

‘WE’RE AA DA SAME HERE - BUT DIFFERENT, TOO’ SOME NOTES ON REGIONAL LINGUISTIC VARIATION IN SHETLAND

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Introduction

The utterance quoted in the title of this paper was taken down by Anthony Cohen, a social anthropologist who was a ‘participant observer’ in the close-knit community of Whalsay, one of the islands in the Shetland archipelago, for a number of years (cf. Cohen 1987: 60f). Admittedly, the utterance originally referred to what Cohen calls ‘the allocation of identity’ within Whalsay, ‘a dialectic of collective and individual identity’, but as I hope to show it could equally well apply to the language situation, and to Shetland as a whole.

The linguistic significance of the utterance might then be interpreted in the following way:

‘We’re aa da same here’ — there is a concept such as ‘Shetland dialect’, a discrete form of language to be distinguished from any other variety of English through certain indexicals. A specification of these would include a sizeable Scandinavian-based vocabulary, uniquely retained in Shetland, containing ‘emotive’ adjectives such as *haandless*, *döless*, *vyndless*; words relating to typical Shetland activities such as *hent*, *makkin*; names of birds and plants such as *scarf*, *bonxie*, *ekkelgirse*; a formal/informal distinction realized in second person pronominal usage (*du/you*). Further indexicals, which may in part be ascribed to the Scandinavian substratum, include the use of BE as a perfective auxiliary, as in ‘Da bull lat oot da most gödless gölbröl I’m ever heard’ (Graham 1984:31); the character and occurrence of the /ö/ vowel as just exemplified; the structure of the syllable, e.g. the existence of long, possibly geminate consonants; so-called ‘TH-stopping’, i.e. plosives instead of fricatives in words such as *they*, *there*, *think* (represented as *dey*, *dere*, *tink* in Shetland dialect writing).

Although the realization of the /ö/ vowel may vary somewhat and the names of flowers as well, the above features are generally shared by all Shetlanders, at least when they speak ‘Shetland’, i.e. the traditional dialect, and do not adapt to outsiders (‘*knappin*’).

‘But different, too’ — there is considerable dialectal variation within Shetland. When, more than ten years ago, I first set up a research project on Shetland dialect, with special emphasis on its Scandinavian element, I found, for one thing, that a major problem would be ‘to unravel the strands of Shetland speech and distinguish those leading back to Norn from those

leading back to Scots' (cf. Catford 1957:76). This is not to be wondered at, considering a type of language contact situation where closely related language varieties interweave beyond distinction. Yet the most complicating factor of all turned out to be the regional diversity, which has made it necessary to aim for a dense network of localities investigated. This regional linguistic variation is the main topic of my presentation, which is mainly of a descriptive character. In my attempt to give an account of it, I will refer to Jakobsen and some later scholars, in particular the compilers of the Linguistic Atlas of Scotland and my own research group. In addition, it goes without saying that the perception of linguistic variation conveyed by the speakers themselves should never be neglected.

To what extent it is possible to *explain* the variation is, however, another matter; obviously, our knowledge of settlement patterns will clarify a great deal of linguistic diversity and diffusion, but it also fails to account for many phenomena. Why is it, for example, that — in contrast with the smallish Shetland Islands — there are hardly any regional dialects in Iceland or Australia, despite the fact that there are major geographical barriers in both these countries? Conversely, neighbouring villages in Dalarna, Sweden, may have clearly distinctive dialects, to the point of unintelligibility. It is also worth pointing out that totally unrelated, or at least only remotely related language varieties may show striking similarities, not only in the odd word, but in phonological systems and syntactic constructions. A characteristic of Shetland dialect, as mentioned earlier, is the use of BE as a perfective auxiliary rather than HAVE, not only with verbs of motion and change as sometimes found in other varieties of English, but with all verbs (cf. the example quoted above). The only other variety of English that features a similar construction is African American Vernacular English!

Although any 'genetic' explanation of such similarities is bound to be extremely far-fetched or downright absurd, it seems part of human nature to look for such explanations; this produces folk-linguistic myths, such as the idea that the English language originated in the Swedish province of Dalarna, since a few words such as *swine* and *folk* sound English-like. Similarly, in the Shetland context, there is something of a folk-linguistic myth in the wish to ascribe anything that deviates from Standard English to the Norse substratum.

However, whereas parallel developments such as those described in the preceding paragraph can probably only be 'explained' as independent innovations, many other characteristics and changes are the obvious results of social rather than purely geographical phenomena: the strong sense of togetherness in certain communities (this probably accounts for the 'deviating' accents on Whalsay and Out Skerries); the possibility and frequency of contacts with other groups of people; social mobility and accommodation; urbanization (this will account for the increasing use of glottal stops in Lerwick).

Regional differences as perceived by the speakers themselves

As indicated above, I wish to emphasize that I have the highest regard for the perception of differences expressed by the speakers themselves; after all, who can be better judges? Yet it can be difficult for a dialectologist to specify the elicitation and to determine the quality of information of this intuitive kind. In Whalsay, for example, a lady told me that the pronunciation of the word *salt* varies within the island: where she came from, people said /sa:t/, but in the south they said /sa:t/. I have rendered these examples in identical transcriptions, because I was unable to hear the difference. Since I recorded the words on tape, I also analysed them instrumentally (with the help of a spectrograph) and the analysis proved them to be identical. It is, of course, possible that there exist differences as regards the quality of the vowel but my informant may have been unable to imitate other speakers. On the other hand, it is well known to linguistic fieldworkers that informants may exaggerate or invent distinctions, at least when they are of a semantic kind (cf. Chambers 1994:1). I would tend to believe that — at least as to the smaller islands — most claimed differences should be classified as idiolectal, or possibly ‘kin-lectal’. This is corroborated by observations made by Anthony Cohen (1987:62f), who writes about ‘Glybie talk’ (the Glybies are a Whalsay family), and on the uniqueness of the Skaw people (Skaw is a settlement at the extreme north of Whalsay). Similarly, there is a family on Skerries where three members have back R’s (so-called ‘corbies’); this alone will not justify the inclusion of R variation on a dialect map.

Describing Whalsay as an entity in the context of Shetland as a whole, Cohen claims that there is something atypical about this island community. He even provides a linguistic example not found in other sources, viz. the habit of emphasizing the descriptive content of any word by adding -Y. A boat which fishes well is ‘fishy’, for example.

Indeed, Whalsay is generally singled out — sometimes together with Out Skerries — by Shetlanders as a ‘deviant’ community, especially as far as language is concerned, but also, for example, when it comes to knitting where distinctive, favoured patterns and colours can be observed.

A few years ago, I carried out a language attitude study among some 350 pupils of the Anderson High School, Lerwick, who were asked to complete a questionnaire, which contained at least two questions clearly relating to regional variation. They ran as follows:

‘Do you think Lerwick people speak differently from other people in Shetland?’ (95% answered ‘yes’) and ‘From the way he or she talks, I can tell whether a person comes from ...’, listing Whalsay, Fair Isle, Unst, Lerwick, Cunningsburgh, the West Side (Walls), ending with the open suggestion ‘somewhere else in Shetland’. 84% claimed to recognize a Whalsay speaker, which is very much in line with data from our interviews, where Whalsay is *always* mentioned as the most deviant accent (‘their words are not different,

but it's the way they say them'). 58% state that they can tell whether a person comes from Lerwick, which is interestingly low and seemingly incompatible with the 95% positive responses to the previous question. Only 9% indicated Fair Isle, which does have a very distinct accent. However, the low figure can be explained by the fact that only about 80 people live on Fair Isle, and schoolchildren in Lerwick thus rarely meet them. The West Side scored 40%, Cunningsburgh 32% and Unst 31 %.

As to more specified, native-speaker (folk-linguistic) comments, here follow two characterisations that have intrigued us:

1) 'Unst people speak *clippet*', i.e. 'not pronouncing all the letters'. In part, this can be dismissed as a general lack of comprehension of what spoken language is like, but the observation is borne out, to some extent, by recordings of extreme vowel reduction produced by speakers from the north of the island, whereas in the south we have observed the opposite tendency of putting in additional, so-called 'epenthetic' vowels between consonants.

2) Before going to Fair Isle we were told by some people that the delivery of speech on the island is extremely slow; conversely, by others that Fair Islanders speak as well as move quickly (like penguins!). The report on slowness was explained to me by Jim Mather, co-editor of the Linguistic Atlas of Scotland, who held that this referred to certain extended diphthongs, such as /dra:ijøf/ for *drive*. However, carrying out instrumental analysis (spectrograms) of tokens of Fair Isle speech, I found no evidence of extreme quantity either way. It is my belief that the perception of quickness has to do with the gemination of consonants (a Scandinavian feature) and the unvoicing in final position as exemplified in *drive* (ending in /f/ rather than /v/), whereas the unusual, 'widened' quality of certain diphthongs may be related to quantity rather than quality.

A higher level of native-speaker intuition, hardly to be labelled 'folk-linguistic', was demonstrated to us when visiting a Whalsay school, where a teacher gave special instructions in 'writing Whalsa'. She told the children that there are four ways of spelling some words: the English way, the Scots way, the Shetland way and the Whalsay way. It was an interesting effort, though not very consistent: *cake*, for example, was said to be 'tyAEik' in Whalsay but 'cake' in all the other variants, whereas *game* was given as 'gem' in Scots, 'geym' in Shetland and 'dyemm' in Whalsay. Although Whalsay palatalisation/fricativisation was correctly observed, the vowel quality suggested for *cake* is puzzling. On the whole, the rules provided were, if not incorrect, certainly incomplete, i.e. strongly reminiscent of the representation of nonstandard dialect in fiction.

Graham's observations on regional variation

The very highest level of native-speaker knowledge and proficiency is to be found in the works of John Graham — a trained linguist, teacher, writer of

fiction and bidialectal speaker rolled into one. His writings include a dictionary, a book on grammar and usage, dialect in fictional dialogue, textbooks for schools and articles for Shetland journals. From personal experience I know that Graham's knowledge of the regional distribution of phonological features and lexical items is encyclopedic. It is to be hoped, then, that his comments on regional variation presented in the introduction to the dictionary will be extended and more detailed in a future edition.

One observation made by Graham has to do with the quality of /a:/, which is said to be what is known as back and slightly rounded, i.e. not too different from Received Pronunciation, in the North Isles (Yell and Unst) and Fair Isle. This is corroborated by a close inspection of the fieldworkers' notebooks from the Linguistic Survey of Scotland; similar vowel qualities were, however, also found on Papa Stour and in Dunrossness.

Another characteristic, shared by Fair Isle and Whalsay, also pointed out by Graham, has to do with the diphthongs in words such as *main* and *fair*, which could be represented in a broad, if not crude, transcription as /moin/, /foir/. This is also borne out by the Fair Isle Notebook from the Survey. Finally, Graham draws attention to the Westside realisation of orthographic WH- as /kw/, in contrast with /hw/ in most areas. This feature is even mentioned in the standard handbook on English accents worldwide (cf. Wells 1982: 399). It may be a regional innovation, but there are clear parallels in Norwegian dialects. On the whole, Graham's claim is borne out by the findings of the Linguistic Survey; however, this feature is variable in certain areas, particularly Cunningsburgh, where a switch often occurs, in that *whisky* may be pronounced as /kwiski/ but *queen* as /hwi:n/. This would appear to be a case of hypercorrection — a well-known phenomenon in language contact situations. A close look at the Survey recordings will reveal scattered examples of the same phenomenon in other districts as well.

Regional variation according to Jakobsen

In his introduction to the *Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland*, Jakobsen (1928: Introduction) claims that there are many distinctive dialects; in fact, he states explicitly that each island in the Shetland archipelago shows dialect variation, postulating nine main dialect areas, which, in turn, consist of several sub-areas. There are, he writes, for example several 'Fetlar dialects' (Fetlar has an area of 15 square miles), such as East and West Herra, Funzie (names of farmsteads). However, the classification is not accounted for. In talking about dialect variation, Jakobsen refers to a 'language map', but this is nothing but an ordinary map, giving no linguistic information whatsoever.

From Jakobsen's notebooks and papers, which I have studied closely in the Tórshavn Library (Landsbókasavn), it appears that he visited and investigated most Mainland districts and most of the islands, yet excluding

Fair Isle and Out Skerries. He paid a very short visit to Whalsay. On the other hand, he managed to interview quite a few ‘immigrants’ from these areas in Lerwick, relying on self-reported data rather than actual language usage. Yell and Fetlar can be said to be over-represented in his material; this probably results from his contacts with Laurence Williamson, a man with scholarly ambitions but extremely rigid notions.

Jakobsen’s magnum opus, the etymological dictionary, is a goldmine of information — above all, of course, for vocabulary, but it is also rich in examples of morphological and syntactic variation, phonetic distinctions and even facts on material culture. The facts are, however, not easily retrievable: important phonological information may, for example, be ‘concealed’ under a particular lexical entry only. A close comparison with the original notebooks will show that nearly everything collected was incorporated in the dictionary in a somewhat unsystematic way. Clearly, a neat description of regional variation must be based on extremely systematic investigations of semantic fields, ‘Wörter und Sachen’, phonological inventories, and syntactic structures. For this purpose, I am in the process of setting up a database, classifying each entry in Jakobsen’s dictionary and listing it under various headings, including regional distribution.

The only place where Jakobsen spells out generalisations about dialect differences (yet restricted to pronunciation) is found in his 1897 dissertation *Det norrøne sprog på Shetland* (The Norn language in Shetland), where he devotes a page and a half to the following issues:

1) establishing the different qualities and distributions of /a:/ — /a/, as mentioned above;

2) pointing out the deviating West Side vowel quality in words such as *she*: Western /y:/ v. Eastern /ö:/; further examples include *tryni* rather than *tröni* (‘pig’s snout’). Here the West Side (including Foula) shows more affinity to Norwegian than other dialects;

3) describing the /hw/(/kw/) distinction. Interestingly, Jakobsen seems to suggest a more consistent pattern for Cunningsburgh than outlined above, i.e. the use of /hw/ exclusively;

4) singling out Dunrossness as the only area where /ð/ has been retained (as in Orkney) and not subjected to ‘TH-stopping’, i.e. changed to /d/. This is generally corroborated by the findings of the Linguistic Survey, but only occasionally by our project.

A present-day application and elaboration of Jakobsen’s data

A first step towards putting together and using a database based on Jakobsen’s dictionary (cf. above) was taken by my student Greger Nässén in a study called *Norn weather words. A comparison between dictionary and actual usage* (Nässén 1989). The following questions, of which c) obviously is of immediate relevance for the topic of this paper, were discussed:

a) How reliable is Jakobsen's information about individual words, their meaning and distribution?

b) To what extent are weather terms of Norn origin still known in Shetland?

c) Are Norn words used in other areas than those attested by Jakobsen? Nässén collected 700 entries devoted to weather words and selected 646 items for a questionnaire, which was distributed to informants all over Shetland in the summer of 1984. He decided to work with four semantic categories, viz. precipitation, winds, the sky, type of weather, and four 'dialect' areas, viz. The North Isles, North Mainland and adjacent islands, South Mainland and adjacent islands, and finally a general category, where Jakobsen either claims that the terms are used in several districts or does not specify the area.

It is impossible to do justice to Nässén's original and penetrating study here. However, some of his most important findings are:

1) The number of identified words turned out to be quite high. Well over 83% of the words of Norn origin were familiar to the informants.

2) As regards the current geographical distribution of Norn weather words, it was shown that a large majority of the words were also recognised by informants in other areas than those attested by Jakobsen. Only 21% of the words were found exclusively in the same areas as given in the dictionary. This finding should not be ascribed to great changes in the distribution pattern; a plausible explanation is that this result simply reflects the fact that Jakobsen was not able to test his huge body of information on all his informants. Viewed from another angle, however, the results appear to prove that the informants tended to recognise words attested by Jakobsen for their own area only, certainly more often than they recognised words alleged to be representative of other areas.

Regional variation according to the Linguistic Atlas

An extremely important source of information concerning present-day regional variation anywhere in Scotland is, of course, bound to be the Linguistic Survey of Scotland, whose crowning glory — the atlases — have been available for some time. As regards vocabulary, however, regional variation within Shetland is far from striking and offers little of general interest.

Looking at the pioneering phonological atlas, then, the first of its kind in its use of 'phonological systems' and 'frames', we find that recordings (face-to-face, mostly not taped) were made in ten Shetland localities. Curiously, if not shockingly, neither Whalsay/Skerries nor Cunningsburgh — generally acknowledged as somewhat atypical (cf. above) is included. This is especially puzzling, since I know that Whalsay, at least, has indeed been *visited* by a

fieldworker, and both Whalsay and Skerries are mentioned in the pilot study by Catford quoted above.

Unfortunately, very little is learnt about consonants from the atlas. Vowels are presented in a very condensed and abstract way; the only significant regional marker to emerge is the fact that Fair Isle has a smaller inventory of phonemes. I agree with Glauser (1994), who, in discussing dialect maps, concludes that the actual, basic material, presented in *tabular form*, is the really fascinating data presented in the atlas, not the maps.

For fine, phonetic detail it is even more rewarding to turn to the original notations as produced by the fieldworkers. This is what I am working on at the moment, collating the findings with our own recordings, using a dense network. When this work is completed, I hope to be able to provide a clearer, if not the final, picture of regional linguistic variation in Shetland.

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