Enshrining language in dialect: Why shouldn’t Shetland Scots be standardised?

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What linguists call the Shetland dialect of Scots (aka Shaetlan, Shetland Scots, Shetlandic) is widely used in the Shetland Isles (Scotland) in literature, education and public signage. Speakers are mostly content with calling it ‘da dialect’, and, perhaps accordingly, it has no universally recognised standard. Occasional debates emerge regarding its standardisation, but on the whole speakers reject the notion of a standard of which they would be seen as users. I ask why this is, and what then constitutes legitimate language. In other words, what benefits, if any, derive from the continued association with ‘dialect’ rather than ‘language’ (a category often associated with standardisation)?

This presentation argues that the choices implied are constrained not only by present patterns of language use, but also by the narrative of language history on the islands, one that also brings in Norn, by all accounts a Scandinavian language akin to Norwegian spoken in Shetland until 100/150 years ago. This narrative functions as a myth to resolve a series of tensions between 1) continuity and discontinuity with respect to an idealised Scandinavian past, and 2) dialect as inherently hybrid or purifiable. Standardising the language implies making marked choices in terms of linguistic affiliation (to Scots, English, Norwegian). The tensions are arguably especially strong in the context of the rise of Scottish nationalism since the 1970s, inducing the need to position Shetland with respect to Scotland, Britain and Scandinavia.

Tracing the discourse on Norn in linguistic and poetic works through the 19th and 20th centuries, I seek to show how Norn is consistently construed as “the real language” of Shetland, and how, by staying clear of standardisation, the dialect might be understood ambiguously both as a shrine for the dead language as well as a space of freedom for artistic creation and school pupils alike.

Keywords: Language standardisation, Shetland Scots, Language myth.