

The
Knitter
FEATURE

Loops on wires

KNITTING IN SHETLAND DIALECT

Viveka Velupillai explores how Shetland's blend of its ancestor languages, Scots and Norn, is still evident in the dialect knitting terms used on the islands



SHETLAND MAY seem remote, but if you turn the globe just a little you'll see that it is in fact a very central place. It is the obvious stop-over for any trade or

migration routes crossing the North Sea or the western part of the Atlantic. And so Shetland has been a place of contact for many centuries.

Some 1,200 years ago Norse seafarers began to settle on the islands, bringing with them their Norse language, which in Shetland, Orkney and Caithness would evolve to Norn. Norn would remain spoken in Shetland for another 800-900 years. The links with Scotland gradually increased over the centuries, and by the early 15th century speakers of Lowland Scots started to settle in Shetland, bringing with them the Scots language. Around the same time, in the early 15th century, the Hanseatic trade started on a large scale in Shetland. This regularly brought merchants, sailors and traders from the northern European Low Countries to the islands. In other words, there was a steady language contact between the Shetlanders and speakers of Low Germanic languages, such as Dutch and Low German.

Trade and language

In 1469 Shetland was pawned to Scotland and it has remained Scottish ever since. However, Norn was spoken for roughly another 250 years. So what

we had was a bilingual society with both Norn and Scots spoken, while many locals were also highly proficient in Dutch and Low German.

One of the big trading contacts that Shetlanders had with the Low Countries was the large-scale knitwear trade with the Dutch fishing vessels, starting in the 1580s. The vessels came in the hundreds to the sheltered eastern sound between Bressay and Mainland Shetland. It was this returning trade to that eastern anchorage which gave rise to Lerwick, now capital of Shetland. What these Dutch fishermen were especially keen on trading for were the Shetland knitted stockings and mittens.

There is no way of knowing exactly when knitting started in Shetland. By knitting I am here referring to the craft where two or more needles are used to form a mesh of interlacing loops by an unlimited length of thread. However, it is fair to assume the skills were widespread enough on the islands in the 1580s to be able to supply the high demand for knitwear of the Dutch fishing fleet. These skills will have been learned in the linguistic environment that was prevalent on the islands at the time and, at the *very* latest, shortly before that, namely Norn, Scots and Low German/Dutch. But not English.

Now, skills like knitting are typically learned in informal settings. An older person, usually a grandparent or someone of that generation and role, instructs a younger person (or a few

younger persons), passing on his or her skills to the learner. This is done in a private, relaxed setting, which means that the language used will be informal and relaxed, rather than the kind of language that tends to be used in formal, standardised settings like the classroom. This kind of informal language is often quite conservative: the way we learned something, the terms that we learned with the acts and motions of the craft, that is what we pass on when we then show others how we do things. In other words, traditional knowledge like this can in fact act as language preservers.

Makkin in Shetland

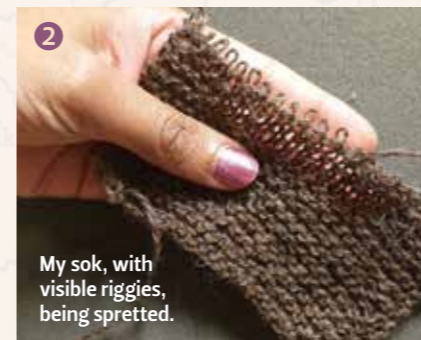
So what does knitting sound like in Shetland? Well first of all, we're not actually knitting in Shetland, we're **makkin**. The first thing I have to do when **makkin** in Shetland is to **Lay up mi sok** ('cast on my piece of knitting'). This construction will be very familiar to any Scandinavian speaker: in Swedish what I do is to **Lägga up min stickning** (lit. 'lay up my knitting').

In picture 1 you see my **kloo** (ball of yarn) of **moorit** (Shetland brown) **wirsit** (spun wool, yarn) and I am **laying up mi sok** by laying up **loops** (stitches) on my **wires** (knitting needles). Speakers of the Low Germanic languages will recognize the word **kloo** in, for example, the Dutch **kluwen** ('tangle, knot')

I have chosen **moorit** yarn, one of the natural colours of the native Shetland



1 Laying up mi sok by laying up loops of my moorit wirsit on my wire.



2 My sok, with visible riggies, being spretted.

sheep. As with a number of terms related to sheep and crofting, **moorit** is directly inherited from Norn and ultimately derives from Old Norse **mórauðr**, a compound consisting of the components **mór** 'moor' and **rauðr** 'red', i.e. literally 'moor-red'.

The term **sok** 'piece of knitting' is interesting: both the Old English **socc** and the Old Norse **sokkr** meant 'stocking'. Now, recall that the main knitwear items that the Dutch fishing vessels traded for were stockings and mittens. Over time the word for stockings evolved to mean just any piece of knitting. In Shetland, the expression **Tak dy sok** means 'Bring your knitting (along)', irrespective of what precisely your project is, whether a hat, scarf, shawl, jumper or any other piece of knitting.

In picture 2 the **riggies** of my little **sok** are clearly visible. These are the lumpy ridges that are formed by garter stitch knitting. The term is an inheritance from Norn and derives from the Old Norse **hryggr** 'back, ridge'. The modern equivalent in the Scandinavian languages is **rygg** 'back'.

The observant reader will notice that in the above figure the yarn is actually being pulled. Every knitter's dread is to have to **spret** their **sok**. This term, like the colour term **moorit**, is only found in the former Norn-speaking areas. It is an inheritance from Norn **spretta** derived from Old Norse **spretta** 'to tear apart, rip up' and is still a (dreaded) knitting



Hentilagets in the Uradale hills

term in the Scandinavian languages, for example Swedish **sprätta**.

One of my own personal favourite terms connected with wool and knitting in Shetland dialect is **hentilagets** 'tufts of wool fallen off sheep when grazing'. When sheep graze tufts of wool tend to fall off or rub off on fences and branches. The **hentilagets** were traditionally gathered up and used as wool. The word is a compound consisting of two elements: (i) **hent** - which is inherited from Old Scots **hint** and ultimately derives from

Old English **henten** 'to seize, grasp'. This is a pan-Germanic root and the Swedish equivalent is **hämta** 'to pick up'; plus (ii) **laget** - which is inherited from Norn **lag(e)d** and derives from Old Norse **lagðr** 'tuft or wisp (of something)'. This root can still be found in Nynorsk **lagde** meaning '(felted) tuft of hair; tuft of wool (for spinning)'.

This term, **hentilagets**, is thus a truly mixed heritage compound, where each of the two components derive from each of the two ancestor languages, and neatly sums up the origin of Shetland dialect. ▶

Knitting history



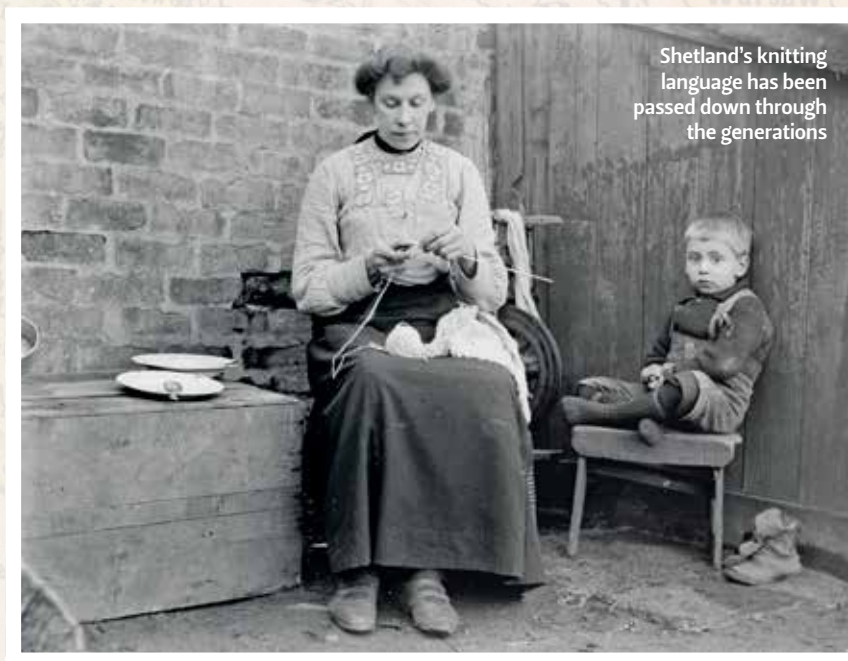
Shetland's capital, Lerwick, was a hub of international trade

The grammar of makkin in Shetland

Language is much more than just words and sounds. Every language has a system, and Shetland dialect also has a distinct grammar. Consider the following example sentences:

- I bowt wirset dastreen. *Hit* was aafil fine.
- I bought yarn yesterday. It was really nice.
- Am baggit aa da oo. *Hit's* fine tae see da back o *hit*.
- I've bagged all the wool. It's good to see the back of it.
- I häd ee peerie kloo o moorit wirset but noo I canna fin *him*.
- I had one small ball of moorit yarn but now I can't find it.
- Oh dear, Am drappit mi wire an noo *he's* (*shö's*) rolled under da couch.
- Oh dear, I've dropped my needle and now it's rolled under the couch.
- Da first loop is aye da lowsest een. Hoo do I get *him* tighter?
- The first stitch is always the loosest one. How do I get it tighter?

What we see here is that some inanimate objects are referred to as *he* or *she*. This is a feature termed grammatical gender: when objects that have no biological sex are referred to with some kind of marker for gender.



Shetland's knitting language has been passed down through the generations

Both Old English and Old Norse had grammatical gender, and it seems as if Norn retained it. Shetland dialect still has grammatical gender and the choice is not haphazard: mass nouns (things that cannot be counted), such as *wirset* and *oo*, are referred to with a neuter pronoun (*hit*), while concrete count nouns (things that can be counted), such as *kloo*, *wire* and *loop*, are referred to with gendered pronouns.

Knitting has thus not only been an important commodity for the Shetland economy, but has also served to preserve the linguistic heritage of the islands. Plus it is fun. ☺

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Viveka Velupillai is an Honorary Professor at the Department of English, University of Giessen, Germany. She specialises on global patterns of language structure (linguistic typology), contact languages and linguistics, and language history. Her main focus is to document and describe the grammar of Shetland dialect.

This is dedicated to my mentor and dear friend Gunnel Melchers