one would have expected nineteenth-century Cornwall and Shetland to have yielded roughly equal amounts of material. In fact, the data we have about Norn from the late nineteenth century exceed by far, both in variety and volume, the information available to us about Cornish from the whole of the century — notwithstanding the fact that there seems to have been a more widespread interest in Cornish than in Norn. Jakobsen's *Etymological Dictionary*, in addition to listing approximately 10,000 individual words, a quite staggering number, contains a great many 'fragments of Norn'. Seekers after remnants of Cornish could only find 'odd words and phrases, the basic numerals, the Lord's Prayer' (Price 1984: 137). It is not impossible, of course, that — for whatever reason — there was simply less Cornish to discover than there was Norn, but it also seems clear that there was no one in the far west of Cornwall at the relevant period with Jakobsen's energy, dedication and persistence.

Jakob Jakobsen is thus plainly a man who deserves our gratitude and praise. Because of this, however, there is a danger when we try to assess his contribution that we may descend into eulogy and clothe him in a mantle of perfection. That does neither him nor us a service because it masks reality, and prevents a true appreciation of merit. Meticulous and critical scholar that Jakobsen was, it is hardly an approach that would have commended itself to him. The greatest service we can do Jakobsen, I believe, is to cast a critical eye on his work and weigh up its advantages and shortcomings dispassionately, because only when we uncover the solid core of his achievement can we (a) properly understand his worth and (b) identify those areas where further study needs to be undertaken. Jakobsen himself would surely have wished for nothing less.

Insofar as each age has its own preoccupations and sensibilities, its own ways of looking at things, there can never be a 'proper' or 'definitive' assessment of the achievements of earlier scholars. One generation may re-discover and exalt what an earlier one has decried. Our task in attempting a revaluation of works of the past can thus only be to judge them in the light of what we think important, giving reasons for our judgement at appropriate points.

How well, then, has Jakobsen's work on Norn stood the test of time? How far does it address the concerns of modern philologists and linguists and make sense to them?

It is perhaps as well to begin by emphasising what Jakobsen actually did. When he arrived in Shetland in 1893, his concern was to rescue from oblivion as much of the Norn language as possible. He was driven partly by feeling for his native Faroese, which he seems to have thought in danger of suffering the same fate as Norn, and partly by the appetite of the philologists of his day for comparative linguistic material. It should not be forgotten that nineteenth-century linguistics and comparative philology were one and the same thing; the focus was entirely historical and the main aim was to trace languages, in particular the Indo-European languages, back to common ancestors and thus demonstrate their relationships. True to his purpose, Jakobsen set about finding as many informants as possible and interviewing them. All the information they were able to give him — continuous pieces of Norn, isolated phrases, individual words, and variant pronunciations — he noted down in meticulous detail.

Unfortunately neither Jakobsen himself nor anyone else seems to have left a detailed record of his interviewing techniques. A basic outline is offered in the introduction to the *Etymological Dictionary* (1928-32: xxvii-xxix), but it cannot be said that one emerges from this account with a very clear picture of the manner in which he operated. How much of his material did he obtain from informal conversation, for example, how much from urging his informants to recall Norn words and phrases, and how much as a result of repeated prompting? Did he talk to informants of 'Norn' or of 'Shetland dialect' — or just of old words and phrases? If we had a clearer idea of the way in which individual pieces of information were elicited, we would be in a better position to evaluate them as source material.

Having amassed a huge amount of data, Jakobsen left Shetland in 1895 and spent the next fifteen to twenty years organising and publishing it. His return visits in 1905 and 1912 appear to have yielded a few significant additions, but nothing to compare with what he obtained in the 1890s.

The publishing of the Norn material naturally involved not just the sifting and organisation of the data and notes Jakobsen had obtained in the course of his fieldwork, but also detailed analysis and comment. *Det norrøne sprog på Shetland* deals mainly with individual words: it classifies them according to their areas of application, adduces cognates from other forms of Scandinavian, and offers brief discussion as appropriate; in addition we find a short section on grammar ('grammar' in this context being virtually synonymous with inflexions), a longer section on sounds and sound changes, and a collection of Norn fragments, some with comments, some without. *The Dialect and Place Names of Shetland* consists, as already noted, of two separate papers: the one on the dialect once again deals chiefly with individual words and their derivation, while that on the place-names explains

the meaning of the more common kinds of name and endeavours 'to suggest general rules, according to which the place-names have been given' (p.120); in both cases items are loosely arranged according to areas of application and/or sense. *Shetlandsøernes stednavne/The Place-Names of Shetland* explains the origins of some 2,800 names, arranged according to topographical elements, farm-names, natural features etc. The *Etymological Dictionary*, naturally enough, is mainly taken up with individual articles on the thousands of words Jakobsen collected, but these are preceded by a lengthy introduction and, in the later, English-language version of the work, by a great many 'fragments of Norn' — some, but by no means all of which, had previously been published in *Det norrøne sprog på Shetland*. The introduction, which itself is fuller in the English than in the Danish-language version (mainly because of the inclusion of other parts of *Det norrøne sprog på Shetland*), and also somewhat reorganised, treats among other things the following: the history of Orkney and Shetland; the language shift in which Norn was replaced by Scots; Jakobsen's movements in Shetland and the principal informants he met on his various journeys (as well as in Lerwick); the relationship of Norn to other forms of Scandinavian; and indications in Shetland dialect of influence from non-Scandinavian languages.

My main aim in outlining the contents of Jakobsen's principal works on Norn in what must appear tedious detail has not been to show what the reader will find there. That is surely well enough known. Rather, my concern has been to underline what he will not find. Words there are a-plenty, also sounds and sound changes, comparisons with other languages and a strong historical perspective. But what of the systems of Norn?

During the years Jakobsen was working with the Shetland material, a Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, was worrying about the state of his discipline. Linguists, he felt, had failed to think seriously about what they were doing and to identify properly the object of their study. It was all very well comparing languages and tracing their ancestry, but what was language? The answer he gave was simple enough. Language is a collection of signs. The signs are arbitrary in the sense not only that there is no intrinsic connection between a sign and what it denotes but also that each language has its own way of organising the world into concepts and categories. This implies that to be meaningful both the linguistic signs and the things signified must be part of a system, since neither can be defined except by their relations to other members of the same system. Language thus essentially consists of systems of oppositions in which each element is defined negatively; it is what the other elements are not. That means that the elements of which language is made up are abstract units whose actual realisation may vary — but only insofar as their realisation does not become confused with that of a contrasting unit. The primary task of the linguist must therefore be to identify and describe the various systems that underlie actual language performance.

Although concerns and methodologies have changed radically since Saussure's day, his thinking profoundly influenced the development of linguistics. Indeed, the claim is often made that he laid the foundations of the modern discipline. Since Saussure and Jakobsen were contemporaries, and Saussure's most influential treatise was only published posthumously in 1916, it would of course be foolish to criticise Jakobsen for not having adapted his approach to take account of ideas that were still in embryo during most of the period in which he was collecting and writing. Criticism is certainly not my purpose in introducing Saussure and Saussurean concepts at this point. What I want rather to emphasise is that a linguist or even an interested layman looking back at Jakobsen's work today must regret that the priorities of linguistic enquiry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century did not extend to the establishing of basic systems. Very possibly, this could not have been done for Norn in any case, for it is far from clear that the information available to Jakobsen would have been sufficient to have allowed the identification of even the crudest oppositions. Nevertheless, one cannot but feel frustrated when reading Jakobsen's works by his failure to look for the wood because of his constant and overriding concern with the individual trees.

I will give an example to illustrate what I mean. Each language or dialect has a set number of distinctive speech sounds. It is their existence that enables us to distinguish one word from another. Thus English *pin* is not confused with *bin* unless a speaker should confuse /p/ with the contrasting unit /b/. The number of distinctive speech sounds varies considerably from language to language, but the average is said to be about thirty-five. It is clearly of far greater importance to identify these basic units of opposition than to describe every shade of sound one encounters. Some speakers of English pronounce *pin* [p^hɪn], others [pɪn], but in neither case will the word be confused with *bin*, because the basic opposition /p/:/b/ has been maintained. In the light of this, what are we to make of the myriad of variant pronunciations Jakobsen offers us in his *Etymological Dictionary*? In a rare outburst of criticism, Stewart (1964: 172) describes the listing in the dictionary of twenty-five variant pronunciations of the word *gopn* 'the hollow of the hand, a handful' (1928-32: 253) as 'phonetics run riot', and it is hard to disagree with this verdict. The question we would wish Jakobsen had addressed is: how did speakers distinguish *gopn* from other words — that is, what were the distinctive units of which his twenty-five variant pronunciations were the realisations? Had he been able to establish, however tentatively, a system (or systems in the case of significant dialectal variation) of distinctive speech sounds, we would not only have known more about Norn in its last years as a living language, but also have been able to trace more easily the lines of its development from Old Norse. In the case of Faroese, for example, we can for the most part predict with certainty what the present-day reflexes of an Old Norse word will be. That is in no way true of Norn.

The point I have made by reference to sounds and sound systems applies equally to other levels of linguistic analysis. Few answers are provided by Jakobsen for the person with questions about the morphological, syntactic or semantic systems of Norn.

Viewed from the modern perspective, then, Jakobsen's Norn studies leave many gaps. We must regret that he did not fill them, but we can well understand that he, like us, was limited by the intellectual climate of the times in which he lived and worked. If we consider him simply as a philologist of his day, and perhaps more than anything as an antiquarian, his achievements must in most respects be judged both wide-ranging and solid. Muted criticism has, it is true, been offered of some of Jakobsen's etymologies. Svavar Sigmundsson (1984), for example, quotes detailed evidence to support the assertion that 'it is easy to find omissions of Icelandic cognates, and of [*sic*] errors in etymology [arising therefrom]' (pp.285-6), and further notes that Scandinavian ancestry was falsely attributed to a number of words that were in fact of Dutch or Scots origin. But such mild correctives hardly constitute a challenge to Jakobsen's authority as the custodian and interpreter of Norn. There is, however, one area in which he has been subject to more serious criticism. His views on the Norn-Scots language shift in Shetland, for long taken as more or less axiomatic, have recently been declared by more than one scholar to be untenable.

As we have seen, the nineteenth-century philologist and the modern linguist differ greatly in their approaches to language. They also differ in the rigour of argument they require in the practitioners of their respective disciplines. While modern linguistics eschews the imprecise formulation and the arbitrary claim, and offers few hiding places for the fuzzy thinker, comparative philology is rife with intuitive responses, impressionistic accounts and *ad-hoc* solutions. The comparative philologist seldom worked within an explicit theoretical framework and was relatively unconstrained by the need to give definitions and adhere to them once given. This left him free to advance ideas for no better reason than that that was the way he felt things must surely have been.

Jakobsen's views on the shift from Norn to Scots in Shetland typify this nineteenth-century approach. Without ever formulating a clear hypothesis, he manages to leave the reader with the impression that the shift was effected by a gradual but increasingly Scots dominated intermixture of the two languages. This development had not even reached its end by the time he arrived in Shetland, he appears to suggest, but was at a stage where the grammatical structure of the language was entirely Scots while large areas of the vocabulary were still of Scandinavian origin. How or why Jakobsen came to think along these lines is unclear, but it is possible that he was to some extent influenced by prevailing attitudes in Shetland. To many Shetlanders the distinction between a Scandinavian language and a form of Scots heavily impregnated with Scandinavian words appears to have been blurred. In the

preface to his *An Etymological Glossary of the Shetland and Orkney Dialect* (1866: vi), Edmondston offers the following view:

From more frequent business and social intercourse with their southern neighbours, the people of Shetland are rapidly losing, or rather have already lost, a distinctive dialect; and when the present old inhabitants have passed away, most of the old *Norn* will be buried with them.

What seems to be revealed here is an inability to distinguish between Scots and Norn, though much hangs on the precise meaning of 'a distinctive dialect'. Lack of clear thinking on the matter is certainly reflected in the works of later Shetlandic writers, who have often tended to see Shetland dialect as something quite distinct from Scots, several assuming it to be in some way a direct descendant of Scandinavian or at the very least to have arisen from an amalgamation of Scandinavian and Scots (e.g., Saxby 1907-8: 65-9; Sandison 1953: ix-xii). Graham (1984: xiii) declares without further ado: 'The Shetland dialect is an amalgam of Norse, Lowland Scots and English.' Stewart (1964: 170) draws attention to confused thinking on the issue among the general population:

They could give him [Jakobsen] their age-old words, whose meanings they knew well-enough, fondly imagining that they, in their Scots context, were a Norse language, their Norn.

It is obvious that Jakobsen with his vast experience clearly understood the difference between a language and a substratum, and indeed he regularly refers to Norse or Norn as a language quite distinct from any form of nineteenth-century Shetland speech. Nevertheless, he may have been sufficiently influenced by the notion that Norn somehow lived on in the Scots and English of Shetland to consider that the only plausible explanation for the linguistic state of affairs in the islands was that there had been some kind of fusion of Norn and Scots.

For the sake of directness and clarity I have so far been summarising what I perceive to have been Jakobsen's view. It is only just, however, to let the man speak for himself. Here are the essentials of what he has to say about the shift from Norn to Scots (1928-32: xix-xx).

The last man in Unst who is said to have been able to speak Norn, Walter Sutherland from Skaw, died about 1850. In Foula, on the other hand, men who were living much later than the middle of the present (19th) century are said to have been able to speak Norn. The Norn spoken towards the middle of the century and later can hardly have been of much account. The difference between it and the dialect of the oldest people of the present generation probably consisted in little more than the fact that the former contained a greater sprinkling of Norn words which the younger people did not understand...

The statement that the Norn died out in the previous [eighteenth] century must not, however, be taken too literally. The process has been a steady and gradual one, which is still continuing even at the present day. One must

certainly suppose that even at the beginning of the 18th century the dialect was hard hit, and after that time it seems to have degenerated very rapidly...

The first portions of the old language to be affected, as one can easily imagine, and as appears from the fragments preserved, were the inflections, the grammatical endings...next the minor words frequently recurring in speech, such as: conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, numerals, and common adverbs; likewise adjectives and verbs in general use, as well as abstract nouns.

As a rule the substantives, denoting visible things, inanimate objects and living beings, have lasted longer...names of implements, household utensils; and this, of course, naturally applies to such things as stand in close connection with the daily life and activities of the people.

One aspect of this account strikes the reader immediately: there is in it a kind of prediction after the event. Jakobsen appears to be suggesting that the sequence of linguistic losses and replacements he assumes for Shetland is generally to be expected in cases of language death ('as one can easily imagine'), but he offers no evidence in support of such a contention. His method is simply to analyse the Norn elements that were extant in his day and extrapolate backwards in time. Thus, numerals ('minor words frequently recurring in speech') would, he reckons, be lost relatively early. But if we once more turn our gaze to the south-west of Britain, we find that in the century and a half that followed the death of Cornish it was the numerals which were remembered better than anything else (Ellis 1974: 125-9).

Recalling the quotation from Edmondston, with its apparent vagueness about the status of Norn, we can also note Jakobsen's loose use of the term 'dialect', which is allowed to denote both eighteenth-century Norn and the speech of 'the oldest people of the present generation'.

The strongest message to emerge from what Jakobsen says, however, is that the language shift in Shetland was a very gradual process by which elements of Norn vocabulary and grammar had been, and were still being, replaced, one by one, by Scots and/or English equivalents. This was a message that seems to have found widespread favour. By some it was not only accepted, but elaborated and refined. Flom (1928-9: 145), for example, gives the following account of early twentieth-century Shetland dialect:

Its grammar is in the main Scotch, but with a few Norse forms; its accent is West Norwegian; its phonology a mixture of the two. In its phraseology the Norse element would seem to be the dominant one; but yielding slowly to Lowland and Standard English. In its vocabulary it is part Norse and part Lowland Scotch (and English), with less important other elements... On the semantic side, Norse and Scotch uses are found side by side in well-nigh every sentence spoken; its compound words very frequently combine one stem from the one language with one from the other. This unusual example of mixed speech, with its exceedingly irregular forms, is the outgrowth of the complete union of two languages.

Flom also writes of 'the progressive disintegration of Norse', of 'the fusion between the two languages' which is 'intimate', and of 'the last stages of the

decay of the ancient Norn in Shetland' (1928-9: 153, 158-9). He even goes so far as to offer an estimate of the changing ratio of Norn and Scots words in 'the total word-stock of the Shetlands' (1928-9: 150). Although Flom adduces reasons of his own to support his thesis of a mixed language, and even contradicts Jakobsen's dictum that 'minor words frequently recurring in speech' were among the first to go, there can be little doubt that in its main thrust his account is strongly influenced by the views of his predecessor. Indeed, there are copious references to Jakobsen's works throughout the article.

For over half a century no challenge was offered to this notion of a gradual change from Norn to Scots and/or English accomplished via the partial or total fusion of the two languages. That is odd, because in its roots the notion seems to be purely intuitive — though there is, of course, nothing to say that intuitive ideas may not be right. The reason for the lack of critical discussion seems to have been threefold: (1) the stature of Jakobsen, (2) a falling off of interest in Norn and (3) the absence of a general theoretical framework in which questions of language death and language shift could be discussed. Fortunately, none of these three factors is any longer a barrier. Jakobsen still enjoys a high reputation, but we feel free to draw attention to and if necessary criticise those aspects of his work that advances in linguistic science have shown to be wanting; Norn is now once more the subject of lively scholarly debate; and an increasing body of knowledge about language contact and language death enables us to place the shift from Norn to Scots in a much wider context.

Debate was joined in 1984 when Laurits Rendboe and I independently (but see Barnes 1984b: 40-41) published brief papers on Norn. Mine was an encyclopaedic article, which perhaps explains why I transmitted the views of earlier scholars on the language shift somewhat uncritically; I did nevertheless find it prudent to add the following rider (1984a: 355-6):

Although what we appear to see is a gradual change from pure Norn to Scots (and more recently English), it is unlikely that there were ever speakers who mixed the two languages up so inextricably that a trained linguistic observer would have been unable to determine which language they were speaking. If an individual's grammatical, and, above all, phonological structure were Scots, that person was no longer speaking Norn, however many Norn words or phrases his or her language contained.

My view was based partly on the fact that no one, to my knowledge, has produced a documented example of a truly mixed language, and partly on the idea that phonological and grammatical structure is primary. English, after all, is classified as a Germanic language, even though less than half its vocabulary is of Germanic origin.

Rendboe's approach was far more radical. He dismissed the mixed language idea entirely and argued on the basis of a re-interpretation both of

the testimony of seventeenth and eighteenth-century writers and of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century fragments that have survived that Norn remained a pure Scandinavian language more or less until the death of the last native speakers. His conclusion was (1984: 80):

As long as the Norn was spoken by the Shetlanders 'amongst themselves', it did not deteriorate in the manner thought by some, neither by being inextricably mixed up with Scots, nor by a breakdown of the grammatical system. As far as the available evidence shows, Norn stood firm to the end.

In subsequent publications, especially *Det gamle shetlandske sprog* (1987), Rendboe has continued to urge this view.

In the two principal contributions I have made to the debate (1989; 1991) I have tried to set out an alternative hypothesis that takes account not just of literary and language-internal evidence, but also of social and political history and of what we know of language shifts elsewhere. My quarrel with Rendboe is twofold. (1) He is not a dispassionate investigator; one sometimes has the impression when reading his treatises that he allows the desired conclusion to form the starting point and assembles and interprets evidence with the sole aim of supporting his conclusion. (2) In ignoring the wider context of language contact and language death Rendboe too easily falls prey to the lure of the *ad-hoc* explanation, and to that extent has not moved on from the position of the nineteenth-century philologists. Often I can think of other interpretations of his data than the ones he provides, but in the absence of any theoretical framework or external body of evidence to which appeal can be made, there is no way in which the validity of such competing interpretations can be ascertained. It is only, I believe, by looking at the Shetland data — historical, literary and linguistic — in the light of other cases of language shift that we can hope both to offer plausible explanations of individual problems and also to suggest a total interpretation of the change from Norn to Scots that has the power to persuade.

This is not the place to rehearse the accumulated wisdom about language decline and death (see, for example, Dressler and Wodak-Leodolter 1977), but the essentials are these. Language fusion is a very sparsely documented process indeed, and the development envisaged by some, in which Shetland Norn is supposed gradually to have adopted more and more Scots features until it became more Scots than Norn, is, as far as I know, unparalleled. What regularly happens in language shift is that the dying language exhibits symptoms of interference and decay. It loses functions, often ending up purely as a language of the home. It also loses structures, in part at least because the usual regulatory mechanisms that help preserve language structure — institutional norms, literary tradition, correction by elders — are breaking down or are non-existent. As a language decays, so its speakers desert it for the higher-prestige alternative. This is usually accomplished in the course of three generations. The first generation are

native speakers of the decaying language who learn the new tongue for reasons of necessity, but mostly remain more proficient in the old. The next generation, largely because of greater exposure at a younger age — often from their own parents — become truly bilingual, or in some cases more proficient in the new language. The children of these bilinguals are seldom exposed to the old language even in the home, and end up at best with only a very imperfect or passive knowledge of it. (The last stages of this process can be observed at the present time in, for example, parts of the far west of Ireland.)

What we have to ask ourselves in the case of Shetland is whether there is any evidence to suggest that the language shift which displaced Norn might have taken a different course from that documented so frequently elsewhere. The answer, as far as I can see, is no. Unless and until such evidence is discovered, I therefore think we have to conclude that both Jakobsen's and Rendboe's interpretations of the shift are wrong. To believe either in language fusion or in a Norn that 'stood firm to the end' we would need far stronger historical, literary and linguistic indications than those which up to now have been shown to exist. It is, of course, surprising that so many items of Norn vocabulary were preserved in Shetland Scots, but that is not in itself an argument for language fusion. The large substratum, for whose preservation we have first and foremost to thank Jakobsen, seems rather to reflect Norn in its dying stages when it was probably little more than the language of fishing, farming and the home. In certain areas of usage, for example the taboo language of fishermen, special factors were probably at play; in others, such as the denotation of different shades of colour in sheep or cows, Scots will have had few words with which to replace the familiar Norn terms; and sometimes, doubtless, Norn words and phrases were simply too firmly associated with the Shetland way of life to be easily lost — as long as that way of life continued.

These in part theoretical and abstract considerations have brought us to the point where it is possible to sketch the linguistic history of Shetland since the Viking Age and thus to clear up some of the terminological confusion I have commented on earlier.

The Viking invaders, who appear to have begun settling in Shetland about AD 800, rapidly imposed their language on the islands. Since the majority appear to have come from Norway, probably western Norway, we must assume that their speech was a form of west Scandinavian. For some seven to eight hundred years this language remained dominant in Shetland. We have only the haziest notion of how it developed because of the extreme scarcity of relevant data, but in the absence of any normative influences aberrant forms were doubtless legion. In some respects the development of Shetland Scandinavian seems to have paralleled that of Faroese. In Faroe, where Danish was for so long the official medium, the indigenous tongue was certainly free to go off at every conceivable tangent. For political, economic

and social reasons which are too well known to need rehearsing here, Scandinavian was eventually replaced by Scots in Shetland. From what we know of the history of the islands after their pledging to Scotland, it seems probable, but not certain, that the fundamental shift took place in the seventeenth century (cf. Barnes 1991: 449-56). Following the shift, it is no longer appropriate to speak of the language of Shetland as Scandinavian, although, as has earlier been stressed, the newly acquired Scots contained a considerable Scandinavian substratum. Today, English is replacing Scots and the Scandinavian element is vastly reduced.

What, then, of 'Norn' and of 'the dialect'? Norn, as we have seen, has meant different things to different people. Such semantic elasticity is of course only tolerable if each user defines what he means by the term, but explicitness is not a virtue that has commended itself to the majority of contributors to the discussion. To me it seems obvious that in a Shetland context Norn should be employed to denote the form of Scandinavian once spoken in the islands, and nothing else. That is in keeping with its etymology; the term, after all, comes from ON *norrænn* 'of northern origin, Norse' and/or *norræna* 'Northern language, Norse language'. Dialect is probably best defined as a regionally distinctive variety of speech within a speech community. Under that definition Norn was hardly a dialect since its speakers appear to have considered that they formed their own speech community in the same way as speakers of Faroese (cf. Rendboe 1987: 2-4). Shetland Scots or Shetland English, on the other hand, seem eminently well qualified for dialect status, since both Scots and English embrace much wider speech communities than Shetland.

It is interesting to speculate on what might have been. Had Norn managed to survive in one or two outlying areas as has Gaelic in the Hebrides and in Ireland, we would presumably now be seeing a Shetland struggling to maintain its native tongue. We can visualise evening classes in Norn for the Scots or English-speaking majority seeking to rediscover their roots. And we can imagine many of the participants slowly giving up as they discover that language learning is not all fun, but involves long hours of steady toil as well. Perhaps there would be dual-language road signs, Norn television, even Norn soap operas. Alas, all this must remain in the realm of fantasy, for Norn, like Cornish, is dead.

But could it be revived? Cornish has its revivalist zealots, although the language they speak and teach has recently been dubbed 'Cornic' and dismissed as largely bogus (Price 1984: 141-4). Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, Shetland Norn is in a much worse state of preservation than Cornish. Much of the basic vocabulary and grammar is missing as are most of the form words, and we have little idea of how it might have been pronounced in its final years. The revivalist would have to begin by re-inventing the phonological system on the basis of eighteenth-century spellings (very limited in scope and by no means fully elucidated), nineteenth and twentieth-

century dialect pronunciation and the systems of the most closely related forms of Scandinavian. This does not sound to me like a realistic or a sensible proposition.

So Shetland will have to think of Norn in the same terms as the Brochs, Jarlshof and other icons of the past. It forms an important but broken link with distant generations and is thus part of the islands' multi-faceted cultural heritage. Like many of the more physical remains, Norn is now only imperfectly understood, but the remnants are still there for us to gaze at — thanks in large measure to Jakob Jakobsen, Faroeman and scholar.

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