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# The be-perfect in transitive constructions in Orkney and Shetland Scots: Influenced by Norn or not?

Ragnhild Ljosland

## 1. Introduction and definition of the question

Why is it possible, in the Shetland and Orkney dialects of Scots, to say, for example: “I’m been ill”, “I’m done it”, “Dey’re gotten plenty o’ fish”, “He was seen him”, and “He was ta’en it” (all examples from Jakobsen 1928-32: XLIII)? Is it due to influence from the Norn language or can it be explained internally within Scots? It is my intention to apply Occam’s Razor and look for a simpler solution than assuming influence from Norn.

In Standard English, and in other dialectal varieties, auxiliary ‘be’ can be used with motion verbs and resultative verbs involving transition from one state to another, although some are marked as archaic. Examples include “Tha punishment of God/is come” from Rachel Melissa Robson’s poem Holy Island, written in the dialect of Northumberland (Robson 2012, no page number), and “Oh baby I’m changed” from The Beatles song I’m Looking Through You (John Lennon and Paul McCartney 1965).

The Shetland and Orkney dialects, however, are characterised by a much wider use of auxiliary ‘be’: “[I]t is used to form the perfect as well as the pluperfect; in addition to verbs of motion and change it is used with all categories of transitive and intransitive verbs, including verbs of perception and emotion; it is used with the participle forms of *be* and *have*” (Melchers 1992: 605, writing of Shetland). In terms of geographical distribution, it is current in both Shetland and Orkney, although Millar (2012: 18) suggests that it is now more common in Shetland.

This wide use of “be” as auxiliary verb with transitives in the Shetland dialect was first noted by Jakobsen (1928-32: XLIII) and has since been investigated by Melchers (1987) and (1992), Hatakka (1995), Pavlenko (1996) and (1997) in two identical outputs, Smith and Durham (2007), and compared to Scots-influenced dialects in the USA and Canada by Yerastov (2011).

It is at present not clear whether the structure is a relic or an innovation (Melchers 1992: 609), and if a relic, then whether it is a relic of Norn or of an older stage in the development of Scots. This paper will attempt to establish that it is not Norn, and from there consider the possibilities of what it might be.

## 2. The Norn hypothesis

Whereas Jakobsen considered the be-auxiliary in perfective constructions with transitives to be an innovation “characteristic of more recent Shetl[andic]” (1928-32: XLIII), and thus only devotes a footnote to it, this type of construction nevertheless features among those characteristics of Orkney and Shetland Scots which are popularly believed to hail from Norn (Heddle 2010; Millar 2012: 18). The case for a Norn origin has been advocated chiefly by Alexander Pavlenko (1996; 1997). Although Millar finds Pavlenko’s explanation “attractive” (2012: 20) and that it “fairly convincingly [argues] that the use of be-perfectives with transitive verbs in the Shetland dialect [...] is, at the very least, a result of the interference between abandoned and target languages during the cross-over” (2007: 132) I am going to argue against Pavlenko’s conclusion.

Central to Pavlenko’s argument is Jakobsen’s (1928-32: XCIII) observation that in many of the late Norn fragments he collected, a former range of Old Norse grammatical endings take the form “-a” (Pavlenko 1996: 79; 1997: 93). Jakobsen (1928-32: XCIII) quotes a verse from Foula:

- **Skækla komæna rīna tūna**  
**swa'rtā hæsta blæ'ta brūna**  
**fo'mtæna (fjo'mtan) hāla**  
**and fo'mtæna (fjo'mtan) bjadnis a kwāra hāla**

In Old Norse, the verse can be standardised as:

- *Skekill er kominn ríðandi á túnit*  
*á svörtum hesti með bletti á brúnni*

*fimmtán halar*  
*ok fimmtán börn á hverjum hala.*

Jakobsen collected the following explanation from the informant: ‘A bug-bear [\*skekill] has come riding into the home-field (the tun) on a black horse having a white spot (blæʰta) on its brow (brūna), and fifteen tails, and with fifteen children on each tail.’ To the form of the Foula rhyme, Jakobsen remarks in a footnote that “[a]ll the grammatical endings in this verse have been levelled to –a, except in *bjadnis*, which has got the Eng. plural *s*<sup>1</sup>” (Jakobsen 1928-32: XCIII). Much has since been made of this ‘a-levelling’ and a central point in the debate is whether it should be seen as part of Norn’s development as a living language, or else as an error made by later rememberers of Norn fragments, who were not themselves proficient in Norn (for further discussion of a-levelling, see Rendboe 1984 in particular).

‘A-levelling’ is also the basis of Pavlenko’s argument for how influence from Norn may have led to the peculiar use of ‘be’ that we see in Orkney and Shetland. Rather than use the ‘Skekla’ verse, Pavlenko analyses another Norn fragment collected by Jakobsen (1928-32: XCV-XCVII), known as ‘The Troll’s Message’. The verse derives from a folk story known across Scandinavia, where a voice emanates from a burial mound, giving a warning. Jakobsen collected six versions of The Troll’s Message, from Fetlar and Foula, of which Pavlenko (1996: 78) and (1997: 92) quotes the following three:

Foula 1:

Hørædu hörædu rīa  
rīa rīa ræn(na)  
sina divla dōna vivla  
køpæra jadla  
høṅdæna bradna.

Foula 2:

-----  
sēana divla dōna vivla  
køpæra kētæl  
høṅdæ bredæn.

Fetlar 1:

Geng home to Fivla,  
and tell Divla  
at de honnins [hōṅins]  
wis lopen  
in a "tuilly" [tøli]  
and brunt de bonnins [bōṅins]

Pavlenko provides the following translation, based on the version from Fetlar, although he believes it to apply to all three: “Go home to Fivla, and tell Divla that the dogs were fighting (or had/have fought) and had/have/burnt the bairns” (Pavlenko 1996: 78-79).

In the principally<sup>2</sup> Scots version from Fetlar, Pavlenko finds the ‘be’ construction in “wis lopen in a "tuilly" [tøli] and brunt de bonnins [bōṅins]” (my underlining). Now, his project is to show that the structure originated in Norn, so he needs to show that it also appears in the “pure” Norn versions from Foula. To do that, he reconstructs “høṅdæna bradna” (Foula version 1) or “høṅdæ bredæn” (Foula version 2) as Old Norse “hundinn hefir bruninn”, i.e. *the dog has burnt* (Pavlenko 1996: 79) and (1997: 92). Comparing this reconstruction to the attested forms in Foula 1 and 2, he infers that “høṅdæna bradna”/

<sup>1</sup> My own opinion is that the “-is” ending in “bjadnis” reflects the Scots plural –is.

<sup>2</sup> One may describe the Fetlar version as having Scots as the matrix language and Norn as the embedded language, see Myers-Scotton, C. (2006: 241-244).

“hōṇdæ brēdæn” must be “hundinn hefir bruninn” with a-levelling, and that the a-levelled endings result in a “fusion of the subject with the reduced auxiliaries \*hafa<sup>3</sup> and \*vera<sup>4</sup> which are represented only by a single vowel phoneme” and also an “absence of any formal distinction between transitivity and intransitivity in the notional verbs” (Pavlenko 1996: 79).

Thus, Pavlenko not only takes a stance in the debate on a-levelling, claiming that real Norn speakers, as opposed to rememberers, had a native late Norn grammar where a-levelling featured, but he also takes his claim further by saying that this a-levelling in the grammar of late Norn and the resulting conflation of *hafa* and *vera* influenced the way people in Shetland (and perhaps by extension, Orkney?) spoke and still speak Scots. He believes the versions from Foula compared to that from Fetlar represent “two different stages of the development of the Shetland perfect” (Pavlenko 1996: 80), which leads him to conclude: “It is natural to assume that the above-mentioned Scandinavian speech-patterns (i.e. the merging of \*vera and \*hafa-auxiliaries and gradual decay of the resulting form) could not but affect the process of the local population acquiring Scots, including its system of perfect tenses” (Pavlenko 1996: 80). The system in Scots included the structures *be + done* and *be + begood* (= begun), and Pavlenko suggests that from these beginnings, in the encounter with late Norn, the use of ‘be’ spread to other transitive verbs in Shetland Scots, first occurring in the speech of Norn/Scots bilinguals (Pavlenko 1996: 80-81, and 1997: 94-95).

However, there are some significant problems with this line of reasoning. Firstly, I believe that Pavlenko’s translation is incorrect when applied to the two versions from Foula. Based on numerous parallels from Norway, Iceland and the Faroes, Yelena S. Helgadóttir (2010: 224) gives a much more convincing translation of the Foula variants of the Troll’s Message: “Hear, hear ride/rider; Ride, ride, run; say [to] her [to] Divla, that [she] Vivla; copper-kettle; hand burn[t].” Following this translation, we see that “hōṇdæ” or “hōṇdæna” correspond to the Old Norse *hōnd* (‘hand’) or *hōndina* (‘the hand’) in which the vowel at the end does *not* represent a reduced form of \*vera or \*hafa. This weakens Pavlenko’s argument considerably.

Secondly, from a sociolinguistic perspective I would like to question Pavlenko’s assumption that Norn grammar could have influenced Shetland Scots grammar at such a late stage in the life-cycle of Norn. Although he does not say precisely when he reckons that the conflation of ‘hafa’ and ‘vera’ was complete in Norn, he only attempts to demonstrate it in *late* Norn, using text collected as late as 1893-95. He explains: “Of course, these patterns [i.e. *be + done* and *be + begood*] could not become a model for the change of the bulk of the perfect constructions until the process of the decay of Norn had reached an advanced stage, i.e. not earlier than the beginning of the seventeenth century – the period from which the Foula examples supposedly date” (Pavlenko 1997: 94). The evidence for the Foula verses dating back to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, in their present form including a-levelling, is not presented in Pavlenko’s articles.

Even if we accept that Jakobsen’s Norn texts may have been preserved through oral transmission since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, before finally being written down at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>, I do not consider it to be proven that the prerequisite a-levelling had developed in Norn already in the period when Scots established itself as an indigenous variety in the Northern Isles. Two issues need to be considered: 1) At what point in time do we believe that formal distinction between auxiliary *vera* and *hafa* broke down in the grammar of Norn speakers, as opposed to rememberers, if it did at all? and 2) Does this point in time coincide with a period when Norn was sociolinguistically in a position to cause structural impact on the grammar of the Scots language as spoken in the isles?

The first question is impossible to answer due to the lack of sources of Norn text. There are preserved Shetland diplomas from 1299, 1307, 1355 x2, 1360, 1452, 1465, 1509, 1545, 1550, and 1586. However, these are formal texts, following Norwegian, Swedish and Danish norms, which cannot be expected to reflect vernacular speech. There is no indication of a vera/hafa paradigm collapse here, as can be seen for example in the 1586 diploma: “... Jamis haffde býct en nÿ stoffue ...” [James had built

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Hafa’ is Old Norse for ‘to have’.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Vera’ is Old Norse for ‘to be’.

a new house] (Barnes 1998: 42-43). The only other source available is the folkloristic material collected in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries by George Low, Jakob Jakobsen and others, containing fragments of spoken Norn, written down as an approximation of what the collector heard. These are less likely to impose normative grammar, but have the drawback of being very late and hailing from the dying phase of Norn when we cannot know how fluent the informant was. Some of these show a complete collapse of grammar, for example “Jarta, bodena komena rontena Komba” [My dear, the boat has come round de Kaim (a hill). Standard Old Norse: Hjarta, bátrinn er kominn runt um Kambinn] (Barnes 1998: 50), which not only reduces \*er to –a in “bodena”, but also suffixes a nonsensical, rhyming –ena onto two other words. I do not believe this is representative of living, native Norn speech. There is therefore no way of knowing for certain when \*vera and \*hafa were conflated in living Norn, if at all. But if it happened, it must either have been in the Middle Norwegian period, when mainland Norwegian underwent great grammatical changes (although not this particular one), although no evidence is now left to us, or in the Early Modern period as a result of imperfect acquisition by the last generations during the process of obsolescence, as Pavlenko suggests.

Moving on to the second question, I would argue that it is perfectly possible, and even likely, that Norn grammar influenced Shetland and Orkney Scots grammar, but only while it was still in a sociolinguistic position to do so. The language shift can be divided into three phases: Firstly, Scots entered the isles. In this phase, Scots was brought by a varied group of speakers from different areas of central and eastern Scotland. The trading town and administrative centre of Kirkwall in Orkney would have been its main gateway. In the early phase, Scots was used by an elite: Higher ranking officials, lairds, religious leaders, and the mercantile class. Norn was still used by the mass of farming and fishing families. Norn has the advantage of speaker numbers, Scots the prestigious domains. In the second phase, Scots is becoming a community language in the sense that it is adopted as the dominant language of many children growing up in the isles, it is used by more and more people, in island by island and parish by parish, in more and more domains of life. Societal bilingualism, and for many speakers also individual bilingualism, still prevails. Scots becomes indigenous to the isles through the formation of a koiné. Norn is now the Low Variety and Scots the High Variety in a diglossic situation, which lasts several centuries, although with geographical variation within the archipelagos. In the third phase, Norn reaches a tipping point where the relatively stable diglossia submerges to language shift. Some islands and areas sustain Norn as a community language longer than others, but the direction of change is unmistakable: Younger generations acquire Norn imperfectly and are clearly Scots dominant. Norn eventually dies.

One can argue about the timing of these three phases in Orkney versus Shetland, and internally within the two archipelagos. I have argued elsewhere (Ljosland 2012) that in Orkney, phase 1 happened before the transfer of the isles to Scotland in 1468-9, and that phase 2 took place before 1560. I am, however, open to the possibility that it may have happened later in Shetland, as Millar (2008: 237) suggests: “[the] present-day Shetland dialect was formed in the early 19th century from the supraregional koiné of the original 16th and 17th century Scots-speaking settlers and the heavily Norn-influenced Scots of the first and second generations of islanders who no longer had Norn as a mother tongue”. There are various estimates for when phase 3 happened, but Knooihuizen (2010:88) argues convincingly that in Shetland, the tipping point came in the early 1700s.

The crucial point is that for Pavlenko’s argument to work, the conflation of *vera* and *hafa* must have happened in phase 2, when Scots first became an indigenous language in a bilingual island community. Norn cannot have had that level of influence on Scots in phase 3, when an older generation of relatively balanced bilinguals gave way to a new generation of Scots-dominant semi-speakers of Norn. In phase 3, the direction of influence goes from Scots to Norn, not vice versa. Therefore, for alevelling in Norn to make sense as an influential feature in Northern Isles Scots, it must have developed while Norn was still a community language, and not in phase 3 when Norn was obsolescent. There is no evidence to suggest that it did: All our tokens arise from data that was collected in phase 3. Indeed, it was precisely because the language was in its last stages of obsolescence that the collectors were

interested in collecting specimens. Norn influenced Scots while the two were used in parallel, not at the point when Norn ceased to be used.

### 3. Other hypotheses of origin

Following the line of reasoning above, we therefore need to consider other hypotheses of origin to replace the Norn hypothesis. Could it be archaic, but in essence Scots? In other words, not a relic of Norn, but a relic of an older stage of Scots? ‘Be’ in its various forms is used with a subset of intransitive verbs across the Germanic languages and the structure originates in Proto-Germanic (McWhorter 2002: 236-7). The category has been receding in English since Old English “with habban encroaching on the domain of beon and wesan” (McWhorter 2004: 37). By the 16<sup>th</sup> century “the use of be in the perfect had largely shrunk to the change-of-state class of intransitives such as come, become, arrive, enter, run, and grow” (McWhorter 2002: 237), and by the 1800s to “become” (McWhorter 2004: 37) when the paradigm finally collapsed (Rydén 1991: 352). In modern Standard English, the construction has virtually disappeared – except “in frozen form with go” (McWhorter 2002: 237). This reversal of the grammaticalisation process is unusual, and goes in the opposite direction of a range of other Germanic languages where the application of ‘be’ has spread rather than contracted over time (McWhorter 2004: 37). If the past tenses with ‘be’ in Orkney and Shetland are to be analysed as a relic of an older stage of Scots, we would have to assume that individual dialects can develop differently from Standard English so that the gradual contraction of the category did not take place in the Scots varieties spoken in the Northern Isles.

Support for such a hypothesis may be sought by comparing to other vernacular varieties of Scots or English. It is interesting, therefore, to note that Melchers (1992: 602-603) reports that Wright’s *English Dialect Grammar* (1905) “claims that the construction is sometimes also heard in various other parts of Britain, such as southern Norfolk, Bedfordshire and Rutland.” However, Melchers (1992: 602-603) also notes that nearly a century later, the *Survey of English Dialects* failed to elicit the construction from any informant. However, she does find three examples in the Cambridgeshire texts included in *The Helsinki Corpus of British English Dialects*, which is based on audio recordings from the 1970s-80s (loc.cit.). Also, in the *Handbook of Varieties of English*, she finds the be-perfect auxiliary in some form or other in “about 15 varieties (p.1153)” of English in the UK (Melchers 2010: 49). However, Melchers criticises the *Handbook* for not paying attention to the fact that it “on closer examination turns out to be used very differently” (2010: 49). The be-perfect is also attested in Irish English, but only with intransitive verbs (Filppula 1999: 116-122). As a conclusion, Bernd Kortmann in the *Handbook* finds the ‘be’ perfect auxiliary among the two most widely attested tense and aspect features in vernacular varieties of English in the British Isles, although in a different distribution pattern compared to that of Orkney and Shetland (Kortmann 2008: 479).

An interesting comparative study from the USA and Canada is provided by Yerastov (2011). He observes that in certain areas of the Appalachian Mountains in the USA and North Eastern Vermont in Canada, the ‘be’-perfect is used in transitive constructions with resultative and comparable resultative meaning, such as for example *I’m done dinner, I’m finished my homework, I’m started my dinner* (Yerastov 2011: 331). In North Eastern Vermont, resultative *be done* has further developed into a lexicalised structure *be done* + *Noun Phrase*. What is particularly interesting from our perspective, is Yerastov’s proposed explanation for this development. Drawing on Mufwene’s ‘founder principle’, Yerastov points to the fact that this grammatical construction is most widely accepted in areas which were densely settled by Scottish immigrants. He therefore concludes that the construction *be done NP* in North Eastern Vermont English “is a lexicalization of the *erstwhile productive be perfect* which *most likely originated in Scots English*” (Yerastov 2011: 345, my italics).

It thus seems that even though the loss of Germanic be-perfect began already in Old English, the loss was not complete in vernacular English until relatively recently, and that it is possible for Scots-based koinés such as that of North-Eastern Vermont to develop new structures from this basis. Rydén points out that the ‘be’-perfect with mutative intransitives lasted longer in more isolated social and regional areas (1991: 351), something which could easily apply to Shetland and Orkney. As Kortmann

notes (2008: 479): “The conservative Germanic *be*-perfect is a typical northern feature (Orkney and Shetland, IrE, ScE, North) but also attested in the Southeast. In the Orkney and Shetland isles, the *be*-perfect has even taken over the entire territory of perfect marking, i.e. to the exclusion of *have*, as in *I’m seen it*.” The contrast here makes it clear that the Orkney and Shetland distribution of *be* is unusual in a British perspective, but at the same time considered by Kortmann to be an extension of the Germanic ‘be’-perfect which was once a standard feature of English and which has been allowed to survive and develop in an idiosyncratic way due to the relative isolation of the Northern Isles and the conservative character of their dialects. In other words, the foundation has always been there. But at some point in the early modern period, Orkney and Shetland Scots parted ways with English in general.

In great contrast to the gradual contraction of the *be*-perfect category from Old English to modern Standard English, in Orkney and Shetland it has not only been retained, but also extended to transitive verbs. It therefore seems not to be a straightforward relic, but an innovation particular to the Northern Isles, which is founded on the condition that the Germanic ‘be’-perfect still existed to some extent in Middle Scots dialects (as well as in other conservative varieties of English) at the time when Scots was established in the Northern Isles. In accordance with the Occam’s Razor principle then, Norn is not a necessary factor in the explanation and a much simpler explanation can be provided by regarding the Northern Isles *be*-perfect as an independent development founded in Middle Scots. One could stop here. However, as I will show below, there are also additional dialect-internal conditions supporting the development of this innovation.

#### 4. Grammatical restrictions (or lack thereof!)

In order to explore the grammatical restrictions on the *be*-perfect, of lack thereof, in the dialects of Orkney and Shetland I have examined four texts: All are prose fiction, and all are written fully in dialect<sup>5</sup>. Two are from Shetland and two from Orkney, and there is one older and one more recent text from each archipelago. A hundred years separate the births of their authors: The authors of the older texts were born in the 1850s, while the authors of the more recent texts were born in the 1940s-50s.

As the older Orkney text, I chose “Bockies in Orkney”: an account of ghosts and supernatural beings by J. T. Smith Leask which was published by the Glasgow Orkney and Shetland Literary and Scientific Association in 1922. The author was born in the parish of Stenness in Orkney in 1859<sup>6</sup>. The text is 7775 words long, and contains a total of 52 instances of the perfect and pluperfect, 19 of these containing a form of the verb “be”, and 30 a form of “have”, as well as three ambiguous tokens.

From these distribution numbers, it would immediately appear that “be” and “have” are in free variation as perfect and pluperfect auxiliaries within this text. However, closer inspection reveals that a disproportionate number of the tokens of “be” is followed by a verb meaning see, hear, listen, read, or tell. In fact, 13 of the 19 tokens (68 %) contain one of these verbs, leaving only 6 instances of other verbs (‘have’ as a main verb, ‘think’, ‘ken’ \*2, ‘go’, and ‘take’). Of course, part of the reason for this uneven distribution is the storytelling mode, where the narrative voice in the text urges the imaginary listener to listen, states that s/he is about to tell of something, or informs the imaginary listener that this is something s/he has heard. Examples of ‘be’ used with this group of verbs are given below (1A-E):

“Be” as auxiliary verb with sensory or communication verbs see, hear, listen, read, tell:

1A Am seen ane o' dem 'at wadhae gleaped a curly dog. [I have seen one of them that would have swallowed a curly dog]

1B Da last bothy am hard o' 'at saa id waas Jamie o' da Garbrae. [The last person I have heard of that saw it was James of the Garbrae]

1C Am leeded tae a hantle o' discourses bae ministers [I have listened to a considerable number of discourses by ministers]

1D am been readin' i' da papers [I have been reading in the papers]

<sup>5</sup> Bearing in mind that usage of “be” and “have” may vary between individual texts, even by the same author, so my examination of these four texts can only be considered a snapshot.

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Mr Peter Leith of Stenness for bringing it to my attention and providing me with a copy.

1E Am telt dee afore o' foo da ferries steul peerie bairns [I have told you before of how the fairies stole little children]

The six instances of “be” as auxiliary verb used with other main verbs were:

1F Eh min, bit am tou't a hape o' lang for Effie sin' sheu slippid awa. [Ah, man, but I have thought a heap of long/I have longed for Effie since she slipped away/died].

1G am haen twa-r-tree dogs, an' a mare or twa, an' a coo or twa i' me time [I have had two or three dogs, and a mare or two, and a cow or two in my time]

1H an' wives teu, 'at am kent i' me day [And women, too, that I have known in my day]

1I Hid's ceurious foo bockies fash Orkna folk efter dey're gean awa fae id. [It is curious how ghosts scare Orkney folk after they have gone away from it]

1J hid's no wirt taakin a sype o' whit du gets tae buy, sin dat Deil's buckie - Lloyd George, is taen tae deu wi'd. [It is not worth taking a sip of what you get to buy since that ‘Devil’s Buckie’/refractory person, Lloyd George, has taken to do with it.]

1K i' me day am kent a hantle i' da gaitend [In my day I have known a considerable number in the neighbourhood]

The auxiliary verb ‘have’ in its various forms occurs 30 times in the text, some examples of which are shown in 2A-E:

2A Och aye, whan I war a peerie ane, hapes o' folk heud oot 'at dey'd fa'an in wi' bockies [Oh yes, when I was a little one, heaps of folk claimed that they’d fallen in with ghosts]

2B id's said da bockie dog hes nivver been seen or hard o' sin' syne. [It’s said the ghost dog has never been seen or heard of since then]

2C Witchy folk tou't 'at da bockie hed been pittin dere is a kind o' warnin' [Witchy folk thought that the ghost had been put there as a kind of warning]

2D Weel whan da ship cam' tae London Jeanie gaed ashore tae pit a Telegraph tae 'er ald mither tellan sheu'd arrived [Well, when the ship came to London, Jeanie went ashore to put a telegraph to her old mother telling she’d arrived]

2E he declared he'd fund a piece whar dere waas a big pot o' gowd [He declared he’d found a place where there was a bit pot of gold]

Notice that ‘have’ also occurs with the verbs ‘see’ and ‘hear’, as in 2B, and with verbs of motion as in 2D.

The three ambiguous tokens are shown in 3A-C, and will be discussed further below.

3A I hoop he's minded on tae sey his Bonnie Wirds [I hope he has remembered to say his prayer]

3B Min, dat waas a sudden ca' 'at's afen paal'd me. [Man, that was a sudden death which has often puzzled me]

3C Dan dere waas anither wheer ane 'at's come i' mind [Then there was another queer one which has come in mind]

The newer Orkney text, chosen for a brief comparison, is a shorter, untitled story of c. 700 words, occurring on page 47-51 of Gregor Lamb’s book of concert tales, *Lamb’s Tales* (Lamb 1997). This text yielded 7 tokens, two of which are of ‘be’ (4A-B), four of ‘have’ (5A-D) and one ambiguous (6).

4A Stop the car, Mervyn is faan oot [Stop the car, Mervyn has fallen out]

4B I think yir' gotten in the wrong car [I think you have got in the wrong car]

5A The three o his boys hid been tae the toon [The three of us boys had been to town]

5B ... she hid forgotten thit wan o the back doors didna close very weel. [... she had forgotten that one of the back door did not close very well]

5C That day we hid been makkan a terrible nuisance [That day we had been making a terrible nuisance]

5D I hidna been in the car for very long [I had not been in the car for very long]

6 Mither Mervyn’s faan oot o the car [Mother, Mervyn’s fallen out of the car]

In the Shetland dialect texts, a different picture emerges. The older Shetland text is also a ghost story. Its author, G. M. Sinclair, was born in 1853 and the story, “Lang Lies Lowrie at da Mill or Lowrie’s Grienin Wife” was written 1893 as an elaborated version of a traditional folktale and was



published in the Shetland Folk Book volume 8, page 65-75 (1988). The text is approximately 5000 words long. In this text, the auxiliary ‘have’ does not occur unambiguously at all, and all 27 instances of the perfect and pluperfect are formed with ‘be’ or in 6 cases the ambiguous ‘s’. The unambiguous tokens include verbs of motion and sensation, as well as a broad range of other verbs, some examples of which are shown in 7A-C (perfect) and 8A-G (pluperfect).

7A ... an tak dis snell quite cloot at A’m hed in bonavara i’da buist fir de i dy pocket [... and take this pure white cloth which I have had in secret in the wooden box for you in your pocket]

7B A’m tint da guid sköni [I have lost the good knife]

7C A’m bön furt else twize sin da Mön oagit abön da hyll [I have been outside twice since the moon crept upon the hill]

8A Sae Lowrie wan haem tankfyl at nane wis seen him [So Lowrie got home thankful that none had seen him]

8B Lowrie wis bön I da pett hyll sin daglie [Lowrie had been in the peat hill since daybreak]

8C Shö wisna done sae ill [She had not done so poorly]

8D Kirsie wis gaddered á da mell buggies [Kirsie had gathered all the oatmeal sacks]

8E ... quin I wis rivven up da korp [...when I had torn up the corpse]

8F ... á da möld at he wis hokkit oot [ ... all the soil that he had dug out]

8G Kirsie wis lichtit da kollie [Kirsie had lit the oil-lamp]

The ambiguous tokens are shown in 9A-F:

9A ... á da maddram an foley at’s guidably faan afore de noo [ ... all the madness and foolishness that’s possibly fallen before you now]

9B Quat’s pitten de in seck a troitska? [What’s put you in such a bad temper?]

9C Him at’s aböne be tankit, fir da guid tröni at He’s pitten apo me [Him that’s above be thanked, for the good knife that He’s put upon me]

9D ... aefter at du’s won haem wi da liver [After you’ve come home with the liver]

9E ... fir da faer at du’s pitten ata mine [ ... for the fear that you’ve put in me]

9F Du’s aetin my liver [You’ve eaten my liver]

The newer Shetland text is a report from a conference on Shetland dialect, written in dialect by Mary Blance and published in the magazine *Shetland Life*, September 2009. The author was born in 1950, and the text is 742 words long. As the older Shetland text, this text also has no unambiguous tokens of the ‘have’ auxiliary. There are of the ‘be’ auxiliary, shown in 10A and 10B.

10A I wis very blyde ta see him becis I wis been tinkin I wid keen naebody. [I was very happy to see him because I had been thinking I would know nobody.]

10B I wis interested ta see at two o da texts Dianne Jonas is been wirkin wi is da old folk tale “Lang Lies Lowrie at da Mill” first written doon in da nineteenth century an Joe Gray’s “Lowrie” fae da 1930’s [I was interested to see that two of the texts Dianne Jonas has been working with is the old folk tale “Lang Lies Lowrie at da Mill” first written down in the nineteenth century, and Joe Gray’s “Lowrie” from the 1930s.]

Judging from these particular four texts, then, the ‘be’ auxiliary seems to dominate completely in Shetland, while “be” and “have” are in free variation in Orkney, perhaps occurring more frequently with certain verbs and in frozen expressions such as “A’m hard” (I’ve heard). Scrutinising a larger text material, including contemporary oral material, may of course reveal a different distribution, as suggested by Smith and Durham (2007:1) who find approximately 50% use of ‘be’ in the contemporary speech of middle aged and older Shetland speakers. But what is at least evident, is that the category of verbs allowing the ‘be’ auxiliary is much larger in both archipelagos than in other varieties of English, and that there is no sign of it being lost in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 5. An alternative explanation

If the Germanic ‘be’-perfect was restricted to mutative intransitives in Middle Scots, and has moreover been shrinking to the point of almost disappearing in most varieties of English in the modern period, how has Shetland and Orkney ended up extending rather than shrinking the category in relatively

modern times? Melchers (1992: 608) has several suggestions, without committing to a single explanation, such as possible contact with Dutch, or instances where the past participle is homonymic with the gerund, such as “pitten” meaning either ‘put’ or ‘putting’, making sentences such as “I was pitten her oot” ambiguous. Examples of this ambiguity, from “Lang lies Lowrie at da Mill”, are shown in 11A-C, although from the context I find it more likely to represent ‘put’ in these cases.

11A ... fir da faer at du's pitten ata mine [ ... for the fear that you've put in me]

11B Quat's pitten de in seck a troitska? [What's put you in such a bad temper?]

11C Him at's aböne be tankit, fir da guid tröni at He's pitten apo me [Him that's above be thanked, for the good knife that He's put upon me]

A more frequently occurring and therefore more interesting ambiguity, though, which Melchers also observes without making much of as an explanation, arises from the fact that both *is* and *has* can be shortened to 's, as in the example below:

I'm shüre du's düne dat, my bairn (Shetland, Stewart 1892, p. 87)

Tokens of this type of ambiguous 's have already been shown above, but are collected here:

3A I hoop he's minded on tae sey his Bonnie Wirds [I hope he has remembered to say his prayer]

3B Min, dat waas a sudden ca' 'at's afen paal'd me. [Man, that was a sudden death which has often puzzled me]

3C Dan dere waas anither wheer ane 'at's come i' mind [Then there was another queer one which has come in mind]

6 Mither Mervyn's faan oot o the car [Mother, Mervyn's fallen out of the car]

9A ... á da maddram an foley at's guidably faan afore de noo [ ... all the madness and foolishness that's possibly fallen before you now]

9B Quat's pitten de in seck a troitska? [What's put you in such a bad temper?]

9D ... aefter at du's won haem wi da liver [After you've come home with the liver]

9F Du's aetin my liver [You've eaten my liver]

This ambiguity may be even more prevalent in everyday speech, compared to the written storytelling mode. While contemporary speech is not part of my data material, Smith and Durham (2007, conference poster) in their analysis of contemporary spoken Shetland dialect material found that ambiguous 's occurred in 525 out of a total of 1679 tokens – that is in 31% of the instances.

Adding to the size of the ambiguous token pool is another dialect trait current in contemporary Shetlandic, although obsolescent in Orcadian: The fact that the second person singular pronoun 'du' is in use, and that it takes 'is' and 'has' rather than 'are' and 'have', as can be seen from the following examples from Shetland:

Ay, du's gaen ta hae a lock o' bairns ta dis man, dat is du. (Shetland, Stewart 1892, p. 47)

Tink whaur du's gaen, an' dat da master du has served sae lang can gie dee nae better fare den he has ta himsell. (Shetland, Stewart 1892, p. 126).

That the second person singular takes 'is' and 'has' leads to ambiguity when shortened, as in 9D and 9F, both from “Lang lies Lowrie at da Mill”:

9D ... aefter at du's won haem wi da liver

9F Du's aetin my liver

However, in Orkney the form 'thoo're' or 'du're' seems to prevail, as for example in 12 below from “Bockies in Orkney” (although today almost completely replaced by second person singular 'you' + 'are'):

12 Am jalousin' 'at du're been leedan tae whit dey ca' "The Higher Creetism". [I suspect that you have been listening to what they call The Higher Criticism]

In addition, also sentences with a complex 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural nominal phrase as its subject take 'is' and 'has' under the Northern Verb Concord Rule (Millar 2007: 74). The category of ambiguous tokens in Smith and Durham's study therefore also include sentences such as “Mam and dad's been there since” (Smith and Durham 2007, conference poster). Two examples from “Lang lies Lowrie at da Mill” (Sinclair 1988) are shown below. Notice that the complexity needs not be great: “The worms” in 13 is apparently complex enough to trigger 'is'. When shortened, it leads to ambiguity as in 9A.

13 Am lien i'da möld fyl da wirms is eaten me [I have lain in the earth while the worms have eaten me]  
 9A ... á da maddram an foley at's guidably faan afore de noo [... all the madness and foolishness that's possibly fallen before you now]

As a consequence, the total sum of ambiguous tokens in Shetland Scots dialect is higher than in other varieties of English, as second person singular and complex 3<sup>rd</sup> person NPs add to the third person singulars as subjects which can be followed by 's. Thus, there is in any text, in the perfect tense, a greater chance of encountering the ambiguous 's than any other shortened form of the verbs 'to be' and 'to have'. This is shown in Table 1 below.

1 <sup>st</sup> person singular, I / A	'm	've
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> person singular, du</b>	's	's
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, he</b>	's	's
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, shö</b>	's	's
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, hit</b>	's	's
1 <sup>st</sup> person plural, we	're	've
2 <sup>nd</sup> person plural, ye	're	've
3 <sup>rd</sup> person plural, they	're	've
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> person plural complex NP</b>	's	's

Table 1: Short forms of 'be' and 'have' used as auxiliaries in the perfect tense in Shetland dialect.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has shown that it is not necessary to rely on Norn-Scots interaction to explain the phenomenon of a wider use of 'be' as auxiliary in perfect and pluperfect constructions. The evidence for Norn influence presented by Pavlenko (1996) and (1997) has been shown to be unsatisfactory as well as unnecessary. Occam's Razor in its purest form would suggest that all we need in the way of explanation is to observe that all Germanic languages, including Old English, contained a category of verbs taking the be-perfect, and that the Orkney and Shetland dialects have simply taken a different path to most other varieties of English and thus extended this category until reaching the extreme of allowing it with all verbs, in contrast to the gradual contraction observed in other varieties to the extreme of near exclusion in Modern Standard English. In either case, the grammatical differentiation between two classes of verbs has broken down. The cause of this parting of ways has not been fully explained in this article, but it has explored the possibility that the ambiguity inherent in the shortened form 's may have had an influence.

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