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‘Skoit du oot by, Magnie’: Scots Grammar supported by Norn in the Dialects of the Northern Isles?

Ragnhild Ljosland



Introduction

The question raised in this paper is whether one can argue that certain archaic grammatical structures from Scots have survived in the dialects of Orkney and Shetland because they had support in the grammar of Norn. I have previously touched on such a possibility regarding the lack of do-support found in constructions such as ‘minds du?’ (Ljosland 2012), but I will here examine two further construction types: imperatives where the subject is expressed (‘skoit du’) and the differentiation between a nominal and a verbal –ing ending, e.g. ‘I go fishan becaes I like fisheen’ (Lamb 2005, 80).

In what was the latest of at least two language shifts in Orkney and Shetland, a local variety of a Scandinavian language, known as Norn, was gradually replaced in the Northern Isles communities by Scots over a period of *at least* 300 years in the 15th to 18th centuries (for discussion see Barnes 1998; Knooihuizen 2005, 2011; Millar 2008, 2012; Ljosland 2012).

The Scots which was eventually established in the communities had developed from varieties spoken by incomers to the isles from various parts of mainland Scotland, eventually stabilising as Shetland and Orkney varieties of Scots (see Millar 2008 and 2012 for further discussion). Among these incomers we have most knowledge of the elites such as lairds, bishops, ministers and clergy, as well as the earls and their administration. However, Scots was also probably brought in by other occupational groups, such as merchants (Ljosland 2012, 65-71). The language shift did not happen at the same time in all isles and parishes. It also took some time for the new language to permeate all sectors of society or sociolinguistic domains, with Norn remaining in use for longer in the contexts of farming, fishing and in the home. It is at present not clear whether a local variety of Scots stabilised at the same time in both archipelagos. Stabilisation might have happened earlier in Orkney than in Shetland, given that Orkney is closer to the Scottish mainland and contains the City and Royal Burgh of Kirkwall. As an end result, however, both main varieties (Orkney Scots and Shetland Scots), setting local differences within each archipelago aside for the time being, are today somewhat conservative varieties of Scots containing a Norn substratum. The Norn substratum has been well demonstrated on the lexical level (Jakobsen 1928-32; Marwick 1929), but the existence and nature of a grammatical substratum is still under discussion.

Much of the difficulty with identifying a grammatical substratum of Norn stems from the linguistic proximity between Scots and the Scandinavian languages which, as Germanic languages, share a number of grammatical structures. Furthermore, Middle Scots from the period before extensive influence from English set in (after the Reformation of 1560 but intensifying following the Union of Crowns in 1603 and Union of Parliaments in 1707) was grammatically even closer to the Scandinavian languages than Scots or Scottish English is today. Such grammatical proximity has sometimes been misrecognised as Norn substratum, as Gunnel Melchers illustrates by using herself in her early career as an example: ‘[...] [I] claimed that questions without do-support, such as *Minds du?* (“Do you remember?”), are “obviously Norn”, without realizing that similar constructions are found in other varieties of Scots’ (Melchers 2012, 224).

Thus, my research question here needs to be approached with some caution. On the one hand, it is obvious to any listener that Orkney and Shetland Scots contain grammatical structures which deviate from Standard English. The source of such deviation, however, is less easy to pinpoint. Norn grammar is perhaps the candidate which most easily comes to mind, but it is not the only possible source. One must always keep the possibility open that grammatical deviations from Standard English or even from other modern Scottish dialects may in fact be relicts of an older stage of Scots. A third

possibility is of course Gaelic influence, but that will not be dealt with in this paper.

What is even less clear is how to disambiguate the Norn and Middle Scots strands in cases where a certain grammatical structure is supported in both. Here, Donna Heddle raises an interesting suggestion, namely that Norn and Middle Scots grammar may in fact support one another, aiding the survival of grammatical relicts:

'The use of a pronoun with an imperative is straight from Old Norse, e.g. *Come thoo here!* Come here! [...] 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.' (Heddle 2010, 55).

Come thoo here is an example of an imperative where the subject is overtly expressed as a pronoun following the imperative verb – unlike in modern Standard English, where it is either left out or precedes the verb (*Come here!*; *You come here right away!*).

In this paper, I will briefly discuss this structure, as well as the Orkney dialect's two distinct forms of the [ing] variable distinguishing a verbal from a nominal paradigm, and further investigate the question of whether the survival of these grammatical structures could have been supported by Scots and Norn together.

Overt subject imperatives

Orkney and Shetland varieties of Scots show a different grammar applying to imperative declaratives compared to modern Standard English. The case in point is that Orkney and Shetland dialects allow the subject to be expressed as a pronoun, as in the title of this paper: 'Skoit du oot by, Magnie', which is a Shetland example provided by Doreen Waugh. Gunnel Melchers draws attention to this construction, giving the example "Geng du, my boy" (Shetland) (2012, 227). The following examples have been elicited from fiction written in Orkney and Shetland dialect:

- 1A Sing thoo the teun o' yin Flotta spring agen. (Orkney, Costie 1976)
- 1B Luksto at the graand twilted lineen. (Orkney, Costie 1976)
- 1C Look-you at the money he his. (Orkney, Costie 1976)
- 1D Leuk you, hoo the sea's ragin. (Orkney, Costie 1976)
- 1E 'Sees thoo there' sheu said. (Orkney, Costie 1976)
- 1F Ye ken the wey o'd. T'ink ye, whin will I dee? (Orkney, Dennison 1880)
- 1G Sees doo yon windmill apo Flangafield. (Shetland, Gray 1933)
- 1H Weel, weel, my joy, bide doo wi my blissin. (Shetland, Gray 1933)

There are three observations that seem relevant here: 1. the pronoun is expressed; 2. the word order is verb-pronoun; and 3. the pronoun may be enclitic.

The fact that the pronoun may be expressed, along with the word order, resemble both Middle English and Old Norse. In Middle English 'the imperative verb precedes the subject' (Chung-hye and Kroch 2000, 314), in contrast to Modern Standard English, where '[i]n an affirmative imperative with an overt subject, the subject must precede the verb' (Chung-hye and Kroch 2000, 314). Also in Old Norse, if the subject is expressed, it follows the imperative verb, as in 1G (*Njal's Saga*, 1891, 308):

- 1G "Ok gakk þú út, Þórhalla Ásgrímsdóttir, ok allr lýðr með þér"
[And go you out, Thorhalla Asgrimsdaughter, and all the people with you]

In Old Norse, the pronoun is often enclitic, as for example in 'kallaðu', or 'skjóttu' (Byock 2013, 181), and it is interesting to observe the same phenomenon in the dialect example 1B (and ambiguously in 1C), although this is of course no proof of an Old Norse origin.

In the above examples, the pronoun is in the nominative case. However, Lamb reports that, somewhat unexpectedly perhaps, the oblique case 'thee' may also occur: 'Wait thee here a meenitie' (2005, 59). Lamb suggests that the nominative forms, especially those involving the verbs *look* or *see*, derive not from an original imperative, but from a question, as 'a contracted form of obsolete English 'Seest thou?' or 'lookest thou?' (Lamb 2005, 59). One could perhaps argue that 1E and 1G

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above can be interpreted as questions. However, as neither is punctuated with a question mark, I have interpreted them as imperative. And as Lamb presents no proof for his assertion, I prefer just to observe that nominative and oblique case pronouns are both possible, and that the sentences as they stand (1 A-H) are not presented as questions.

What did Norn do? One of the fragments Jakobsen (1928-32) collected, known as the Troll’s Message, starts with several imperatives here quoted in the Foula A version (translation from Helgadóttir 2010, 224-26):

Hørædu hørædu rīa	[Hear, hear, rider!]
rīa rīa ræn(na)	[Ride, ride, run!]
sina divla dōna vivla	[Say (to) her, (to) Divla, that (she) Vivla]
kōpæra jadla	[copper-kettle]
hōdæna bradna.	[hand burn(t).]

In Old Norse, the beginning of the verse would be: *Heyr þú (or heyrðu) heyr þú ríðari, ríð, ríð, renn!* In Jakobsen’s rendering of the verse, ‘hørædu’ in the first line represents a verb (hear/listen) and a pronoun (you, singular). It is difficult to judge, without hearing it, whether the pronoun in the first line is enclitic, but from Jakobsen’s transcription (‘hørædu’) it seems probable. In the second and third lines (‘rīa rīa ræn(na)’ and ‘sina divla’) the subject pronoun is not expressed, unless, of course, one chooses to argue that ‘rīa’ derives from ‘ríð þú’ and ‘ræn(na)’ from ‘renn þú’, which would explain why they are disyllabic.

At this point, it is tempting to jump to the conclusion that what we are seeing in the modern dialect is a relict of Norn. However, Melchers urges caution, saying there is ‘some indication that similar constructions have been elicited in other varieties of Scots/Scottish English’ (2012, 227). When searching for the combination ‘look’/ ‘looks’/ ‘leuk’ + ‘you’/ ‘ye’/ ‘thoo’/ ‘thou’ in the *Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech* the database yielded one result: ‘Look you doun the street!’ The source text is poetry by David Purves, translated into Scots from English. The combination ‘sing’ + ‘ye’/‘you’ also yielded one imperative: ‘Sing ye o the Coolins of Skye, of Harris or Eigg, or fair Iona’. This is from a play by the same author as above, David Purves, and is part of a song within the play. The combination of imperative verb followed by an overt subject pronoun therefore seems to be rare, but not impossible, in the Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech. As an impressionistic preliminary result, the construction seems to be both more prevalent and more productive in the dialect text material from the Northern Isles compared to the Scottish corpus, although this tentative conclusion needs to be checked against more data.

It might be noticed that in the list of eight examples in 1A-H, three contain the verb ‘look’ (1B-D) and a further two the verb ‘see’ (1E, G). In her interesting article on the history of ‘look’ as a pragmatic marker, Brinton (2001, 185-87) notes that ‘look’ and ‘see’, along with certain other sensory verbs, exist as an attention-grabbing device, along with their literal counterparts, giving us Modern English forms such as ‘Look you,’ or ‘Lookye,’ preceding the sentence proper. This usage as a pragmatic marker may on the surface look like an imperative followed by a second-person subject pronoun. However, in Brinton’s analysis, it has developed as a re-bracketing of an imperative ‘look’ in the sense of ‘see to that’ + a subjoined nominal clause, with deletion of the subordinate conjunction, as in: [Look] ~~that~~ [you be not late] → [Look you] [be not late]. So the second-person pronoun originally belonged in the subordinate clause, and not as a subject to ‘look’ (Brinton 2001, 187). This re-bracketing began in the seventeenth century (Brinton 2001, 177). However, in examples 1A-H, it may be noted that all instances of ‘look’ and ‘see’ are actually meant in a literal sense, and not as attention-grabbing pragmatic markers. 1B-E and G may therefore still hold as examples of an imperative verb followed by a subject pronoun. Only in 1F, ‘Ye ken the wey o’d. T’ink ye, whin will I dee?’ it may be argued that ‘T’ink ye’ functions as a pragmatic parenthesis. Most interesting are 1A, ‘Sing thoo the teun o’ yin Flotta spring agen’ and 1H, ‘Weel, weel, my joy, bide doo wi my blissin’, as they do not involve sensory verbs. A further investigation which excludes sensory verbs may be

desirable, but the rareness of such constructions calls for a larger corpus of data than I have had access to here.

The [ing] variable

A potentially interesting case for examining the relationship between Scots and Norn is the [ing] suffix. In the Orkney dialect there is an interesting contrast between the forms ‘-an’ and ‘-in’ (also spelled ‘-een’ in the dialect text material), as illustrated here in the following example:

2A: Than I saa thir wis a light burnan i' the wash-hoose, for this wis the morneen that Phemie Bews cam the deu the washeen. (Costie 1976)

That the contrast between “-an” and “-in” is still alive in Orkney dialect today, and not just in older texts, can be illustrated with a text by Dave Gunn which appeared on Facebook 24/9/2013. It read: ‘If wae get a good morneen the morn ah'll be just chiran’.

As pointed out by Labov (2001, 86-90), this contrast has an interesting history and grammatical distribution in all varieties of English. On the one hand, in many varieties there is variation between an apical and a velar form. This variation carries social connotations so that the velar form (-ing) is perceived to be more ‘correct’ and ‘formal’ and associated with the higher social classes, whereas the apical form (-in) is perceived as more ‘informal’ or ‘colloquial’ and associated with lower social classes.

Social variation seems less relevant in Orkney, where instead the interest lies in the grammatical restrictions on the two forms. In Marwick’s analysis, the Orkney dialect has a nominal and a verbal use of the [ing] variable:

The pres. participle (O.N. *-andi*) is still plainly distinguished from the verbal noun: e.g. ‘He was drinkan (‘dr nk n) a’ the night long’; but, ‘I never heard about his drinkin’ (‘drn kin). The same distinction is made in some dialects of Scots – where the present participial form is derived from O. Northern English *-ande*. (1929, xxxi)

The [ing] variable has a fascinating history in English, and Labov (2001, 88-89) suggests that the social variation we observe today is rooted in historical competition between a verbal and a nominal form. He argues that the apical form is the ‘direct and regular descendant of the Old English participial ending *-inde*, *-ende* and that the velar form is the descendant of the Old English verbal noun ending *-inge*, *yngē*’ (*ibid.*). The specialisation of the velar form for the nominal and the apical form for the verbal uses then broke down in Early Middle English, but competition between the two continued as a sociolinguistic variable (*ibid.*). However, the old system can still be traced statistically in naturally occurring speech. For example, in a corpus of Philadelphia speech, tokens of the apical form /-in/ were found to occur with falling frequency within the following categories (Labov 2001, 87-88):

- 1) Progressive future “going to”, due to the pronunciation /g n / (no percentage given)
- 2) Progressives, 51%.
- 3) Participles modifying the verb phrase, 42%.
- 4) Miscellaneous complements, including verb complements, sentential complements and deletion of relative pronoun and auxiliary, 37%.
- 5) Gerunds, 34%.
- 6) Gerunds incorporated into noun phrases, under 10%.
- 7) Nouns, under 10%.
- 8) Adjectives, under 10%.

This apparent continuum can also be analysed as the syntactic conditioning of the [ing] variable falling largely within two distinct groups: a verbal and a nominal use of [ing], where, interestingly, the likelihood of using the apical form is much higher within the verbal group compared to the nominal. For example, ‘Good mornin’ (apical form in a noun) is possible, but *far less likely* to occur than ‘I’m

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comin’ (apical form in a verb). Setting ‘going to’ aside, the verbal group clusters between 34-51%, whereas the nominal group clusters below 10% in the Philadelphia material. Adjectives share characteristics with the nominal group.

In the following, I shall investigate whether similar patterning can be found in the Orkney and Shetland dialect text material. The texts examined are, from Orkney: extract from Christina Costie, *The Collected Orkney Dialect Tales of C. M. Costie*, 1976 (author born 1902), and from Shetland: extracts from Christine De Luca, *Dodie’s Phenomenal Pheesic*, 2008 (author born 1947), Haldane Burgess, *Tang*, 1898 (author born 1862) and Hazel Sutherland, *Biggin da dess*, 2004 (author born 1967). The Orkney material comprises c. 10400 words, but with some narrative text in Standard English, and the Shetland material c. 3300 words. One must note at this point that if the Philadelphia experiment should be replicable using the Orkney dialect text material, the apical form /-in/ in the Philadelphia material would be expected to correspond to the form /-an/ in Orkney dialect, while the velar form /-ing/ should correspond to /-in/.

The admittedly small Shetland dialect text material examined here shows no distinction at all between a nominal and verbal paradigm: The suffix takes the form ‘-in’ in all categories, as illustrated by the following examples drawn from the fifty-seven tokens found in the Shetland text material (though the category ‘noun’, such as *wedding*, *ceiling*, was not found in the material from Shetland):

- 3A: I wis jöst tinkin at Bob Ertirson wid be comin haem dis helly. (Progressive, Burgess 1898)
- 3B: I’m up an off again trampin him doon (Participle modifying the verb phrase, Sutherland 2004)
- 3C: Dad wid be oot in da garden, bendin doon wi his palm on da grund (Miscellaneous complements: Sentential complement, Sutherland 2004)
- 3D: Dere’s Hansi’s boat, da “Inga”, comin in ta Da Point (Miscellaneous complements: Deletion of relative pronoun and auxiliary, Burgess 1898)
- 3E: da Loard is hed a göd dael o practice at makkin days nu (Gerund following preposition, Burgess 1898)
- 3F: Mam supervises da biggin a da dess (Gerund, Sutherland 2004)
- 3G: Dey wir a aerosol can o SUPERFOAM SHAVIN SOPP belangin tae his faider. (Gerund incorporated into noun phrase, and deletion of relative pronoun and auxiliary, De Luca 2008)
- 3H: Maist grannies is fine, kindly, obligin aald weemen (Adjective, De Luca 2008)

Robertson and Graham’s *Grammar and Usage of the Shetland Dialect* (1991, 28), however, notes that ‘In some districts [of Shetland] the gerund is pronounced differently from the present participle’ without elaborating on what the difference is or which districts are meant.

In the Orkney text material, on the other hand, there is clearly a distinction between /-an/ and /-in/, as can be seen in the following examples from Costie (1976):

- 4A: Wir bairn’s gaan tae leave us (Progressive future)
- 4B: Whit are thoo waetan for? (Progressive)
- 4C: Some fell afightan i’ the corner (Miscellaneous complements: verb complement)
- 4D: Kirsty, did I hear a bairn greetan? (Miscellaneous complements: deletion of relative pronoun and auxiliary)
- 4E: Sheu wis weel gled whin they wir a’ inside the barn waetan for the toast (Miscellaneous complements: sentential complement).
- 4F: Gaetheewa’ back tae the drinkin room at the Ness. (Gerund incorporated into noun phrase)
- 4G: ... oot the door lik lightneen (Noun)

However, not all tokens from Costie (1976) fall neatly into Labov's clusters. Adjectives, which in the Philadelphia material have less than 10% apical forms, appear in Costie with the –an ending:

- 4H: thoo might be lucky tae get a weel workan lass.
 4I: ... a' the rest o the heckan kind that he hud tae deu wae.
 4J: He wis a peur bed-lyan body
 4K: I [ran] ap the stair wae the greetan bairn

An interesting category is the gerund. The example given by Labov is 'just by guiding her hand', where the gerund follows a preposition. In Costie's texts, a preposition can be followed both by –an and –in:

- 4L: sheu lukkit up at me efter haean a lang luk at the boy.
 4M: a certain kind o' backwardness in coman forward
 4N: I hope thoo maks a geud job o' fosterin' yin calf!

Gerunds without a preposition also appear with –an and –in:

- 4O: thinkan'll no get thee claes nor fill thee belly
 4P: as seun as the toastin wis by, the first doon-sittin o' folk wis telled tae come tae thir maet.

The –an ending appears in 4O despite Marwick's insistence that the 'verbal noun' is 'plainly distinguished' from the present participle.

Marwick, in the quotation above, attributes the Orkney verbal form, ending in –an, to an Old Norse origin. While it is true that Old Norse has a present participle verb form ending in '-andi', for example 'syngjandi' (singing) or 'ríðandi' (riding) (Barnes 1999, 147), its function is much more restricted than the modern English –ing. It is used in structures such as 'þá kom þar ríðandi Hjalti ok þeir' ('Then Hjalti and them came riding', *Íslendingabók*, ch 7). It is also likely that the Old Norse form not only influenced the Orkney dialect, but also other varieties of Scots and was borrowed into Older Scots as '-and' (King 1997, 180). However, for phonological reasons the '-and' form in Middle Scots became identical to that of the verbal noun, spelled '-ing', or '-in' – both verbal noun and present participle endings were then pronounced as /ən/ (King 1997, 180). We therefore have the somewhat complicated situation that /ən/ as a verbal ending in modern Scots may derive from Old Norse via Older Scots and through phonetical reduction, or from Old English '-inde, -ende' through influence from English. The two origins are now identical in form.

The change in form in Scots from '-and' to /ən/ started to occur in the early 15th century. That is of course *before* Scotland gained control of the Northern Isles in AD 1468-69 (or AD 1472 as the formal handover date was). However, the spread of the change was gradual. According to Bugaj (2002, 54) the distinction in form was lost in the late 16th and 17th centuries as a result of gradual anglicisation. However, one must assume that this refers to the written corpus, as its sporadic dialectal survival is attested. Today the '-and' ending 'survives in pockets' (Douglas 2009, 50). One such pocket is Orkney, but curiously not Shetland, if one is to trust the written dialect material examined here. It is interesting that Orkney preserves this distinction to some extent, despite the loss of it in mainland Scots having started relatively early, and intriguing that Shetland does not preserve it. I will discuss a possible interpretation below.

Conclusion, or rather, some further speculation

Both the permissibility of expressing the subject pronoun after an imperative verb and the survival of the –an ending might be put forward as candidates for supporting the claim that Norn and Scots grammar in some cases supported one another in the Northern Isles. However, the evidence examined here is inconclusive. Further research using a larger corpus is desirable, particularly into overt subject

