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The Norn-to-Scots language shift: another look at socio-historical evidence

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Introduction

IT is just over a century now since the Faroese scholar Jakob Jakobsen initiated the study of Norn, the former Scandinavian vernacular of Orkney and Shetland.[1] Early contributions to the study were primarily concerned with the consequences of the language death process for the structure of Norn, a field that has proven to be rather controversial at times (Barnes 1998: 21–23). The limited number of sources on the language's structure can be (and have been) interpreted in various ways, and it is unlikely that conclusive evidence will ever appear (Barnes 1991: 457).

Since the 1960s, the study of language shift and language death as a separate field within (socio-)linguistics has developed rapidly. This study has given us a greater understanding of the processes involved in language shift and death, and generalisations on the social reasons underlying them. However, any generalisation when applied to a case would have to be confirmed by specific socio-historical evidence (Barnes 1996: 194). In the past two decades, some works have been concerned with giving this specific evidence for the case of the Norn-to-Scots language shift. In this essay I take another critical look at this evidence in order to identify where more research is needed.

1 Jakobsen did fieldwork in Shetland in the 1890s. The primary source of reference is Jakobsen (1921). An English translation appeared as Jakobsen (1928–1932).

When did Norn die?

If we want to look at the sociohistorical causes of the Norn-to-Scots language shift, it is critical to establish which period in Northern Isles social history to investigate. This is dependent on another disputed question: namely, when did Norn die? We lack a first-hand account of the process, and depend on a limited number of short comments on the language situation in the Northern Isles, written particularly in the eighteenth century.[2] These sources can be interpreted in various ways, but I have found that most sources describe Norn as a thing of the past by the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Those sources that disagree are of a later date and seem to be influenced by a specific Shetlandic bias that wants to emphasise the ongoing links between Shetland and Scandinavia (Smith 1990: 25, Melchers 1991: 463–464, Barnes 1998: 1).

The dating of Norn language death to the late eighteenth century is confirmed by an estimate of the language competence of the 'last speaker' of Norn who gave us an oral text of any length, William Henry of Guttorm on the island of Foula in Shetland. Henry was interviewed by George Low in 1774 and provided him with a thirty-five stanza ballad and translations into Norn of a list of thirty English words (Low 1879: 105–114). Low writes that he unsuccessfully tried to get translations of many more words, and was unable to procure a literal translation of the ballad. The summary of the ballad he did get differed quite substantially at some points from the actual ballad text (Hægstad 1900: 31–32).

These comments from Low allow us to make an estimate of Henry's proficiency in Norn. A three-way gradation of language proficiency in cases of language death has been developed by Nancy Dorian (1982: 32; see also Thomason 2001: 275). She distinguishes between speakers, who have full competence in the language; semi-speakers, who have limited competence but a good passive knowledge; and rememberers, who know words and phrases, but have no real command of the language. William Henry was at best a

2 A majority of these sources can be found in Marwick (1929: 224–226) and in various volumes of *OSA*. A complete list is printed in Knooihuizen (2005: 112–123).

very poor semi-speaker, but on this evidence it seems more appropriate to classify him as a rememberer.

This classification, in turn, allows us to put a date to the language death process. In the model of language death developed by Hans-Jürgen Sasse (1992: 19), language death (or the 'end of regular communication in a language') follows a primary language shift (PLS). PLS is the point where a majority of the community substitute their primary language with their secondary language, as a consequence of a conscious decision by the community not to transmit their language to the next generation any longer. There is no set time span between PLS and language death, but generally there will not be more than one generation of post-PLS semi-speakers.[3]

George Low (1879: 105) described Henry as 'an old man' in 1774. Another clue to his age are the dates of his tenure as a school teacher: from 1749 until his death in 1800 (Cowper 1997: 39).[4] If we from these dates estimate that Henry was born in the early 1720s, if we know that he was born after the PLS, and if we take into account that Henry was a native of Foula, a remote outlying island where the PLS occurred later than in the more central areas of Orkney and Shetland, this would suggest that the PLS took place in most of the Northern Isles shortly after 1700 at the latest.

If we are to look at the socio-historical factors that underlie the decision to transmit Scots rather than Norn to later generations, we will therefore need to look at the developments in society in the Northern Isles in the seventeenth century.

Reasons for language shift

In his article, 'Orkney and Shetland Norn', Michael Barnes (1984: 355) gave a list of five reasons for the language shift. It is quite probable these reasons did play a role, as the same reasons were alleged to lie behind the language shift away from Cornish,[5] and are also thought

3 Implied by Dorian (1982: 32): 'They [semi-speakers] represent the youngest age group in the community to make use of the dying language.'

4 It is not proven that Low's Henry and the SSPCK schoolmaster were the same person, but I find it very likely that they were.

5 Reasons for the demise of Cornish were given by the seventeenth-century scholar William Scawen and are quoted in P. Berresford Ellis (1971: 17, 1974: 82–83).

to underlie cases of language shift in more recent times (see e.g. Kloss 1966). Reorganizing Barnes' list into slightly more general groups, the three reasons I wish to highlight in this essay are:

- The introduction of Scots in important linguistic domains such as administration, law, and religion;
- The spread of Scots and English through (formal) education;
- The loss of language contact with Scandinavia, combined with in-creasing language contact with Scots.

The use of Scots in administration and law

Language use in Northern Isles administration and law has primarily been assessed by analysing language use in written documents (Barnes 1991: 446–447). Allowing for incidental occurrences, *i.e.* single documents in Scots while most contem-porary documents are in Norse or vice versa, and the fact that it is far from certain that many documents were actually written in the Northern Isles, there seems to have been a tendency to use Scots in official documents in Orkney from the 1430s and in Shetland from the 1520s.

Prior to the official abolishment of Norse law and the subsequent establishment of Scottish law in the islands in 1611, a mixture of Scottish and Norwegian laws was used (Donaldson 1984: 32). The surviving court records are, with no exceptions, written in Scots (Donaldson 1954), but that does not necessarily mean that Scots was also the spoken language in court. Judging from their names, many court officials seem to have been of Scandinavian heritage, and may have been Norn-speakers (Donaldson 1958: 76). There is evidence from the Faroe Islands that parliament discussions were held in Faroese, while the written record was in Danish (Clausén 1978: 21), and a similar situation may have occurred in the Northern Isles. However, a court record in Scots from Orkney from 1542–1543 (*OSR* no. xliv), mentions specifically that the defendant spoke 'in the common tongue'. It can credibly be argued that this refers to Norn, and the fact that such is worth mentioning suggests that the spoken language in court was primarily Scots (Marwick 1929: xxiii).

The use of Scots in religious contexts

Scots was used in church in Orkney from the late fourteenth century. The Black Death of 1349 had caused a shortage of Norwegian clergy and Scottish clergy were subsequently attracted to fill their positions. The church was a very powerful instrument of Scotticisation (Crawford 1977: 178; 1999: 18–22). At this time, Shetland seems to have used Latin in church matters (Scheel 1912: 391),[6] with Scots making an entrance after the transfer to the archbishopric of St Andrews in 1472. The language of the Reformation was undoubtedly Scots (and later English), with the only available vernacular bibles written in English.

Ministers were Scots-educated, although there were many who were born and bred in the Northern Isles (Knooihuizen 2005: 124). The story of Magnus 'Norsk' Manson, a minister who is said to have travelled to Norway in the 1590s to learn the language of his charges who did not understand Scots, has been used especially by earlier scholars to claim that Scots as the spoken language in church was the norm (Jakobsen 1928–1932: xvii, Scheel 1912: 391, Flom 1928–1929: 147–148, Murison 1969: 122). This story is almost certainly not true (Barnes 1991: 451). However, there is no evidence to suggest Scots was not used in church. Language requirements for the Northern Isles parishes were absent from the *Fasti*, the overview of ministers in the Church of Scotland, while they are mentioned for the Gaelic-speaking parishes in the Highlands and Islands. This could suggest that there were none, and that Scots was used in church and was understood by the parishioners (Barnes 1991: 451).

A problem with previous research on language use in the public domain has been that the focus was directed towards *written* language use. It is uncertain, however, how much the written word meant to seventeenth-century Orcadians and Shetlanders. The earliest report on literacy, dating from the 1820s, states that only about ten percent of Shetlanders were illiterate, but the survey

6 Scheel uses this example to claim Scots was not understood in Shetland at the time, but it is more likely to be a case of functional diglossia between secular (Scots) and church (Latin) matters.

methods used were highly questionable, and simply owning a bible and preferring English over Scottish Gaelic seem to have been major factors in declaring a person 'literate' (Wiggen 2002: 47–48). It is likely Geirr Wiggen is correct when he writes (2002: 61) that 'the written language meant little or nothing' to Northern Islanders until well into the nineteenth century.

The spoken language in these important domains will have been of much more importance, and as I have concluded above, this language was Scots. A further analysis shows that Scots had taken over no later than by *c.* 1600.

The spread of Scots and English through (formal) education

Sources as early as 1750 blame an English-language education campaign by the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK) for the demise of Norn.[7] The role of SSPCK schools has been treated as a given throughout the study of Norn language death, with Geirr Wiggen's *Norns død, især skolens rolle* (2002) as the most complete work on the subject. Wiggen seems to work from the presupposition that formal English-language education caused the death of Norn. His discussion of education in the Northern Isles is thorough, but I would take a critical stance towards his conclusions.

There is some evidence of limited schooling, both formal and private, mostly in Orkney from the late fifteenth century onwards, but the first formal education in Shetland dates from the eighteenth century (Graham 1998: 11, 14–15).[8] The first SSPCK school in the Northern Isles was started in Walls, Shetland, in 1713. This was an ambulatory school: it would stay in a parish for a limited time before moving on to the next parish (Graham 1998: 25). This system meant that although most people at some point would have had access to some form of education, the amount of education they would have

7 Reports from 1750 by the brothers Murdoch and James Mackenzie are quoted in Marwick (1929: 225).

8 A source for Orkney similar to Graham (1998) is not available, and this section is therefore based primarily on Shetland data.

received was necessarily limited. Also, the quality of education in SSPCK schools was questionable. We know of one schoolmaster, Thomas Henry of Foula, who could only write his name, and therefore could only teach reading (Graham 1998: 36, Cowper 1997: 39).

A question that has been raised is how education in standard written English could cause a language shift to Scots (Wiggen 2002: 70–71). This need not be a problem though, as throughout Scotland we can see that Scots increasingly came to be regarded as a speech variant of written Standard English from the early seventeenth century, and this was probably the same in the Northern Isles (Görlach 1990: 146, 153).[9] A much bigger problem is the dating: if we accept *c.* 1700 as the date for the primary language shift, it would be impossible for an education campaign that started in 1713 to have been a cause of the shift.

Loss of language contact with Scandinavia

Contacts between the Northern Isles and Scandinavia, in particular Norway, were not brusquely cut off with the transfer of the islands to Scotland in 1468–1469. Orkney's administration was already Scotticised before then, but Shetland's links with Norway for administrative purposes, such as the ratification of land sales, continued until the mid-sixteenth century (Donaldson 1984: 27). Orcadian trade with Norway survived at least until the mid-seventeenth century, although the Scottish trade became increasingly important (Thomson 1987: 126; Stewart 1969: 160). Shetland's trade had a more international flavour: its main trading contacts were with the Hanseatic traders who had dominated the Shetland–Norway trade and were now bypassing the *kontor* in Bergen (Norway) and the Danish Royal trade monopoly (Smith 1990: 28, 31–32; Friedland 1983: 89), and from the seventeenth century Scottish merchants and Dutch fishermen also formed a sizeable market (Boelmans Kranenburg 1983: 102; Barnres 1984: 355).

9 The relationship between Scots and Standard English is a controversial issue, but an in-depth discussion of this lies outside the scope of this essay.

I have mentioned the dwindling relations between the Northern Isles and Norway in the formal public domains of administration, law, religion, and trade, and these fields' reorientation towards Scotland in the two centuries after the islands came under Scottish rule. Links with Norway in more personal private domains show a comparable trend. There is little evidence available on family relations, but the previously regular work-migration and emigration of Shetlanders and Orcadians to Bergen came to an end towards the end of the seventeenth century (Daae 1953 [1895]: 4–7).

Increasing language contact with Scots

As contacts with Scandinavia diminished, those with Scotland grew closer. Two major factors will have contributed to contact with speakers of Scots: the islands' trade with Scotland, and the immigration of Scots-speakers to the Northern Isles. Scots trade focused particularly on Orkney, and was centralised at the market in Kirkwall. (Shetland trade was dominated by Hanseatic merchants.) From Kirkwall, the goods were traded on by local middlemen (Shaw 1980: 167–168). Direct trade contacts between the population and visiting ships were strongly discouraged (Thomson 1987: 209). This trade set-up did not lead to extensive contact between traders and the locals (Shaw 1980: 172). However, it is likely the local middlemen were Scots-speakers too as trade was a popular career opportunity for ministers' sons (often people with Scots heritage). In this way all Orcadians will have been in regular contact with the Scots language.

Trade aside, the immigration of Scots-speakers will have made a much larger impact on language contact patterns. Scots immigration to Orkney is generally considered to have begun around 1400 and to have been rather substantial (Barnes 1984: 355), while there is disagreement on the dating and the extent of immigration to Shetland. Based on linguistic evidence, the large-scale immigration to Shetland is dated to the second half of the sixteenth century,[10] and by the first half of the seventeenth century, personal name evidence

10 Donaldson (1983: 15) classifies features from present-day Shetland Scots as sixteenth-century features, and from that infers that this must have been the main period of Scots immigration to Shetland.

suggests a Scots presence in all of Shetland's parishes, albeit more pronounced in some than in others, with at least one third of the population of Shetland being Scots by then (Donaldson 1983: 13–15; 1984: 16).[11] Similar evidence is not available for Orkney, but given the closer proximity to Scotland and the longer history of immigration, it is unlikely the Scots population in Orkney was any less. The proportion of Scots was big enough to ensure they would not shift to Norn, but maintain their own language, which scholars generally assume enjoyed greater prestige than the local Scandinavian vernacular as it was the language of administration, law, and religion (Thomason & Kaufman 1991: 122).

The incomers to both Orkney and Shetland can be classified in the same categories: churchmen and their kin, new landowners, traders, fishermen, and 'specialists', *i.e.* officials and craftsmen (Donaldson 1983: 9, 11–12). In other words, there were Scots incomers who belonged to the same class as the natives, but more importantly, the upper class became Scotticised. The settlement pattern in the islands, which consisted of scattered 'farming townships' rather than more centralised towns (with the exception of Kirkwall and, from the seventeenth century, Lerwick) (Shaw 1980: 80, 170, 176), combined with the number of Scots and their presence in all layers of society, made it very likely that all Northern Islanders were in frequent contact with Scots.

The traditional picture of Northern Isles history, which features a Scots oppressor and a heavily subjugated Norse population (Wiggen 2002: 62; Jakobsen 1957: 20), has been shown not to have been in existence yet in the seventeenth century (Smith 1990: 32; Donaldson 1958: 76). There is no evidence that Scots was forcefully imposed on the islands, nor that Norn was wilfully eradicated. In this respect it differs greatly from the simultaneous developments with Scottish Gaelic in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland (Withers 1988). The average Norn speaker, though, will have felt a pressing need to learn and to use Scots, the language of admininistration, law and religion, and of at least a third of the population (Barnes 1991: 453).

11 Donaldson (1983) includes a discussion on the reliability of personal name evidence.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have primarily discussed the introduction of the Scots language in the Northern Isles and the reasons why the local Norn-speaking population felt the need to learn Scots and use it in a number of public domains. Reasons for abandoning Norn also in the more private domains have not been established.

Ongoing research in the adjacent fields of language shift and language death, both in the modern and the historical context, may shed more light on the final abandonment of languages, but as always, general theories will need to be supported by case-specific evidence. For the death of Norn, such evidence must be sought by further research in two areas: firstly, the Scots immigration to the Northern Isles, their settlement and contact patterns, and power relations between Scots immigrants and the existing Norn-speaking population; and secondly, the social history of the Northern Isles, especially in the seventeenth century, the key period in the language death process.

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