

## A spelling and keyboard for Shaetlan

Viveka Velupillai

(<https://www.iheardee.com/>)

Article 4.3

**States should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue.**

UN Commission on Human Rights

*Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.*

Adopted by General Assembly resolution 47/135 of 18 December 1992

It is a fundamental human right to receive schooling in your mother tongue. Yet despite their rich literary tradition, Shetlanders have never been granted this right. On the contrary, the use of Shaetlan was, until recently and without any linguistic justification, not even permitted in schools.

One of the main obstacles for a language to be accepted as a medium of instruction is the lack of a standardised spelling system. This is, in fact, the only legitimate excuse for not allowing Shaetlan as a medium of instruction: there is no valid reason on linguistic grounds for Shaetlan not to be used, since it is fully as systematic and structured as any other language variety of the world. There is therefore no linguistic justification why Shaetlan should not be used to the same extent as English in teaching in schools, on a daily basis, in all subjects and throughout the entire schooling career (i.e. from P1 to S5/6). The lack of an orthography, however, is a pragmatic obstacle that is possible to solve.

It is important to keep in mind that Shetland is a bilingual community. All speakers of Shaetlan are bilingual in Standard English. However, it is also important to keep in mind that while all speakers of Shaetlan have received a minimum of nine years' formal schooling, with training in reading and writing *Standard English*, they have received virtually no training in reading and writing Shaetlan. It is a mistake to think that literacy is innate: nobody is born with the ability to read and write in their language. All speakers need training in literacy of their own mother tongue, and it is, as mentioned above, a fundamental human right to receive such a training. Swedes receive a minimum of nine years of training in literacy in their own language, as do speakers of German, Italian, Korean, Japanese, etc.

There have been various objections put forth to me about a spelling system for Shaetlan and about bringing in Shaetlan as a medium of instruction on schools.

One of the common statements is that if Shaetlan were used in schools, then the children wouldn't understand what was being taught. That argument, if anything, only confirms that Shaetlan and English are different enough on the intelligibility scale to be considered different languages. In the UNESCO International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL 2022-2032)<sup>i</sup>, which aims to build “a global community for the preservation, revitalization and support of indigenous languages worldwide”, this merely strengthens the argument for including Shaetlan as a medium of instruction in schools to safeguard its survival and transmission to the next generation.

Shetland is, as mentioned, a bilingual community and should be recognised as such, which means that both languages should be given equal space and equal support. This does not mean that English should be taken out as a medium of instruction in schools – that would merely perpetuate the monolingual imbalance by replacing one language with another. Rather, it means that Shaetlan *and* English should be used as languages of teaching on a roughly equal level. In other words, in a bilingual situation, education should also be bilingual, which means that instruction should be bilingual when possible. There are various modes of achieving this, such as having some subjects in one language and others in the other, or alternating between the languages within one subject every semester or every year, or having the textbook/material in one language and the classroom medium of instruction in the other. My own sister (13 years old) attends a Swedish/English bilingual school outside Stockholm, where all those modes are used. Bi- and multilingualism is very common world-wide, and different communities have found different solutions for their education systems.

### **A spelling system for Shaetlan**

One of the objections put forth to me about a spelling system is that Shaetlan is an oral language, not a written one. This is also something a number of Shaetlan authors have been criticised for. This argument not only belies the rich literary tradition of Shetland, but also completely ignores the fact that there are only two types of languages that are not oral before they are written: (i) Sign Languages, which by their very nature are of course not spoken but signed natural languages, and (ii) artificial programming languages, which are not natural languages anyway.<sup>ii</sup> In other words, all natural human spoken languages are oral until they get written down and also become text based in various forms.

Another objection put forth is that Shaetlan has so much internal variation that it would be impossible to capture it all in one spelling system. It is very true that Shaetlan is richly varied

– in an archipelago like this any linguist would like to know why if that were not the case. However, there are two things to consider here: first, every single Shetlander I have met has declared that they will immediately be able to identify a Shetland voice when away from the islands. In other words, there is something which binds the Shetland voices together. Which brings us to the second point: the purpose of a spelling system is not to illustrate every potential variation of a given word. In absolute terms that would be impossible, since no single individual actually utters the same phrase absolutely identically twice. In other words: the purpose of a spelling system is to illustrate the broad commonalities, rather than highlighting every potential difference. That means that while there will only be one consistent spelling for one word, in real speech that particular word will be uttered differently in different areas, between different speakers and indeed by the same speaker at different points in time. These absolute physical variations will not be captured in a systematised transcription system. Rather, what will be emphasised here is that, despite the fact that a given word will be uttered differently in different regions and by different individuals, it is universally understood across the speech community as that same word.

Yet another objection I have heard against a spelling system for Shetland is that it will kill variation. The linguist will answer “Well, only if you let it”. The purpose of a spelling system is not to be dogmatic and prescriptive about how things are supposed to be articulated, but, as mentioned, to capture the commonalities of a speech community so that the reader does not need to be familiar with the voice of the writer in order to be able to enjoy his or her piece of writing. In other words: the point is to make a written piece broadly accessible across a speech community, and, crucially, to make the rendering of the spoken language *predictable* and therefore teachable.

And here I would like to point out that this particular speech community is schooled in the English orthography, which is not only very archaic and therefore by now highly opaque, by which I mean that the spelling of a given word no longer represents how it is pronounced. For example, there is no longer any descendant of Old English that pronounces *white light* as /ˌmɪtɪ lɪxt/ (something like “h<sup>w</sup>eete leeg<sup>ht</sup>” in an anglicised rendering). The closest we come to that is in some varieties which might say /ˌmaɪt lɪxt/ (something like “h<sup>w</sup>yte licht”). There are some that will pronounce *white* as /ˌma:t/ (“h<sup>w</sup>aat”). And so on. The point here is that there is one way of spelling *white light* throughout the anglophone world, but there are dozens and dozens of ways of pronouncing it. Furthermore, the English spelling system has some exceptionally rare conventions. For example, neither I nor my colleagues know of any other orthography where the first person singular, i.e. the speaker and not the addressee, is capitalised

(*I*). In fact the orthography is internally inconsistent: it is only in the subject position that it is capitalised (*I*), not in any other position or function (*me, my, mine, myself*, etc.) Yet everyone is quite capable of coping with the English spelling system while preserving their voices.<sup>iii</sup>

Yet another objection I have heard against a Shaetlan spelling system is that Shaetlan keeps changing and evolving, so there cannot be any spelling system for it until it has stopped changing. But every language changes and evolves at all times. Standard English is at the moment undergoing a vowel shift: the front unrounded vowel /ɛ/ is being lowered to /æ/ in stressed positions, so that *Best Western* is no longer /bɛst wɛstɜːn/ but /bæst wɛstɜːrn/ and *snack* is lowered from /snæk/ to /snak/.<sup>iv</sup> Even programming languages evolve. The only language that no longer evolves is an extinct one.

In sum: there is no linguistic reason why Shaetlan should not share equal space with English in schools. There is only the pragmatic hurdle of creating a principled spelling system in order to be able to produce materials. We have now created that, using international linguistic principles and methods: we have streamlined the conventions in the existing dictionaries, given weight to existing usage in current *digitalk* conventions (see below), and gone into detail on the etymology for each entry. The principles for the system outlined at <https://www.iheardee.com/shaetlan/spellin-in-shaetlan> (or at <https://www.iheardee.com/english/spelling-in-shaetlan> for an English version).

### **A keyboard for Shaetlan**

There is one domain where written Shaetlan is used vigorously, unhesitantly and unselfconsciously by the entire Shaetlan speaking community, and that is in the domain of *digitalk*. This has been going on for a number of years, and has been studied in Kerry Karam's excellent PhD dissertation on code-switching between Shaetlan and English in various situations, and Vaila Walterson's admirable thesis on the use of Shaetlan on Instagram.<sup>v</sup> *Digitalk* is the informal written register (way of communication) used in digital media, such as text messages, instant messages, WhatsApp/Telegram/Messenger, general social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, etc), and so on. It has proven to be a world wide phenomenon that digitalk is a safe space for marginalised languages to be used in written form, and is a space where marginalised and/or stigmatised languages are able to gain a written voice. A quick survey done by myself shows only the tip of the iceberg:

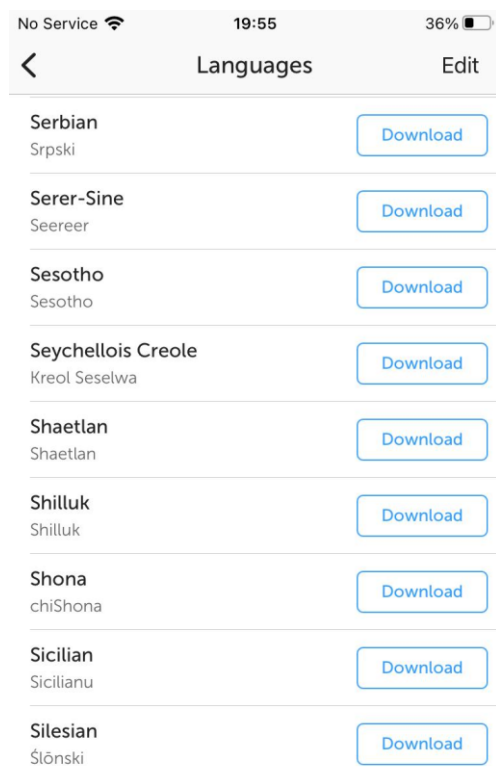


However, even in the *digitalk* domain the dominance of Standard English is palpable: anyone who wants to write in Shaetlan on their gadgets will have to battle the English autocorrect and predictive text.

In an effort to remedy this, we contacted the Microsoft SwiftKey team to see if they would accept Shaetlan as a language in their mobile keyboard, and if so, what they would need from us. A mobile keyboard is the keyboard used in hand-held devices such as smartphones and tablets. It is an app that the user can download and install on his/her device. The Microsoft SwiftKey keyboard is a free app, and is available for both iPhones and Android phones. It allows up to five languages to be used at the same time, and reflects a more accurate linguistic world-wide reality in that it allows code-switching and code-mixing within the same message. In other words, I can type in English, but mix in Swedish, German and Italian expressions in my message, and have access to both autocorrect and predictive text for all of them at the same time, rather than having to choose only one language and relying on myself to spot any typos in all the other languages. One major aim for the Microsoft SwiftKey team, whose team leader Julien Baley is a native speaker of Breton himself, is to help give a voice to marginalised languages. The design of the keyboard is that it learns and adapts to the habits of the user.

Given the sociolinguistic situation in Shetland, the SwiftKey team were convinced of the need to include Shaetlan in their language list. What they needed from us was a wordlist, including as many forms as possible, and preferably in a standardised orthography, within a certain deadline (15 November 2021). They also asked us to translate the entire emoji list into

Shaetlan. This we did, and we submitted the wordlist of an initial 10,300 entries (this is roughly equivalent to the size of Jakob Jakobsen’s two-volume *An etymological dictionary of the Norn language in Shetland*), and then an additional list of 18,200 entries, including 4,000 placenames (that covers all the entries in Jakob Jakobsen’s *The place-names of Shetland*, plus some additions of our own), bringing the total up to 28,500 entries as a starting point for the Shaetlan SwiftKey keyboard. As of 18 November 2021 Shaetlan is thus, for the first time ever, included in an international language list in the form of the Microsoft SwiftKey keyboard.



For anyone interested in using the keyboard, you can access further information and a small tutorial here: <https://www.iheardee.com/shaetlan/shaetlan-keyboard> (or here <https://www.iheardee.com/english/shaetlan-keyboard> for an English version).

## Recognition for Shaetlan

It is time to recognise that Shetland is a bilingual community, and that both of the main languages of Shetland deserve the same type of recognition. The tools are now in place for Shaetlan to be accepted into schools as a medium of instruction. There is a linguistically viable and principled spelling system, one which has been recognised as such by university colleagues world-wide, and there is typing help and support in the form of a mobile keyboard which is freely available to anyone in the world. As the International Decade of Indigenous Languages

is just kicking off, it is time to bring Shetland into schools on a daily basis, as a medium of instruction for all ages and in all subjects.

### About the author

Prof. Dr. Viveka Velupillai is affiliated with the Department of English at the University of Giessen, Germany, but is based in Shetland. She specialises in linguistic typology, contact linguistics and historical linguistics, and her main project is to document and describe Shetland, the high-contact language spoken on the islands alongside English.

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<sup>i</sup> The United Nations General Assembly (Resolution A/RES/74/135) proclaimed the period between 2022 and 2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL 2022-2032), to draw global attention on the critical situation of many indigenous languages and to mobilize stakeholders and resources for their preservation, revitalization and promotion (<https://en.unesco.org/idil2022-2032> last access 21 January 2022).

<sup>ii</sup> A possible third type would be conlanguages, or constructed languages, although that could be debated, since nearly without exception ultimately based on existing natural spoken languages.

<sup>iii</sup> For example, the Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English has 77 varieties in their database, all of which have internal regional, age and social variation (<https://ewave-atlas.org/> last access 21 January 2022); this database does not include the five newly described Micronesian Englishes (<http://english-in-micronesia.weebly.com/> last access 21 January 2022). The International Dialects of English Archive has more than 1,600 samples of different English voices from 135 countries in the world (<https://www.dialectsarchive.com/> last access 21 January 2022). While there are minor spelling differences in that some varieties spell *-ise* as *-ize* (*digitise* ~ *digitize*) and *-our* as *-or* (*colour* ~ *color*), the vast majority of the lexicon is spelled the same way across these varieties.

<sup>iv</sup> See, for example, Raymond Hickey. 2018. 'Yes, that's the best'. Short Front Vowel Lowering in English today. *English Today* 34(2). 9-16.

<sup>v</sup> Karam, Kerry. 2017. *Knappin: Standard versus dialect speech modification in Shetland*. Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen. 217-222.

Walterson, Vaila. 2020. *An exploratory study of Shetland dialect on Instagram*. Stirling: University of Stirling BA thesis.