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The Norse element in the Orkney dialect

Donna Heddle

1. Introduction

The Orkney and Shetland Islands, along with Caithness on the Scottish mainland, are identified primarily in terms of their Norse cultural heritage. Linguistically, in particular, such a focus is an imperative for maintaining cultural identity in the Northern Isles. This paper will focus on placing the rise and fall of Orkney Norn in its geographical, social, and historical context and will attempt to examine the remnants of the Norn substrate in the modern dialect.

Cultural affiliation and conflict is what ultimately drives most issues of identity politics in the modern world. Nowhere are these issues more overtly stated than in language politics. We cannot study language in isolation; we must look at context and acculturation. An interdisciplinary study of language in context is fundamental to the understanding of cultural identity. This politicising of language involves issues of cultural inheritance: acculturation is therefore central to our understanding of identity, its internal diversity, and the porousness or otherwise of a language or language variant's cultural borders with its linguistic neighbours. Although elements within Lowland Scotland postulated a Germanic origin myth for itself in the nineteenth century, Highlands and Islands Scottish cultural identity has traditionally allied itself to the Celtic origin myth. This is diametrically opposed to the cultural heritage of Scotland's most northerly island communities.

2. History

For almost a thousand years the language of the Orkney Islands was a variant of Norse known as *Norroena* or *Norn*. The distinctive and culturally unique qualities of the Orkney dialect spoken in the islands today derive from this West Norse based sister language of Faroese, which Hansen, Jacobsen and Weyhe note also developed from Norse brought in by settlers in the ninth century and from early Icelandic (2003: 157).

As Michael Barnes notes, the term 'Norn' is an adjective derived from ON *norroenn* meaning 'Norwegian, Norse', and *Norroena* is derived from the cognate noun meaning 'Norwegian language, Norse language'. According to Barnes (1998:1) 'to some it denotes any piece of Scandinavian

language material emanating from the Northern Isles, to others it means only the spoken Scandinavian of the islands and written records of such speech.’

It was a language with some status. Hugh Marwick states in *The Orkney Norn* (1929: xi) that it was a widely recognised term, citing a Norwegian document from Bergen dated 1485 as the first example of the use of the term in Scotland.

2.1 What is Norn?

Norn belongs to the North Germanic branch of the Germanic languages. Together with Faroese, Icelandic and Norwegian it belongs to the West Scandinavian group, separating it from the East Scandinavian group consisting of Swedish and Danish. The North Germanic languages can be further divided into an Insular Scandinavian language group, including Icelandic, Faroese etc, and a Mainland Scandinavian language grouping of Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish based on mutual intelligibility and the fact that Norwegian has been heavily influenced in particular by Danish during the last millennium, due to Danish hegemony in Norway, and has therefore diverged from Faroese and Icelandic. Norn is generally considered to have been closer to Faroese and the Vestnorsk dialects of Norway than Icelandic and would have been mutually intelligible with them. This mutual intelligibility has been established by, *inter alia*, Oslund (2006: 133).

Norn is to be distinguished from the present day dialects of the Northern isles, termed by linguists ‘Orkadian’, ‘Shetlandic’ or more recently ‘Insular Scots’, and known to the inhabitants as ‘Orkney’ and ‘Shetland’ or ‘Shaetlan’. In chapter 1 of *The Edinburgh Companion to Scots*, ‘A Brief History of Scots’, John Corbett et al. note the legacy of Norn dialect in the Northern Isles: ‘Old Norse and Norn however impacted powerfully on the placenames of the northern isles and on the everyday vocabulary of the Insular variety of Scots.’ (2003: 5)

The linguistic aspects of Norn, such as phonology, can be difficult to evidence from the few written sources that do exist. Traits shared with dialects of Norwegian, including a voicing of /p, t, k/ to [b, d, g] before or between vowels, can however be extrapolated from the modern dialect.

The features of Norn grammar were very similar to the other Scandinavian languages. There were two numbers, three genders and four cases (nominative, accusative, genitive and dative). The two main conjugations of verbs in present and past tense were also extant and like all other North Germanic languages, it used a suffix instead of a preposited

article to indicate definiteness as in Norwegian today: *hus* ('house'); *huset* ('the house').

Remnants of this Norn are present throughout Orkney and Shetland mainly due to the sheer scale of the Norse settlement of Orkney, a result of which was the obliteration of whatever indigenous language was spoken in Orkney by the new Viking language. Unfortunately, because Norn was the language of the common people, it was very rarely, if ever, written down - what remains includes a version of the Lord's Prayer and a ballad. Although official documents do exist from this period, they were generally written in Norwegian.

Norn remained the language of Orkney until the early fifteenth century, but, contrary to popular belief, its decline began well before the islands were annexed to Scotland in 1468.

The first Scots influence was felt on the Church. Although the bishopric of Orkney was still subject to Norway, its bishops had shown a tendency to follow Scottish practices. The eradication of Norn thus became part of the political process of the transfer of power in Orkney from Norway to Scotland. By 1312, the Scots language used by the highly literate clergy soon became more commonly used in higher status circles and the Scots calendar had been adopted. Norn was steadily eroded as a language of governance and the pledging of Orkney to Scotland as part of the dowry of Margaret of Denmark in 1468 (known as the Impignoration) merely accelerated the process. Scots became the language of governance and Norn as an extant language disappeared very quickly. The secular Scots influence on Orkney really began after 1379 when the earldom was passed from the Norse line which had culminated in the Angus and Strathearn succession of Scottish earls with Norse descent to the purely Scots Sinclair line. This was nearly one hundred years before the impignoration and the Scots rule of Orkney was clearly a deciding factor in the Danish decision to impignorate Orkney rather than Shetland – still firmly under Norse rule.

Such cultural changes in religious and secular society, coupled with the economic changes, meant that the old tongue began to die out and was certainly considered of very low status. Norn therefore remained spoken in rural areas only for 300 years or so longer and, from the late 1500s to the early 1700s, most Orcadians were probably in fact bilingual - speaking both Norn and Scots English.

This bilingual tendency is also noted by Martin Martin in relation to Orkney, in his *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (1703: 369), a facsimile of which was republished as *Curiosities of Art and Nature* in

2003. He remarks that ‘The Inhabitants speak the *English* Tongue, several of the Vulgar speak the *Danish* or *Norse* Language; and many among them retain the Ancient *Danish* Names’.

By the end of the 18th century, only a handful of Norn speakers were left and it was a very devalued currency. It is not known exactly when Norn became extinct. The last reports of Norn speakers are claimed to be from the nineteenth century, but it is more likely that the language was dying out in the late eighteenth century (Price 1984: 203). The more isolated islands of Foula and Unst are variously claimed as the last refuges of the language in Shetland. Walter Sutherland from Skaw in Unst, who died about 1850, has been cited as the last native speaker of the Norn language, but this is not the prevalent academic view. Dialects of Norse had also been spoken on mainland Scotland – for example, in Caithness – but here they became extinct many centuries before Norn died on Orkney and Shetland. Hence, some scholars also speak about ‘Caithness Norn’, although even less is known about ‘Caithness Norn’ than about Orkney and Shetland Norn.

2.2 The Modern Era

In more modern times the Norn element in the dialect of the islands has been investigated by two key scholars — Jakobsen, in his *Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland*, and Marwick in *The Orkney Norn*. Marwick (1929: xxvii) says: ‘The two tongues (Norn and Scots) were cognate; many words were practically identical in each, and, before the one lapsed, each language must have been largely stocked with words from the other. The speech of Orkney to-day must be termed Scots, but it is still richly stocked with words that were part and parcel of the Orkney Norn. . . . On the other hand, before it ultimately died, the Norn tongue must have been increasingly impregnated with words from Scots. Yet the change was something more than a steady inflation of Norn with Scots words until it became more Scots than Norn. What probably happened was that the common everyday phraseology of Norn ceased and was replaced by the corresponding Scots terms of speech. In this respect the most important change would be in the pronouns, common verbs and the intermediary words – prepositions and conjunctions.’ This last area of note is in fact perhaps the most significant legacy of Norn in the present day dialect and one which this essay will explore further.

2.3 Discussion

Why has any form of Norse based Orkney dialect survived at all? Could this be an example of cultural conflict polarising attitudes to a beleaguered language with a bit of guerrilla warfare, of using dialect as a prime cultural marker?

The Scots settlers who came to Orkney and Shetland were from all walks of life and from all the airts of Scotland. They brought with them divergencies in pronunciation and in vocabulary which were assimilated into the Scots dialect used as *lingua franca* in Orkney and Shetland and which would have cross fertilised with the extant Norn substrate. Therefore the Scots itself was under siege from the indigenous dialects and later on from the Standard English taught in schools and the modern usage of transatlantic English by the younger generation. So the indigenous dialects were not completely subsumed by an all conquering dominant language variant - because there wasn't one extant.

However, the modern dialect is indeed essentially Scots, encompassing most of the words in daily use as well as inflectional forms; but the Norn substrate still makes its influence strongly felt not only in the vocabulary, but also in the syntax. This influence has perhaps been explored most in terms of vocabulary. Gunnel Melchers (1981) noted, for example, that the key areas exhibiting Norn substrate were:

- (a) Nouns, particularly concrete ones. e.g. flowers and plants
- (b) Jocular and derisive names and pet names.
- (c) Words expressing qualities and behaviours, such as anger or ill humour
- (d) Adjectives that denote the range of colours of domestic animals.
- (e) Words relating to the weather, the wind, the sea, and fishing, such as *roost*, a whirlpool, from ON *rósta*, meaning tumult, and to the superstitions of fishermen.
- (f) Seasons and holidays, such as *Voar*, the spring, from ON *vár*.

Even after Norn stopped being a language in everyday usage, vocabulary, rhymes and bits of conversation remained. It maintained a subversive role in the sustenance of cultural identity. The above categories are all to do with culture and environment. Early scholars attempted to evaluate this effect on the dialects. Jakobsen's three visits to Shetland at the end of the nineteenth century garnered some 10,000 words which he considered to be of Norn origin. Marwick's research in Orkney in the early twentieth century identified about 3000 Norn words in the Orkney dialect of the period. These

scholars and other studies can help us to evaluate a Norn substrate in the dialect of the Northern isles but, as Michael Barnes notes in *The Norn languages of Orkney and Shetland*, there is no definite description of these dialects in the nineteenth or twentieth century to work from. The issue of Norn as a quantifiable language base is therefore a problematic one.

2.4 Norn in use today

Most of the use of actual Norn/Norse in modern day Orkney and Shetland is politically motivated and purely ceremonial, and mostly in Old Norse rather than Norn itself: for example Shetland's motto is *með lögum skal land byggja* ('with law shall land be built').

Another example of the use of Norse/Norn in the Northern Isles can be found in the names of ferries, which is a self-conscious usage to underline the islands' Viking heritage and the historical sailing links to Scandinavia: for example, Northlink Ferries has ships named MV *Hamnavoe* (after the old name for Stromness), MV *Hjaltland* (Shetland), and MV *Hrossey* ('Horse Island', an old name for Mainland Orkney).

Beyond these rather artificial survivals, however, Norn influence – of greater or lesser strength – can be found at all levels of the Scots dialects of the Northern Isles.

3. Norn elements in the modern dialect

3.1 Intonation

Orkney dialect differs from Shetland in that Shetland follows Nordic stress patterns whereas Orkney has a rising intonation akin to Welsh or Irish – in fact, Orcadians are often mistaken for them! The source of the prosody of Orkney and Shetland dialects is difficult to determine.

Klaske van Leyden has noted that there is a difference in cadence between Orkney and Shetland which she subscribes ultimately to Celtic influence on the Orkney variant. This is not a position I would endorse and indeed, van Leyden notes 'However, given the historical links between the Northern Isles and *western* Scandinavia, it is quite surprising that one should find *eastern* Scandinavian intonation in Orkney, but not in Shetland dialect, which appears to be the most 'Scandinavian' of the two varieties in terms of temporal organisation and lexis.' (2006:22). As far as intonation is concerned, melodic differences between the two dialects appears to lie in the accent lending pitch rise. The Shetland rise is on the stressed syllable while the Orkney rise is post stressed syllable. Could there be a more Nordic explanation? I proffer the following theory in progress for debate.

The theory is based on the proposition that Old Norse had a pitch accent as well as a stress accent. We do not of course know what this sounded like, but if we accept that it existed we can formulate an explanation of some kind for the rising intonation which is such a feature of the Orkney dialect and tie it firmly back into the Norse linguistic heritage.

One suggestion – which sadly cannot be verified – is that the pitch accent may well have survived in Orkney as a result of a lack of contrast on various levels with Scandinavia at a much earlier date than Shetland, where the rising cadence is not found. The rising intonation would therefore have been part of the linguistic and cultural identity primary markers for Orkney and thus would have survived both as a conscious and unconscious reminder of the Norse heritage. Interestingly, the rising intonation also survives in East Norwegian (as noted by van Leyden), which was an area whose linguistic and cultural identity was polarised by its proximity to Sweden. This would merit further study.

3.2 Vowels

The vowel systems of modern Orkney dialect are generally Scots and it has been suggested that Norn speakers with their rich vowel system but relatively small number of consonant phonemes could more readily imitate the Scots vowels. It is difficult, therefore to isolate any vowel sounds which came into the dialect directly from Norn.

3.3 Syntax

3.3.1 Nouns and pronouns

There are a number of significant syntactical features in Orkney and Shetland dialect which derive ultimately from Norn roots.

1. Masculine nominative ending *-r* still survives in a few words, e.g. *chalder* (oystercatcher). This would not be recognized as such by a modern speaker.
2. Placenames, where compounds are numerous, contain older oblique cases and inflexions from Norn – usually genitive, e.g. *Savaskaill* from ON *sævar-skáli*, meaning sea hall.
3. The usage of a suffixed definite article is very rare in ordinary nouns but quite common in placenames, e.g. *Burrian* (ON *borgin*, the fort)
4. The usage of a plural for a singular noun, e.g. *This feet is sore but the other feet is fine*. This foot is sore but the other foot is fine. This is not confined entirely to Norse/Norn influenced dialects but is certainly a feature of them.

5. And finally, something which harks back straight to Old Norse - *whar* means both 'who' and 'where', and may be elided from ON *hverr* (who, which, what), e.g. *Whar's that?* Who's that?/Where's that?

3.3.2 Verbs

1. Orkney dialect is distinguished by a use of phrasal verbs, i.e. verb + adverb, e.g. *come at* = improve
2. The use of a pronoun with an imperative is straight from Old Norse, e.g. *Come thoo here!* Come here! This also occurs with an interrogative - *minds thoo on*, do you remember?
This usage was common in Scots dialects but is rare now. Its retention in Orkney dialect is likely to have been supported by the Norn substrate.
3. There is extensive evidence for the Old Norse derived use of the verb 'to be' + pp to create the passive, perfect and pluperfect of verbs involving motion.

I war just meed the tea.

The perfective formation is more complex than this in general, as noted by Millar (2007: 75), but this particular aspect involving motion is clearly evident in the Orkney dialect of today.

4. The use of the verb 'to be' as an auxiliary in place of English 'to have' is also prevalent in the modern dialect, e.g.
I'm just meed the tea 'I have just made tea'.
5. The use of the verb 'to be' as a future tense main verb is also commonly found, e.g.
I'll just be 'I will just be with you/ I am just coming/ I will just be there'.

3.3.3 Prepositions

Compound prepositions are a strong feature of the dialect and are most commonly placed at the end of a sentence, e.g. *I'm gan oot a luk upbye*. I am going out for a look about up the road. These were common in Scots dialects but are rather old fashioned now. As in the case of the imperative + 2nd person pronoun construct, their retention in Orkney dialect is likely to have been supported by the Norn substrate.

4. Conclusion

Norn and its substratal influence on Insular Scots still have an important political and linguistic role in the modern dialect variants of Orkney, and indeed Shetland. However, the status and awareness of the language variants of Orkney and Shetland has been slowly eroded by the cultural changes faced by the Northern Isles in the 19th and 20th centuries. The dialects are in a state of flux and are changing rapidly due to the constant influences of television and education as well as the large number of incomers now settled in the islands. Language is still a political issue for the Northern isles. Now, as we stand on the cusp of the new millennium, it is time for us to cherish our Nordic linguistic and cultural heritage, for in our past lie the seeds of our future, and without our tongue, we cannot speak for ourselves.

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