

Shaetlan

An endangered Mixed Language in the North Sea

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*This article is dedicated to Peter Bakker
friend and mentor*

Abstract

Shaetlan is the autonym of the language pre-dating English in Shetland, an archipelago in the North Sea. It is a Mixed Language with Norn and Scots as the main ancestor inputs, but with contact influence also from the Low Germanic languages due to the Hanseatic and fishing trades. Specifically, it is a G-L language with a noticeable Scandinavian grammar and a predominantly Anglian lexicon. It has been severely stigmatised for the last 200 years and has never been formally recognised, but has remained spoken as an LL language in a displacive bilingual context. It is now endangered, with dwindling intergenerational transmission, including from speakers who are actively involved in promoting the language for emblematic purposes, but who are opposed to its recognition or its use as a medium of instruction in schools, and who choose not to transmit it to their own children. However, the digital era has seen an upswing in its use in the digital sphere and has offered new methods of normalisation. Furthermore, the *Shaetlan Language Plan* of the University of the Highlands and Islands Shetland College constitutes the first de facto recognition of the language in its own right, and offers multiple avenues for normalisation and an active inclusion of the language in all societal spheres, including as a medium of instruction in education.

Keywords

Contact Language; Mixed Language; G-L language; marginalised language; endangered language; language revitalization

1 Introduction

Shaetlan (Glottocode: shet1241) is the autonym of the indigenous language which pre-dates English in Shetland. It is of a mixed ancestry, with Norn and Scots as its main input languages, but with a linguistic history also shaped by intense contact with the Low Country Germanic languages. Based on over eight years of participant observation, the estimate is that the language is spoken by ca 30-50% of the population.¹

Shetland is an archipelago consisting of over a hundred islands, holms and skerries located roughly halfway between Scotland and Norway. It is the northernmost part of the UK, and is battered by the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the North Sea to the east. In 2021 Shetland had a population of 22,940 inhabitants, spread unevenly over 16 islands and with just under 7,000 in the capital Lerwick (60°20N, 1°20W).

¹ it is not possible to get more accurate figures than that on language users until and unless Shaetlan is added to the national census (see further Section 5).

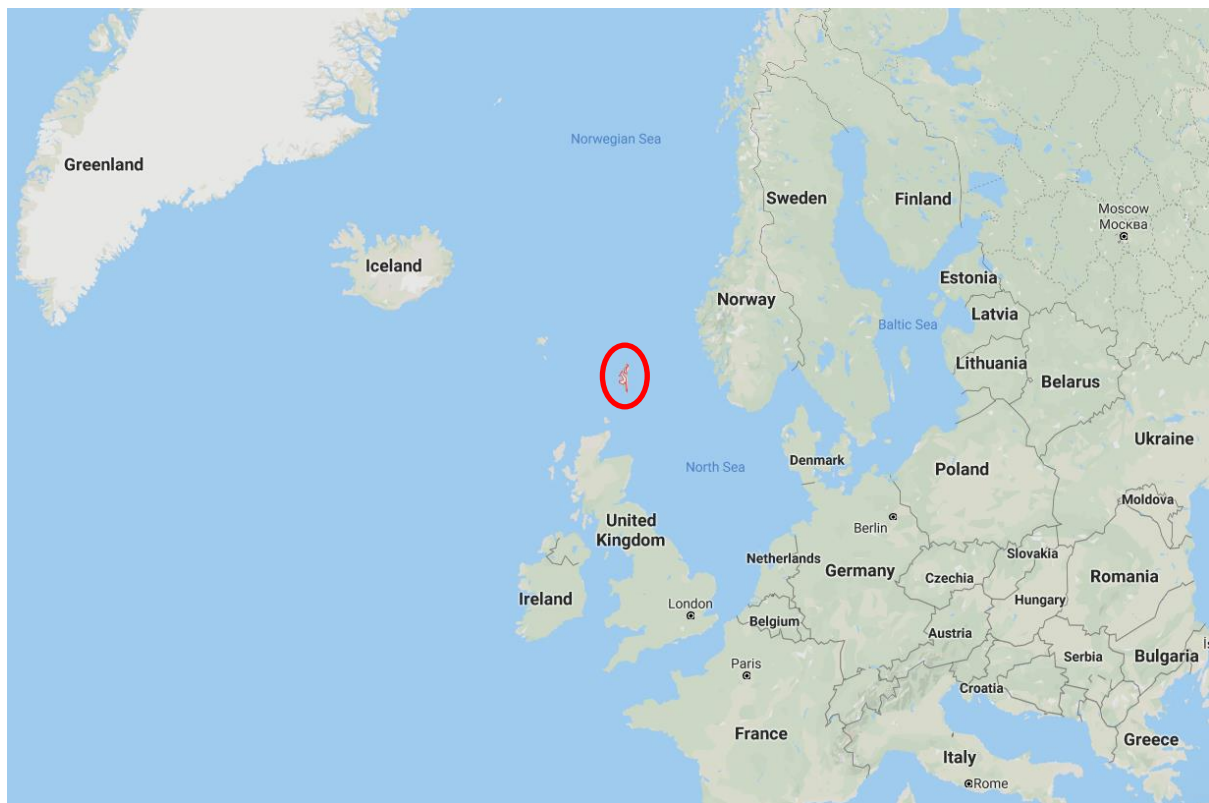


Figure 1. Shetland on the map.

Its location far out in the sea is by today's urban land-based standards in the middle of nowhere. However, for centuries, if not millennia this location has been a central place, because for most of humanity's history trade and travel was done by sea or other waterways.² Figure 1 shows that Shetland was and is an obvious stopover for any trade and migration routes between Iceland, western Scandinavia, the British mainland and the lowlands of north-western continental Europe. This centrally maritime location has in every way affected the environment, history and linguocultural identity of Shetland.

Shaetlan has seen severe stigmatisation over the last few centuries, and is now in an endangered state with dwindling intergenerational transmission. The prevailing attitude over the last two hundred years of universal schooling has been that it is a

² It is in fact still a place of contact: Shetland is an extremely popular destination for tourists. Not only do cruise liners with several thousand passengers dock in Lerwick on a daily basis from March to October, sometimes several at the same time, but Shetland also hosts a huge amount of long term tour visitors. Shetland also draws huge amounts of international visitors for the winter fire festivals (*Up Helly Aa*), the spring music festival, the autumn film festival (*Screenplay*), *Shetland Wool Week* and the literature festival (*Word Play*). Furthermore, throughout the year there will at any given time be ships in from the high seas for various reasons (refuelling, rough weather, etc). Shetland is thus still a place of contact in that the wider world still keeps coming to its shores for various reasons.

lesser and coarser version of English. However, the structure of the language has remained remarkably resilient and still shows its unique Mixed Language ancestry not only in the vocabulary but also (and especially) in its grammar.

There is considerable regional and social variation across the archipelago, with Lerwick being the most acrolectal area and Whalsay and the two Burra Isles considered the most basilectal by the Shetlanders themselves. However, that lies mostly in phonetic/phonological and some lexical differences, whereas the grammar is fairly (but obviously not completely) uniform throughout the archipelago. The greatest grammatical variation is displayed sociolectally, where the most acrolectal varieties correlate with higher education and/or certain kinds of employment (typically non-manual), with the literary elite displaying the highest levels of Anglicisation and English-influenced hypercorrections.

This chapter is based on the data collected in *Da Shaetlan Project* (see also the project online outlet *I Hear Dee* at <https://www.iheardee.com/>),³ which has been running since 2015. The database of the project consists of 400,000 words (37.5 hours) of archival spoken data (in the form of oral history interviews from the 1980s and 1990s by and with local Shetlanders), as well as contemporary interview data, participant observation and immersion since 2015.

The chapter is structured as follows: I will first give a sociohistorical background to Shaetlan and its principal formation period (Section 2), before giving a short linguistic sketch of the language (Section 3). Section 4 discusses the place of Shaetlan in the Mixed Language paradigm, while Section 5 outlines the current sociolinguistic and sociological situation before Section 6 gives a final summary of the chapter.

2 Sociohistorical background

The Shetland archipelago has been inhabited for some 6,000 years (Montgomery & Melton 2014), if not longer.⁴ By the time the Western Norse expansion started in the late 8th century, the islands had been populated by a Celtic-speaking population. The majority were most likely part of the Pictish linguistic and cultural sphere. However, Gaelic-speaking Christian missionaries did migrate to Shetland from the 6th century onwards and might also have been part of the linguistic landscape when the first Norse travellers arrived. It is not known when the Norse seafarers first came to Shetland, but evidence suggests that the first settlements were as early as about 790-

³ 'I hear dee' is a somewhat tongue in cheek expression in Shaetlan.

⁴ This section is a somewhat shortened version of Section 2 in Velupillai (forthcoming).

800 AD (Wainwright 1962a, b; Barnes 1998). With that, the beginnings of a Norse speaking population started in Shetland. In 875 king Harald Hårfagre of Norway claimed the islands, together with Orkney and Caithness, and fused them into the administrative unit of the Earldom of Orkney (*Orkneyinga Saga*; Crawford 2013, Donaldson 1983). With this, Western Norse became the dominant administrative language. This version of Old Norse would eventually evolve into its own variety, later referred to as *Norn* in the literature, which would remain spoken in Shetland for another 8-900 years.

It is not known what happened to the pre-Norse population; there is no mention of them in the Old Norse sagas, and very few linguistic traces of them have remained. There are no identified substratal traces in Norn (Barnes 1998, but cf. Lindqvist 2015) and almost all early placenames are Norn, with a gradual increase of modern Scots and English placenames. It is possible that the catastrophic climate events of the 6th century, which affected a large part of Eurasia, may also have led to depopulation of Shetland through famine and/or migration (Fraser 2024). However, Pictish did survive at least a century after Norse settlement (Barnes 1998), even if in potentially reduced numbers, as evidenced by two known Ogham inscriptions in Pictish from the 9th or early 10th centuries (Forsyth 1996). Furthermore, it is possible that the names of the three northernmost larger inhabited islands – Fetlar, Yell and Unst – might be pre-Norse (Andrew Jennings, p.c.), in which case Pictish would be the most likely source (Coates 2007, but see also Coates 2019 on the problematic nature of the name Fetlar).⁵

The seat of the Norse earldom was in Orkney (Crawford 2013), but in 1195 the Shetland archipelago was placed directly under the Norwegian king (Donaldson 1983: 9) and with that “Shetland’s links with Orkney, strong until then, diminished” (Ballantyne & Smith 1999: xi). However, the links between them remained in the ecclesiastical sphere: the archipelagos shared a bishop and “Shetland’s archdeacon remained a senior figure in Orkney’s chapter until 1544” (ibid.). From now on Shetland was a tributary province of Norway and paid tax directly to the Norwegian king. The islands were ruled by Norse law through the king’s *sysseľman* (approx. ‘governor’).

The linguistic ecology of the two archipelagos thus gradually diverged and “[i]n 1469 Shetland was still essentially Norse, in race, in language and in institutions,

⁵ Pictish [xpi] is currently thought to have belonged to the Celtic languages, possibly the Brittonic branch. This is primarily based on onomastic evidence (Watson & Taylor 2011; Rhys 2015).

whereas in 1468 Orkney was already very largely Scotticised” (Donaldson 1983: 8), probably partly because the Earldom of Orkney had been populated by Scots houses from the middle of the 14th century and onwards (cf. also Ljosland 2012, McColl Millar 2018). Another point of diversion between the archipelagos is that while the Hanseatic and Dutch trade in the “fish lands” between Bergen, Iceland, Faroe and Shetland was intense (see below), there was much less of a Low Germanic trade presence in Orkney in the late medieval and early modern period (Holterman 2020).

The early 15th century saw increased settlement in the southern areas of Shetland by immigrating Lowland Scots speakers (McColl Millar 2007, 2008; Knooihuizen 2009). This influence was to a large extent related to the Church: Shetland belonged to the diocese of Orkney (where the bishop was Scots), and the archdeaconry of Shetland was Scots, as was the clergy to an increasing degree (Donaldson 1983). However, the Scots settlers were also landowners, administrators, traders and craftsmen. In other words, these settlers tended to belong to the higher, more sociopolitically and economically powerful social strata. Documents from the early 16th century show some landowner families who, interestingly, used both local Shetland patronymics and Scots surnames (Ballantyne & Smith 1999: xv), and that some “relatives of ecclesiastics who had come from Scotland to Shetland” in the 15th and early 16th centuries occasionally became law officials in Shetland (ibid.: xv-i). With this, the Lowland Scots language (Lallans) increasingly started to establish itself in Shetland, in what seems to have been a top down spread.⁶

In the same early 15th century, namely from about 1415 onwards, there was also sustained contact with the Low Germanic languages (predominantly varieties of Middle Dutch and Middle Low German) through the Hanseatic trade (Mehler & Gardiner 2013), which was initially via Bergen, but then directly with the islands, as the subsequent Dutch herring trade would be (Friedland 1983, Ballantyne & Smith 1999: xiii, Holterman 2020). This regularly brought merchants, sailors and traders from the northern European Low Countries to the islands. It is worth noting that this contact was not only at the actual boats in the harbours, but also that the Hansa merchants, for example, had numerous trading stations of various sizes dotted all over Shetland, some large enough to have the character of a small settlement, where the merchants and their crew would stay for varying lengths of time, sometimes over the

⁶ It should be noted that the Scots spoken at the time is likely to have diverged more from English than what contemporary Lowland Scots does from contemporary Standard English after centuries of intense contact with and dominance of Standard English (cf. McColl Millar 2018, 2020 and subsequent studies on the concept of *dialectization*).

entire winter (Holterman 2020). This went on until the French and Napoleonic wars (Smith 2013). In other words, there was a steady language contact between the Shetlanders and speakers of Low Germanic languages, predominantly Dutch and Low German.

With the union of Norway and Denmark in 1380, Shetland came under Danish rule. In May 1469 Christian I of Denmark pawned Shetland to James III of Scotland as the second part of his daughter Margaret's dowry (Orkney had been pawned a year earlier, in 1468), and "wrote to his subjects in Shetland and Orkney, instructing them to pay scat [tax] to the king of Scots until he [the King of Denmark] or his successors redeemed the pledge" (Ballantyne & Smith 1999: xiv).⁷ With the gradual administrative shift to Scottish rule, the Scots language steadily gained socioeconomic value. Furthermore, the Lowland Scots settlement pattern mentioned above would increase, with Scots speakers concentrated in the south of the archipelago (Donaldson 1983, Knooihuizen 2009, Crawford 2013). However, the shift to Scots was gradual and Shetland remained a multilingual place. Contemporary testimonies bear witness to the stable multilingual language ecology of Shetland during this early period:

The Inhabitants of the South Parish are, for the most part, Strangers from Scotland & Orkney, whose Language, Habit, Manners & Dispositions are almost ye same with the Scotish. ... Their Language (as I said) is the same with the Scotish: yet all the Natives can speak the Gothick or Norwegian Tongue. ... by reason of their Commerce with the Hollanders, generally they promptly speak low Dutch. The Inhabitants of the North Parish are (very few excepted) Natives of the place ... All the inhabitants of this Parish can speak the Gothick or Norwegian Language,

⁷ "[King Christian] gave the king of Scotland his letter of confirmation [*følgebreff*] to his subjects [*undersaatterne*] in Orkney and Hetland, [to the effect] that after the negotiations which he had had with the king of Scotland, they should be obedient and dutiful to him, and give him scat annually, until such time as he [the king of Denmark] or his descendants, kings of Norway, should pay to the kings of Scotland the money for which the said lands and islands were mortgaged." [Copenhagen, 28 May 1469]. The original letter is not known to exist; this account is translated by Ballantyne & Smith (1999: 18) from the following account given by Arild Huilfeldt in his *Historiske Beskriffelse*:

Ĥuor paa ĥand gaff Kongen aff Skotland sic Følgebreff til Undersaatterne paa Orckenør oc i Ĥetland / at de effter saadan Forĥandling / ĥand met Kongen av Skottland giort ĥaffde / ĥannem skulde vere ĥørig oc lydig / oc Aarligen deris Skat giffue / indtil saa lenge ĥand / eller ĥans Effterkommere / Konger udi Norge / betalde Kongerne aff Skotland saadanne Penninge / ĥuorfaare samme Lande oc Øer / effter Breffuens Liudelse / vaare pantset.

Actum Kiøbenĥaffn / 28 Maji, Anno 1469.

(Huilfeldt 1599: 190)

& seldom speak other among themselves; yet all of them speak the Scottish Tongue both more promptly & more properly, than generally they do in Scotland

(James Key, minister of Dunrossness (S Shetland) 1680s; Bruce 1908: 43f)

English is the common language among them, yet many of the people speak Norse or corrupt Danish, especially such as live in the more northern isles; yea, so ordinary is it in some places, that it is the first language their children speak. Several here also speak good Dutch, even servants, though they have never been out of the country, because of the many Dutch ships which do frequent their ports. And there are some who have something of all these languages, English, Dutch and Norse.

(John Brand, Scottish missionary 1700; Brand 1701: 69)

Many of them are descended from the Norwegians and speak a Norse Tongue, corrupted, (they call Norn) amongst themselves [...] and because of their Commerce with the Hollanders, they promptly speak Low Dutch. [...] The Incommers [sic] (whose residence in these Isles is not above a few Centuries of years) [...] speak the Scots Language as well as the Norse.

(Various informants no later than 1710; Sibbald 1845 [1711])

Norn remained spoken in Shetland for at least another 250 years, meaning that there was Norn/Scots bilingualism in Shetland until at least the early 18th century, suggesting a diglossic community. However, it is not likely that it was a balanced contact situation, given that Scots was the language of the new power holders (cf. Bakker 2017, Faraclas 2021). Ljosland (forthcoming) has shown how Scots law and administrative officials in Orkney were either not able or not willing (or both) to recognise the speech of the local population (Norn), which could even lead to cases of fatal misunderstandings, for example when a woman, Jonet Rendall, was accused of witchcraft and association with the devil and sentenced to death, whereas Jonet kept saying that the witchcraft was not done by her but by *Walliman* (a male elf). Ljosland sees this as “a clash between Norn and Scots and between folklore and book learning” where the Sherriff, who does not speak Norn and who is “informed by teachings on the Devil’s conspiracy with witches as seen for example in King James VI’s *Daemonology* [...] failed to listen to or understand Jonet’s voice in this matter (ibid: pXXX). It is likely that this kind of unwillingness as well as contempt on the part of the new ruling class also occurred in Shetland, as various documented complaints also indicate (Ballantyne & Smith 1994, 1999).

The spread of Scots seems to have followed a south to north tendency, with Norn surviving for longer in the northern and remoter areas of Shetland (cf. e.g. Donaldson 1983, Knooihuizen 2009). Walter Sutherland of Skaw in the far north of Unst, who passed away in 1850, is reported to be the last known speaker, or possibly rememberer, of Norn (Jakobsen 1928-32: xix). It is reasonable to assume that the

linguistic ecology varied for the different areas of Shetland, as well as for the different social groups, as mentioned above. It seems plausible that a larger proportion of potentially monolingual Scots speakers would be concentrated in the higher strata of society, such as clergy, lawmen and other kinds of administrative functionaries, as well as the actual lairds and rulers (cf. Faraclas 2021). It also seems plausible that a larger proportion of potentially monolingual Scots speakers would be found in the southern parts of the Shetland mainland. Conversely, it is reasonable to assume that potentially monolingual Norn speakers would be found in the lower strata of society, as well as in the northern and/or more isolated areas of the archipelago. However, onomastic evidence tentatively indicates a fair number of mixed marriages, which seem to indicate an uneven bias towards a Scots husband and a Norse wife (Knoolhuizen 2008: 33). Irrespective of which of the partners was Scots or Norn, it is fair to assume that such mixed households were bilingual.⁸ Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that the Low Germanic language contact would be concentrated around the trading centres. Even so, the picture we get of the middle of the 16th century is one of a fairly stable multilingual and deglossic linguistic ecology in Shetland.

This long drawn and stable bilingualism in Shetland resulted in a very distinct linguistic blend of Norn and Lowland Scots, with a noticeable contact influence of Low Germanic languages (Middle Dutch and Middle Low German); see e.g. Robertson & Graham (1952/1991), Graham (1993), Barnes (1998), Christie-Johnson & Christie-

⁸ It goes without saying that basing assumptions on language use in a household several centuries ago on onomastic evidence is extremely tentative at best, and that any such data should be and is taken with great caution – my own Tamil surname, for example, does not reveal that my two mother tongues from a balanced bilingual household are Swedish and English. However, to presume that a mixed household would be monolingual in the language of the husband (cf. e.g. Knoolhuizen 2008) does not conform with what we know about multilingualism and mixed households typologically or historically, but rather reflects an anachronistic, 20th century viewpoint of monolingual nationhoods in nationalised standard languages as reflected predominantly, but not exclusively, in the WEIRD [Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic; initially coined by Henrich et al. 2010] world (cf. also Nic Craith 2000, Velupillai 2015, Faraclas 2021, Lim 2021, among others). See also Treffers-Daller & Sakel (2012) as well as Ortega (2012) on how the monolingual biases continue to be built into research. In reality, however, a majority of the world's population is bi- or multilingual even today: in a survey based on available census data, which covers just under ¼ of the countries in the world, Mikael Parkvall (p.c.) found that about ⅓ of the global population is monolingual, while ⅔ are bi-/multilingual (cf. also Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 25-26, Parkvall's figures also confirm Nagy & Meyerhoff 2008, Edwards 2012, and Lim & Ansaldo 2016 on the proportion of multi- versus monolingualism). It is not farfetched to propose that similar proportions would have been likely in previous centuries – in fact it is likely that there were even higher proportions of bi-/multilingualism in the past.

Johnson (2004), Melchers (2004a/b), van Leyden (2004), Knooihuizen (2005), McColl Millar (2007), Melchers & Sundqvist (2010), to mention only a few. Shaetlan is thus a distinct Contact Language by any definition in that it **emerged** due to contact as opposed to, for example, English, Scots and Swedish, which have **undergone** a high degree of contact (but which did not emerge due to some specific contact situation; cf. e.g. Matras & Baker 2003, Bakker & Matras 2013, Michaelis et al. 2013, Velupillai 2015, Grant 2019, among many others for the concept of Contact Language). Specifically, Shaetlan fits the framework of the G[rammar]-L[exicon] **Mixed Language** type, as shown in Section 4.

English would gradually increase in sociopolitical dominance and prestige in mainland Scotland (see e.g. McColl Millar 2020, 2023 with further references; see also Young 2023). With the Union of the Crowns in 1603 James VI/I moved to London and promoted English (not Scots) as the language of the Church and administration. In fact, “[t]he king himself altered his writing practice in the direction of Standard English; even translating/transcribing earlier works into his new working language” (McColl Millar 2020: 91). The printed word would in the 17th century gradually, and by “piecemeal attrition” (ibid), shift away from Scots and towards English (cf. also e.g. Meurman-Solin 1993 and Devitt 1996).

Nonetheless, the ambiguous linguistic status of Scots throughout the late medieval and Early Modern periods, combined with the foregrounding of Standard English by the Presbyterian victors in the strife that convulsed the country in the second half of the seventeenth century, whose adherence to the English Bible involved memorisation – and replication – of large amounts of text, meant that switching preferred written (and, for some, spoken) variety, was advanced.

(McColl Millar 2020: 91)

This sociopolitical dominance and prestige of English (over Scots) would eventually also spread to Shetland.

Beginning in the 18th century, with the introduction of organised education and especially the SSPCK (Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge) school system, English has been the socio-politically dominant language in Shetland and the language considered “proper”. The first such school opened in Waas (Walls) in 1734 and from 1765 parochial schools were set up; “English became increasingly predominant as the formal and, by implication, the more correct mode of speech” (Graham 1993: xv). By 1827 every parish had its own school (Graham 1998) and “[m]ost of the new schools were staffed by teachers from outwith Shetland who had little or no knowledge of the local speech and, more often than not, tended to regard

it as a threat to their educational ideals of formal English and a broadly based culture” (Graham 1993: vxi-vxii). In 1872 elementary education became compulsory (Wiggen 2002). Education, administration and governance has thus by default been conducted in English for the last two centuries, with Shaetlan at best seen as an imperfect version of English and at worst seen as rude slang. The two languages consequently stand in a displacive diglossic relationship to each other, with English as the High Language (HL) and Shaetlan as the stigmatised Low Language (LL). Shaetlan is today in an endangered state, with dwindling intergenerational transmission and an increasing number of Shaetlan-speaking adults choosing to communicate with their own children monolingually in Shetland English. This even includes Shaetlan speaking parents who themselves actively engage in ‘promoting’ the language for entertainment purposes, but are vehemently opposed to its recognition or, for example, to its use as a medium of instruction in education (cf. Section 5 below).

There is thus an increasing proportion of Shetlanders who are monolingual speakers of Shetland English. And there is no longer any monolingual Shaetlan speaker: any mother tongue speaker of Shaetlan today is bilingual in Shaetlan and Shetland English (cf. also Karam 2017). Yet despite this intensely displacive diglossic contact situation with English as the socio-politically dominant language on all societal levels, Shaetlan has retained its distinctive linguistic characteristics both phonologically, morphosyntactically and lexically.

3 Linguistic sketch

Shaetlan displays a predominantly Scandinavian grammar and a predominantly Anglian lexicon. However, the latter is highly distinct due to the Scandinavian substrate and the Low Germanic contact influence. This section will give a short overview of the structure of Shaetlan, but is in no way a complete description of the language. All data examples cited use the transcription orthography convention devised by *Da Shaetlan Project*. The principles for the orthography are freely available on the *I Hear Dee* site.⁹ For more details on the data, the general structure of the language and the spelling used, see Velupillai & Mullay (2022) and <https://www.iheardee.com/> (last access 7 November 2022).

⁹ Available at <https://www.iheardee.com/shaetlan/spellin-in-shaetlan> (in Shaetlan) and <https://www.iheardee.com/english/spelling-in-shaetlan> (in English).

3.1 Grammar

It is often implied, and sometimes overtly stated, that the grammar of Shaetlan is “mainly English” (cf. Graham 1993: xix, cf. also e.g. Sundkvist 2021). The implied position is that the default grammar is Standard English, and any deviation from Standard English is merely colloquialisms (at best). However, the data summarised in Velupillai & Mullay (2022) belies this assumption and show that Shaetlan has a number of distinct and stable features that have received little or no attention, or, as for example in the case of the *be*-perfect (exs. (6), (9), (12), (16)), have been claimed to be obsolete (Smith & Durham 2011, 2012), despite such prevalence that it is even used with tourists.¹⁰

3.1.1 Shaetlan grammar is not “mainly English”

3.1.1.1 Phonology

Shaetlan has 27 contrastive consonants: /p, b, t, d, k, g, f, v, θ, s, z, ʃ, ʒ, x, h, ts, tʃ, m, n, ɲ, ŋ, r, l, ɫ, ʌ, w, j/. Like all Germanic languages it is vowel rich, with 12 contrastive monophthongs (/i, y, e, ɛ, ø, a, u, o, ɔ, ɑ, ɒ/) and 7 diphthongs (/œ, ɛɪ, ɔɪ, eɐ, aɪ, eɜ, au/). Notice that Shaetlan has phonemic front rounded vowels /y, ø/ (ex. (1) below), which are absent in English, and a pragmatically motivated falling intonation for morphosyntactically unmarked polar questions (i.e. where the morphosyntactic structure of the utterance is identical to that of a statement, without e.g. *do*-support, other word order inversions, tags, or any other interrogative marking; ex. (2)):

- (1) /le:/ <lay> ‘lay’ ~ /lø:/ <lø> ‘listen intently’
 /ʃɪn/ <shin> ‘shin’ ~ /ʃyn/ <shün> ‘soon’
 /ɒn/ <on> ‘on’ ~ /øɒn/ <øɒn> ‘odour; stuffy atmosphere’

(Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 38)

- (2) Dy faider wis a fysherman ∨
 2SG.POSS father be.PST.SG INDF fisherman
 ‘Your father was a fisherman?’

(participant observation)

¹⁰ The latter is probably a misunderstood code-switching phenomenon, where the researcher thought s/he heard Shaetlan when the consultant was politely speaking English with a Shetland accent, given that it is near impossible for the Shaetlan speaker to use Shaetlan with a non-Shaetlan speaker or to use Shaetlan in a formal situation (such as an interview situation). See further Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 27-28.

See further Sundkvist 2021 for a detailed discussion of the Shaetlan phonology; for a detailed study on the prosody of Shaetlan, see van Leyden 2002, 2004.

Shaetlan allows complex syllables of up to three onset and coda consonants, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. The syllable structures of Shaetlan

V	CV/VC	CCV/VCC	CVC	CCVCC	CCCVCCC
<i>a, ee</i> ‘one’	<i>coo</i> ‘cow’ <i>at</i> ‘that’	<i>kloo</i> ‘ball of yarn’ <i>aert</i> ‘earth’	<i>sook</i> ‘suck’	<i>stand</i>	<i>strents</i> ‘strengths’

3.1.1.2 Morphology

Words are formed through compounding or derivation. Compounding often consists of merging two roots, such as *oo* ‘wool’ + *bag* ‘sack’ > *oobag* ‘wool sack’. These kinds of compounds tend to take the part of speech of the second element. Prepositional verbs can be denominalised through compounding, such as *tae kerry on* ‘to carry on’ > *a onkerry* (alternatively *a kerryon*) ‘a disturbance, commotion’. In some cases the stressed and unstressed versions of the same word may compound in different ways and give different meanings. For example, the word for ‘by’ in Shetland has two versions, the unstressed *bi* (/bi/) and the stressed *by* (/baɪ/). In compounds the unstressed *bi* is the first element and indicates direction: *bisooth* ‘southwards’, *binort* ‘northwards’, etc; the stressed *by*, however, is the last element and indicates (known) relative location: *upbye* ‘up (over) **there**’, *ootbye* ‘out (over) **there**’. See further Velupillai & Mulla (2022: 61-62)

There are a number of derivational affixes in Shaetlan, most of which are Anglian:

Table 2. Derivational affixes in Shaetlan

AFFIX	TYPE	EXAMPLE	ELEMENTS
-ster	NMLZR	<i>bluster</i> ‘rough, mossy peat’	<i>blue</i> + -ster
-ie	NMLZR	<i>blinkie</i> ‘torch light’	<i>blink</i> + -ie
-een	NMLZR	<i>biggeen</i> ‘building’	<i>bigg</i> + -een
-mis	NMLZR (abstract)	<i>bitternis</i> ‘cold and stormy weather’	<i>bitter</i> + -nis
-(i)ment	NMLZR (abstract)	<i>plaessment</i> ‘placement’	<i>plaess</i> + -ment
-dom	NMLZR (abstract)	<i>bairndom</i> ‘childhood’	<i>bairn</i> + -dom
-ik	NMLZR (diminutive)	<i>boolik</i> ‘pimple’	<i>bool</i> + -ik
-kin	NMLZR (diminutive)	<i>cøttikin</i> ‘ankle-sock’	<i>cøt</i> + -kin
-er	VBLZR	<i>sneester</i> ‘to snigger’	<i>sneest</i> + -er
-en	VBLZR (inchoative)	<i>stivven</i> ‘to become stiff’	<i>stiv</i> + -en
-ie/-y	ADJZR	<i>birsi</i> ‘stubby’	<i>birse</i> + -ie
-(g)it	ADJZR	<i>daddit</i> ‘weary’	<i>dadd</i> + -it
-ly	ADJZR	<i>ruckly</i> ‘uneven’	<i>ruckel</i> + -ly
-ed	ADJZR	<i>duddered</i> ‘shabby’	<i>dudder</i> + -ed
-able	ADJZR	<i>biddable</i> ‘obedient’	<i>bid</i> + -able
wan-	ADJZR (negated)	<i>wanwirt</i> ‘trifle’	<i>wan-</i> + <i>wirt</i>
-lins	ADVZR	<i>backlins</i> ‘backwards’	<i>back</i> + -lins
-wye (‘-where’)	ADVZR	<i>aawye</i> ‘everywhere’	<i>aa</i> + -wye

The diminutive *-kin* derives from Middle Dutch *-kijn/-ken* and Middle Low German *-kin*. It is cognate with High German *-chen* and ultimately derives from the Proto-Germanic diminutive **-īkinq/*-ukinq*.

3.1.1.3 The noun phrase

Shaetlan nouns have two numbers (singular and plural), and three genders (masculine [(3)a], feminine [(3)b] and neuter [(3)c]). Gender is realised pronominally:

- (3) a. *I tocht I haed a pendrive bit noo I*
 1SG.SBJ think.PST 1SG.SBJ have.PST INDF pen_drive but now 1SG.SBJ

can-na fin him
 can-NEG find 3SG.M.OBJ

‘I thought I had a pen drive, but now I can’t find it.’

- b. *Da phone=s ring-in is du gyaan tae pick*
 DEF phone=be.PRS.SG ring-PROG be.PRS.SG 2SG.SBJ go.PROG to pick

her up or no
 3SG.F.OBJ up or NEG

‘The phone’s ringing, are you going to pick it up or not?’

c. *Yun = s* *da oo aa bagg-it up, hit = s* *fine*
 DEM.DIST = be.PRS.SG DEF wool all bag-PST up 3SG.N = be.PRS.SG fine

tae see da back o it
 to see DEF back of 3SG.N

‘That’s all the wool bagged up, it’s good to get rid of it.’

(Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 71-72)

Velupillai (2019) has shown that concrete count nouns belong to the feminine or masculine gender, and abstract nouns and mass nouns are neuter. This also holds for new vocabulary, so that, for example concrete count nouns like laptop, pendrive, phone, etc, are assigned either masculine or feminine gender. Weather and time expression dummies are nearly always masculine (though a dummy feminine sometimes occurs regionally with winds):

(4) *He’s* *tøm-in*
 DUM = be.PRS.3SG pour_down-PROG
 ‘It’s pouring down with rain.’

(Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 83)

(5) *He’s* *5 o’clock eenoo*
 DUM = be.PRS.3SG 5 o_clock now
 ‘It’s 5 o’clock now.’

(Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 83)

There is a highly prolific associative plural:

(6) *Is* *du* *seen* *John an dem*
 be.PRS.SG 2SG.SBJ see.PTC PN APL
 ‘Have you seen John and his friends/family?’

(Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 73-74)

The associative plural is so prolific and robust that it is even used with non-Shaetlan speakers, and belongs to one of those features that Shetlanders tend to be “corrected” for.

Some features have been hiding in plain sight in that they have been assumed to reflect local “mispronunciations” of a Standard English feature. Examples of that are the appellation names:

(7) *Dere = s* *Gibbie a Okrabister*
 there = be.PRS.SG Gibbie on Okrabister
 ‘There’s Gibbie of Okrabister’

(Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 70-71)

Appellation names, i.e. names where a person is identified by a place (such as *Anne of Green Gables*), are in Standard English expressed with the possessive *of*. However,

the Shaetlan preposition *a* reflects an older reduced form of *on*. The construction resembles that of Scandinavian appellation names, where someone is *X on PLACE* (e.g. *Anne på Grönkulla* ‘Anne of Green Gables’, lit. Anne on Green Gables). Shaetlan speakers have thus been “corrected” to **Gibbie of Okrabister*, even leading to hypercorrections with an apologetic apostrophe, as in **Gibbe o’ Okrabister*.

The pronominal system has three persons, two numbers, and three genders in the third person singular. Shaetlan distinguishes between the singular and plural addressee, where the plural form is also the singular polite form:

Table 3. Personal pronouns in Shaetlan

	SINGULAR		PLURAL	
	SUBJECT	OBJECT	SUBJECT	OBJECT
1	<i>I</i> ¹¹	<i>me</i>	<i>we</i>	<i>wis</i>
2	<i>du</i> (informal)/ <i>you</i> (polite)	<i>dee</i> (informal)/ <i>you</i> (polite)	<i>you</i>	<i>you</i>
3M	<i>he</i>	<i>him</i>		
3F	<i>shø</i>	<i>her</i>	<i>dey</i>	<i>dem</i>
3N	<i>(h)it</i>	<i>it</i>		

The polite 2SG *you* is used with elders (often including parents) and both new and known acquaintances, while the informal 2SG *du* is used with intimate friends (typically peers), siblings and younger persons (especially children) (Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 81).

The use of neuter *hit* versus *it* is not haphazard: the form *hit* carries more emphasis and tends to be used as dummy subjects in impersonal sentences (such as *Hit will come clear laetter* ‘It will become clear later’). *Hit* is also the default form in cleft sentences (such as *Hit wis becis dey wir gotten gluffed at dey jump* ‘It was because they got scared that they jumped’). In our corpus of spoken Shaetlan the absolute majority of *hit*-forms were used as impersonal dummies and in clefts (for the statistically minded: $X_2 = 59.76$, $df = 1$, $N = 3,805$, $p < .00001^{***}$).

There are both dependent and independent possessive pronouns, which inflect for three persons, two numbers, and three genders in the third person singular:

¹¹ Community intuition based on contact induced anglicisation as well as the sense of distinction between Shaetlan and Lowland Scots varieties: speaker perception, not entirely justified by the data, is that 1SG is pronounced /aɪ/ and not /a/. The anglicised spelling thus seems to be an important identity marker. However, community practice has established a habit of graphically rendering the contracted form *I’m* (*I am*) as <A’m> to indicate the perceived weaker pronunciation of the 1SG in the contracted form.

Table 4. Dependend possessive pronouns in Shaetlan

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
1	<i>my/mi</i> ¹²	<i>wir</i>
2	<i>dy/di</i>	<i>yir</i>
3M	<i>his</i>	
3F	<i>her</i>	<i>dir</i>
3N	<i>hits</i>	

Table 5. Independent possessive pronouns in Shaetlan

	SINGULAR		PLURAL
	SG.N	PL.N	
1	<i>mine</i>	<i>mines</i>	<i>wirs</i>
2	<i>dine</i>	<i>dines</i>	<i>yirs</i>
3M	<i>his</i>		
3F	<i>hers</i>		<i>dirs</i>
3N	<i>(h)its</i>		

Notice that the first and second persons singular of the independent possessives have two forms: one which refers to singular nouns, and one which refers to plural nouns. In other words, for the first and second persons the form of the possessive pronoun has to agree in number with the noun it refers to:

- (8) a. *Du kerry dy bag an A'll kerry mine*
 2SG.S carry 2SG.DPOSS bag and 1SG = be.FUT carry 1SG.IPOSS
 'You carry your bag and I'll carry mine.'
- b. *Du clean dy bõt-s and A'll clean mine-s*
 2SG.S clean 2SG.DPOSS boot-PL and 1SG = be.FUT clean 1SG.IPOSS-PL
 'You clean your boots and I'll clean mine.'
- c. *He can kerry his bag an du can kerry dine*
 3SG can carry 3SG.DPOSS bag and 2SG can carry 2SG.IPOSS
 'He can carry his bag and you can carry yours.'
- d. *He can dry his bõt-s an du can dry dine-s*
 3SG can dry 3SG.DPOSS boot-PL and 2SG can dry 2SG.IPOSS-PL
 'He can carry his bag and you can carry yours.' (Velupillai & Mulla 2022: 84-87)

This is another feature that has remained hidden in plain sight and that Shetlanders tend to get "corrected" for. The feature was noticed already in 1894 (Ross 1983-4). It is no longer attested for all varieties, but seems quite widespread among the

¹² The 1SG and 2SG both have an emphatic possessive form (*my/dy*) and an unemphatic possessive form (*mi/di*). This is not found in any of the other persons/number.

mesolectal and basilectal varieties. It may be both a regionally and socially conditioned feature, and is generally no longer used nor recognised by the literary classes or the most acrolectal speakers.

There is a number-invariant demonstrative with a three-way distal system:

- (9) *A = m* *clipp-it* *dis* / *yun* / *dat* *ram-s*
 1SG.SBJ = be.1SG.PRS shear-PST DEM.PROX DEM.DIST DEM.REM ram-PL
 ‘I’ve shorn these/those/those rams.’ (Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 95-97)

The default dichotomy is between *dis* (‘this’ i.e. proximate) and *yun* (‘that’, i.e. distal), while *dat* is marked for remoter distance in place and/or time (i.e. ‘that.REM’), also metaphorically.

Shaetlan has both stressed and unstressed reflexive pronouns, which are distinguished for politeness in the 2SG:

Table 6. Reflexive pronouns in Shaetlan

	SINGULAR		PLURAL	
	STRESSED	UNSTRESSED	STRESSED	UNSTRESSED
1	<i>mesel</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>wirsels</i>	<i>wir</i>
2	<i>deesel</i> (informal)/ <i>yirsel</i> (polite)	<i>dee</i> (informal)/ <i>you</i> (polite)	<i>yirsels</i>	<i>you</i>
3M	<i>himsel</i>	<i>him</i>	<i>demsels</i>	<i>dem</i>
3F	<i>hersel</i>	<i>her</i>		
3N	<i>hitsel</i>	<i>(h)it</i>		

Notice that the stressed plural forms all end with the plural *-s*, which means that for the reflexive pronoun the stressed forms show a difference in the second person between the polite singular and plural forms.

Reciprocity is expressed with the personal pronoun object form:

- (10) *Dey spak* *dem a start*
 3PL.S speak.PST 3PL.O a little_while
 ‘They spoke with each other for a little while.’ (Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 88-89)

The indefinite article is invariant (*a*). The definite article (*da*) is used in more contexts than the Standard English definite article:

with seasons: *da voar* ‘spring’, *da simmer* ‘summer’, *da hairst* ‘autumn’, *da winter* ‘winter’.

with the names of illnesses: *Shø’s ill wi da caald* ‘She’s ill with a cold’ / *da gulsa* ‘... jaundice’ / *da Covid*.

generic nouns: *Shø jüst canna bear da dratsis*. ‘She just can’t stand otters.’

with count nouns that have some kind of close relationship to the speaker (in either time, place or socially), or with habitual actions: *D’ir startit da skül noo* ‘They’ve started school now’.

(participant observation)¹³

3.1.1.4 The verb phrase

Shaetlan has the present, past and perfect tenses, and the progressive aspect. The present tense has an overt tense marker with the 2SG and 3SG:

Table 7. Shaetlan present tense inflection

	KERRY (‘carry’)	SPAEK (‘speak’)
1.SG	<i>I kerry</i>	<i>I spaek</i>
2.SG	<i>du kerries</i>	<i>du spaeks</i>
3.SG	<i>he/shø/(h)it kerries</i>	<i>he/shø/(h)it spaeks</i>
1.PL	<i>we kerry</i>	<i>we spaek</i>
2.PL	<i>you kerry</i>	<i>you spaek</i>
3.PL	<i>dey kerry</i>	<i>dey spaek</i>

The past tense is either marked with a suffix *-ed/-it* (with weak verbs) or is marked nonlinearly (strong verbs). Compare:

(11) *lowse* ‘pour down’ ~ *lowsed*

tøm ‘empty’ ~ *tømed*

tell ‘say’ ~ *tellt*

steep ‘soak’ ~ *steepit*

bide ‘live’ ~ *bed*

fin ‘find’ ~ *fan*

jimp ‘jump’ ~ *jamp*

spaek ‘speak, talk’ ~ *spak*

(participant observation)

The perfect tense is universally marked with a form of BE:

(12) a. *A’m* *seen* *da* *film* *aaraidy*, *bit* *du* *is-na*

1SG = be.1SG.PRS see.PTC DEF film already but 2SG.FAM be.3SG.PRS-NEG

‘I’ve seen the film already, but you haven’t.’

¹³ The more generalised use of the definite article in Shaetlan is also mentioned in Graham (1993: 1).

b. *Y'ir* *been* *dere* *afore*, *bit* *shø* *is-na*
 2PL=be.2PL.PRS be.PTC there before but 3SG.F.S be.3SG.PRS-NEG
 ‘You’ve been there before, but she hasn’t.’

c. *Dey ir* *aa pitten* *oot* *der* *essibag-s*, *onli* *we* *irna*.
 3PL.S be.3PL all put.PTC out 3PL.POSS bin_bag-PL only 1PL.S be.1PL.PRS-NEG
 ‘They have all put out their bin bags, only we haven’t.’ (Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 106-107)

This feature is highly prolific and robust, to the extent that it will even be used with tourists, as mentioned above.

There are a number of modal verbs in Shaetlan: *man* ‘must’ (deductive modality expressing evidentiality or situational modality expressing necessity); *mey/micht* ‘may/might’ (deductive modality expressing possibility); *bøst* ‘have to, must’ (situational modality expressing necessity); *sall/sud* ‘shall/should’ (situational modality expressing certainty); *can/cud* ‘can/could’ (situational modality expressing ability or permission)

Shaetlan has a number of reflexive verbs, which take the unstressed form of the reflexive pronoun as an argument. This is usually done with verbs that involve a change of location somehow, like *come*, *go*, *haste*, etc, as well as posture verbs such as *sit/lie down*, etc:

(13) *A=ll* *maebbi* *jüst* *set* *me* *doon* *fir* *a* *peerie* *start* *afore* *I* *ging*
 1SG.S=BE.FUT maybe just sit 1SG.REFL down for a small while before 1SG.S go
 ‘I’ll maybe just sit down for a little while before I go.’ (Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 111-112)

Because these verbs are intransitive in Standard English, but not in Shaetlan, this is another feature where Shetlanders have misguidedly been “corrected” and told not to use the “superfluous” pronoun.

3.1.1.5 The prepositional phrase

Another feature that has been hiding in plain sight is the differentiation of the verbal particle and the directional preposition ((14))

(14) *Pat=s* *gyaan* *tæ* *ging* *til* *da* *posst* *office*
 Pat=be.PRS.SG go.PRS.PTC to_{PART} go to_{PREP} DEF post_office
 ‘Pat’s going to go to the post office.’ (Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 116-118)

Standard English no longer differentiates between the verbal particle (*to_{PART}*) and the preposition (*to_{PREP}*). Shaetlan speakers thus get “corrected” when they use the

directional *tīl*, in the assumption (based on Standard English) that it is a “mistaken” use of Standard English *till* (‘until’). Here it should be noted that the directional functions of *tīl* had already started to merge with the verbal particle form *tae* when Jakob Jakobsen was doing his fieldwork in Shetland in 1893-95, which he puts down as a contact effect with Standard English (Jakobsen 1928-32: 942). Whether there is any patterning that might correlate with higher access to Standard English (such as access to education and/or to trading centres), remains to be investigated.

Yet another differentiation that is prevalent with most speakers but which has all but vanished in the acrolectal varieties, especially with the literary class speakers, and which is consequently misguidedly “corrected” away, is the preposition *fīr* ‘for’ (pronounced /fɛr/ or /fīr/) versus the conjunction *fur* ‘because’ (pronounced with a rounded vowel, as in /fɛr/ or /fɔr/):

- (15) a. *Da lass maed it fīr her midder*
 DEF girl make.PST 3SG.N for 3SG.F.DPOSS mother
 ‘The girl made it for her mother.’
- b. *Du=ll hae tae spaek up fur I can-na hear dee*
 2SG.FAM.S=be.FUT have to speak up because 1SG.S can-NEG hear 2SG.FAM.O
 ‘You’ll have to speak up because I can’t hear you.’ (Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 115-116)

In our spoken data corpus, areally spread over the length of Shetland, the preposition and conjunction were audibly differentiated the absolute majority of the time (for the statistically minded $X_2 = 262.28$, $df = 1$, $p < .00001^{***}$). It is not unlikely that the two functions have merged into the same form in a pattern replication of Standard English with the literary class speakers, who represent a group highly exposed to Standard English.

Duration is commonly indicated with *in* (as opposed to Standard English *for*):

- (16) *A=m kemp-it in ooer-s!*
 1SG.S=be.1SG.PRS struggle-PTC DUR_{PREP} hour-PL
 ‘I’ve struggled for hours!’ (participant observation)

3.1.1.6 Syntax

The comparative conjunctions are either *as* or *ir*:

- (17) *He=s peerie-r as/ir me*
 3SG.M=be.3SG.PRS small-COMP than 1SG.O
 ‘He’s smaller than me.’ (Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 121-122)

Shaetlan has a mirative copula:¹⁴

- (18) *Shø cam tae be a cusheen o mine*
 3SG.F.S COP.MIR INDF relative of 1SG.POSS
 ‘It turns out she was a relative of mine.’ (Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 128-129)

Yet another interesting case of reanalysed hypercorrection is the existential marker in Shaetlan:

- (19) a. *Look, de’r a dratsi inna da gairden.*
 look EXIST.PRS INDF otter in DEF garden
 ‘Look, there’s an otter in the garden.’
 b. *De wir a dratsi inna da gairden dastreen.*
 EXIST.PST INDF otter in DEF garden yesterday
 ‘There was an otter in the garden yesterday.’ (Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 129-130)

The existential forms, which are not formed with any form of adverbial *dere* (‘there’) – which is also quite audially evident in any spoken data – have in later times been reanalysed to the grammatically illogical Standard English “they are” and “they were”, which is then subsequently rendered in written Shaetlan as “dey are/were” especially by the literary classes and the most acrolectal speakers. However, far more grammatically consistent and therefore convincing is that they are actually fossilised forms of Norn *de* (< ON *þet*, the weak ablaut N.SG.NOM/ACC form of the demonstrative *þat*, which became *det* in all Continental Scandinavian languages; cf. Iversen 1994: 86) plus the Norn *er* ‘is’ and *vera/vesa* ‘be’. These forms are phonetically very close to the Scots forms *ir* ‘are’ and *wir* ‘were’, which could explain the hypercorrection to a construction that does not make grammatical sense in neither Standard English nor Shaetlan.

Shaetlan has two ways of marking negation: a negative suffix *-na* for auxiliaries and an invariant free form *no* for lexical verbs:

- (20) a. *Du sall-na/sud-na spaek*
 2SG.FAM.S shall.PRS-NEG/shall.PST-NEG speak
 ‘You’re not to speak.’
 b. *We ir-na/wir-na hungry*
 1PL.S be.PL.PRS-NEG/be.PL.PST-NEG hungry
 ‘We aren’t/weren’t hungry.’ (Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 130-131)

¹⁴ I am grateful to Ekkehard König for demystifying this construction for me.

- (21) a. *A = m* **no** *sure*
 1SG.S = be.1SG.PRS NEG sure
 ‘I’m not sure.’
- b. *Du = s* **no** *tell-t*
 2SG.FAM.S = be.2SG.PRS NEG tell-PST
 ‘You haven’t said.’

(Velupillai & Mullyay 2022: 131)

Tag questions are formed with the negative tag suffix *-(e)n* and the personal pronoun:

- (22) a. *A = m* *here, am = n* *I?*
 1SG.S = be.1SG.PRS here be.1SG.PRS = NEG_{TAG} 1SG.S
 ‘I’m here, aren’t I?’
- b. *You* *ken* *whit* *I* *mean, do-en* *you?*
 2SG.POL.S know what 1SG.S mean do-NEG_{TAG} 2SG.POL.S
 ‘You know what I mean, don’t you?’
- c. *He* *can* *try* *again,* *cann-en* *he?*
 3SG.M.S can try again can-NEG_{TAG} 3SG.M.S
 ‘He can try again, can’t he?’
- d. *Dey = ll* *send* *it,* *will-en* *dey?*
 3PL.S = will send 3SG.N.O will-NEG_{TAG} 3PL.S
 ‘They’ll send it, won’t they?’

(Velupillai & Mullyay 2022: 133-134)

Content questions are formed with the interrogatives *wha* ‘who’ / *whit* ‘what’ / *whit wye* ‘why; how’ / *whin* ‘when’ / *whar* ‘where’. Polar questions can be formed with tags, *do*-support or inverted word order. However, there is a pragmatically motivated polar question which is morphosyntactically identical to a statement, but has a sharp falling intonation (see ex. (2) above).

The default imperative has postverbal pronoun retention in the subject form:

- (23) *Write du!* / *Write you!*
 write 2SG.FAM.S write 2SG.POL.S/2PL.S
 ‘Write!’

However, imperatives with reflexive verbs show pronoun retention not only with the subject form, but also the object argument:

- (24) a. *Come du* *dee!*
 come 2SG.FAM.S 2SG.FAM.O
 ‘Come!’ (lit. ‘Come yourself’)

- b. *Set du dee doon!*
 set 2SG.FAM.S 2SG.FAM.O down
 ‘Sit down’ (lit. ‘Set yourself down’) (Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 137-138)

Shaetlan has the coordinators *an* ‘and’, *bit* ‘but’, *or* ‘or’, *fur* ‘because’, etc. It allows both finite and non-finite complement clauses, and a number of adverbial clauses. Purpose clauses, for example, are expressed with *fir tae*:

- (25) *Mary geed ti’ da toon fir tae git da airrants.*
 PN go.PST to_{PREP} DEF TOWN PURP get DEF groceries
 ‘Mary went to town to get groceries.’ (Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 146-147)

This purposive is again one of those features that is highly prolific and widespread areally, but which most of the literary class and those speakers who are very exposed to Standard English do not recognise, possibly due to anglicisation of their speech.

The relative clause marker is an invariant *at*:

- (26) *da lass at wave-d / da stane at fell*
 DEF girl REL wave-PST DEF stone REL fall.PST
 ‘The girl who waved / The stone which fell.’ (Velupillai & Mullay 2022: 147-148)

3.1.2 A grammar cluster dendrogram

Velupillai & Mullay (2022) combined the features of Shaetlan with the major features listed for English in the *Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber et al. 2021) and for Swedish in *Svenska Akademiens grammatik* (Teleman et al. 1999). There were two reasons for this: (1) the grammar of Shaetlan is often described as being “mainly English”; and (2) Swedish is genetically as closely related to Shaetlan as Standard English is. As shown above, the ancestors of Shaetlan are Scots (not Standard English) + Norn (not Swedish) + (Middle) Dutch/Low German. Scots is not and never was a dialect of English any more than English is or was a dialect of Scots: Scots descends from Northumbrian Old English, while Standard English descends from Mercian Old English. And Norn was never a dialect of Swedish any more than Swedish is or was a dialect of Norn: Norn descends from Western Old Norse while Swedish descends from Eastern Old Norse. In other words, the genetic distance between Shaetlan, Standard English and Swedish is roughly the same, though Shaetlan has been in an imbalanced diglossic contact situation with Standard English for some 200-250 years, whereas there has not been any significant contact between Shaetlan and Swedish.

Some features were identical. For example, both languages have the same basic constituent order (AVO/SV), but so do 35.4% of the languages of the world (Velupillai

2012: 284). Some features were similar but not the same. For example, both languages have regular and irregular verbs (as do all other Germanic languages), but they differ in which verbs are regular or irregular. Some features had no overlap between the languages. For example, Standard English has a paradigm of relative pronouns (*who/whom/which/that/Ø*), agreeing in at least animacy status (human versus non-human) with the antecedent, while Shaetlan has the invariant *at* for all types of antecedents. On the other hand, Shaetlan, as has been shown above, has an associative plural and a special form for the 2SG (*du*), but Standard English has neither. We weighted the features as follows: identical (total overlap) = 1; similar but not the same (partial overlap) = 0.5; different (no overlap) = 0.

We used the `hclust` function in R to plot a Cluster Dendrogram, where the algorithm clusters data based on how similar or dissimilar they are.

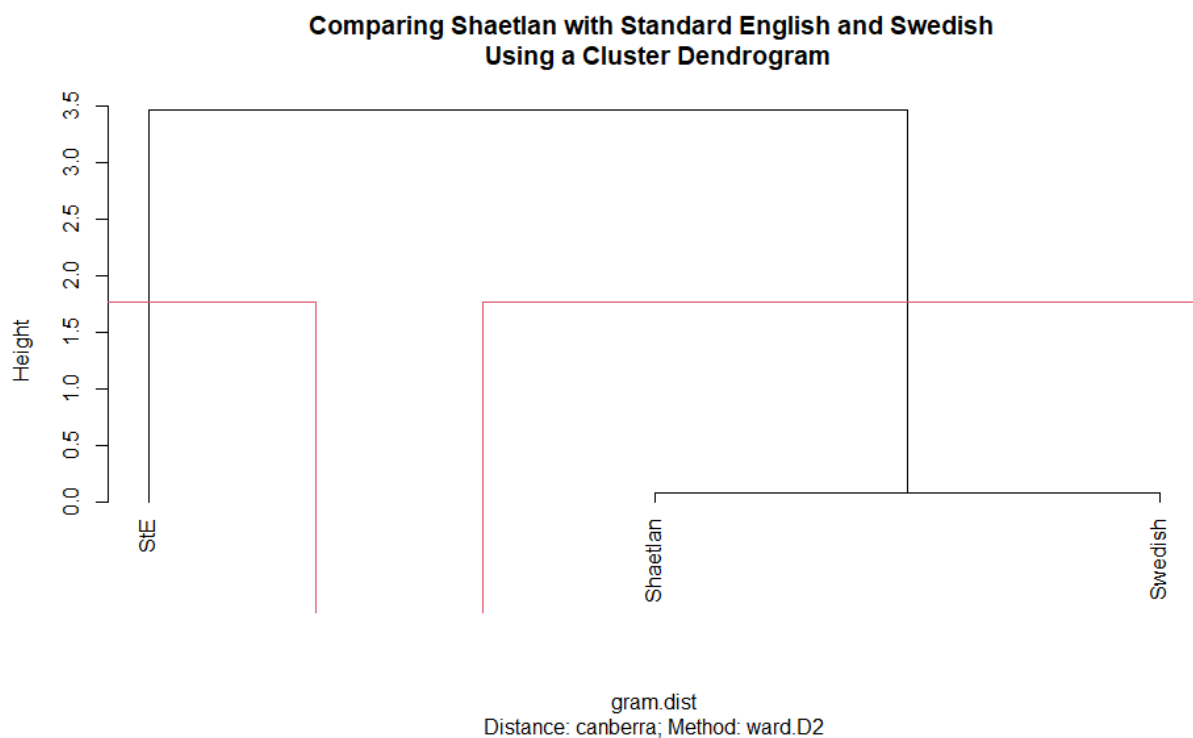


Figure 2. Cluster Dendrogram of a comparison of grammatical features between Standard English, Shaetlan and Swedish.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the branches and boxes show that Shaetlan and Swedish cluster together while Standard English sits on its own. In other words, despite the intense pressure on Shaetlan from Standard English, but with little systematic contact with Swedish, the grammar has remained much closer to the Scandinavian grammar than to the Anglian grammar.

3.2 Lexicon

The Shaetlan lexicon is predominantly Scots Anglian, but with a noticeable Scandinavian substrate and Low Germanic contact influence. There are some semantic domains that exhibit more non-Anglian etymological ancestry, such as weather vocabulary, maritime vocabulary, especially (but not exclusively) types of waves, vocabulary related to diseases, and vocabulary related to traditional skills, such as crofting, fishing, boat building, knitting, peat cutting, stone building, music instrument construction, etc (see Velupillai forthcoming for more details and an in depth discussion). The Low Germanic loans typically – but not exclusively! – appear in the semantic domain of trade. I stress that these are trends only: for example, *flukkra* ‘snowflake’ is from Middle Dutch/Middle Low German *vlocke* ‘(snow)flake’ and is likely to have entered the lexicon due to the Hanseatic trade. Much more in depth research is needed on the potential patterns for etymological clusterings by semantic domains. But see further, for example, Jakobsen (1928-32), Graham (1993), Christie-Johnson & Christie-Johnson (2004), Bugge (2007), Melchers (2010), Shetland ForWirlds (2015), Scott (2017), to mention only a few.

As an experiment, we put together Swadesh 100-lists of seven languages: Shaetlan, Scots, English, Nynorsk Norwegian, Bokmål Norwegian, Swedish and Dutch. The rationale for including those particular languages is that Shaetlan is in an imbalanced diglossic contact situation with English, where English dominates socio-politically. The ancestor languages for Shaetlan are Lowland Scots and Norn, with Low Germanic contact influence. There is not enough data for a Norn Swadesh list. The ancestor languages are thus represented by contemporary Scots, Nynorsk and Dutch, which is an approximation, and obviously also anachronistic, since the formation period of Shaetlan dates from the 16th to the 18th century. Swedish is included as an example of an unrelated Scandinavian language that is genetically as distant from Shaetlan as English is.¹⁵ These data were then run through a phylogenetic network by Peter Bakker and his associates and are summarized in Figure 3.

¹⁵ The sources for the lists were as follows: English: fixed list & native speaker knowledge (Viveka Velupillai); Scots: Robinson (1985); Shaetlan: native speaker knowledge (Ronald B. Eunson); Nynorsk: *Nynorskordboka* (2023); Bokmål: *Bokmålsordboka* (2023); Swedish: native speaker knowledge (Viveka Velupillai); Dutch: native speaker knowledge (Hilly van der Sluis).

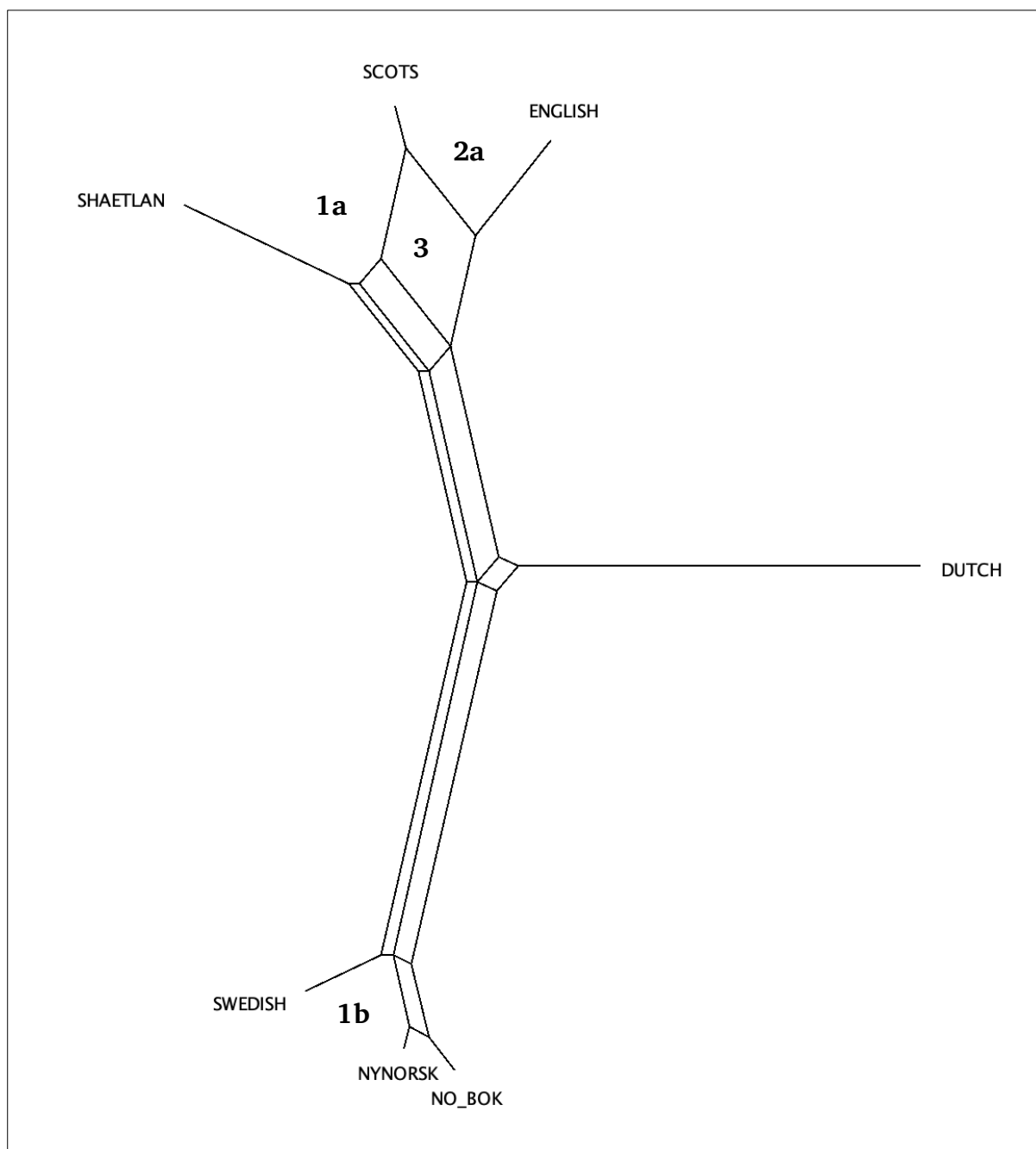


Figure 3. Phylogenetic network visualization of lexical distance between Shaetlan, Scots, English, Swedish, Nynorsk, Bokmål and Dutch. Graph kindly provided by Peter Bakker, with the assistance of Móeiður Vigfúsdóttir, Cecilie Meilby Jensen, Teis Lykke Tambjerg and Anna Damgaard Hansen.

The results show that (i) Shaetlan is considerably more distant from both Scots and English than Swedish is from the two Norwegians (cf. points 1a and 1b); (ii) Scots and English are closer to each other than Shaetlan is to either of them (cf. points 1a and 2a); (iii) the boxed area between Scots and English shows that there is more influence between Scots and English than there is between either of them with Shaetlan (cf. point 3).

Incidentally, this neatly illustrates that “Language is a dialect with an army and a navy” (Anonymous via Weinreich 1945): Swedish and the two Norwegians cluster very closely together, and are considered separate languages. Yet Shaetlan, which is quite removed from both Scots and English, and has the second most distinct branch (after Dutch), keeps being referred to as a “dialect” – in fact most insistently by that same literary elite who themselves write in the language (see further Section 5 below) – despite what the linguistic data shows.

4 Shaetlan: A G-L Mixed Language

Prototypically, Mixed Languages have split ancestry, that is, they have two (or a few) identifiable source languages, and they typically emerge in situations of stable community bilingualism (Velupillai 2015: 70). Mixed Languages are often labelled as ‘dialects’ of one of the source languages (most commonly of the source language from which the bulk of the lexicon derives), but it is important to keep in mind that these are autonomous linguistic systems (see further Velupillai 2015: 70).

The most common type of Mixed Language known to us today is the G[rammar]-L[exicon] Mixed Language, where the grammar predominantly originates from one source language and the lexicon predominantly originates from the other source language. Needless to say, this is a simplification: not 100% of the grammar will have transferred from source language 1 and not 100% of the lexicon will have transferred from source language 2. In fact, since code-switching is likely to have been an instrumental factor in the formation of any given Mixed Language (cf., for example, Thomason & Kaufman 1988, Auer 1999, Muysken 2000, Thomason 2001, Matras 2003, Myers-Scotton 2003, Bakker & Matras 2013, Meakins 2013, Bakker 2017, Smith & Grant 2019), it is safe to assume that the absolute majority of G-L languages will show a certain degree of blending of both languages in both the grammar and the lexicon – as well as innovations not attested in either of the source languages (cf. also Fleming 2021).

Bakker’s (2017) model has convincingly proposed that the prototypical G-L language will have its grammar from the original settlers and its lexicon from the new settlers of the contact situation (see also Bakker 2019, 2020). This is in fact sociologically fairly straightforward: the more visible lexicon – as speakers we are quite aware of the words and sounds of our utterances – is provided by the new settlers, which tend to be more socioeconomically dominating, while the more hidden grammar – as speakers we are less aware of the structure of our utterances – is retained from the original, less socioeconomically dominating settlers. This can be

seen in, for example, Bildts, a Mixed Language spoken in the province of Fryslân in the north of the Netherlands (van Sluis et al. 2016). In Bildts the grammatical system is predominantly Frisian (the language of the original locals) and the lexicon is predominantly derived from a combination of the varieties of Hollandic from the South Holland province (the varieties of the new settlers). Typical for these kinds of languages is also that they tend to be referred to as ‘dialects’ of the source language which has provided the bulk of the lexicon – i.e. the language which represents the socioeconomically dominant new settlers. Thus Bildts has for long been referred to as a ‘dialect of Dutch’, when in fact it is distinct enough to be recognised in its own right.

Shaetlan arose in a contact situation of two main languages, Norn and Scots (c.f. also Laurenson 1860, Lyngby 1860, Edmondston 1866, Ross 1893-93, Jakobsen 1908-21, Angus 1914, Robertson & Graham 1952/1991, Graham 1993, Barnes 1998, Melchers 2004a/b, van Leyden 2004, Knooihuizen 2005, McColl Millar 2007, Melchers & Sundqvist 2010, among many others). Shaetlan is thus, as mentioned above, by definition a Contact Language, in that it emerged due to a specific contact situation, in this case the long drawn contact between the Norn speaking original settlers of Shetland and the Lowland Scots (Lallans) speaking new settlers to Shetland. This contact situation led to mixed marriages and stable community bilingualism, as stated by contemporary testimonies. The language ecology also included Low Country Germanic varieties, due to the intense and long drawn trade with the Hanseatic League and the Dutch herring industry, a contact which, as mentioned above, lasted until the Napoleonic wars. The formation history thus bears close similarities to that of Michif in Canada (cf. Bakker 1997), especially with respect to the mixed marriages where the dominant pattern seems to have been a Scots speaking husband and a Norn speaking wife, leading to a new bicultural community identity. Following Bakker’s 2017 model we would thus expect a G-L language with its grammar predominantly from the original settlers (Norn) and its lexicon predominantly from the socioeconomically dominating new settlers (Scots). And this is what the graphs above in fact show: Figure 2 above shows that the grammar of Shaetlan clusters with Scandinavian (not Anglian), while Figure 3 above shows that the Shaetlan lexicon is predominantly Anglian but still highly distinct from both Scots and English (notice that Shaetlan sits on the second most distinct branch in the phylogenetic network of Figure 3). We thus find a language where the grammar derives predominantly from the variety of the previous settlers (Scandinavian Norn) and the lexicon derives predominantly from the variety of the new settlers (Anglian Scots). Shaetlan in fact

now serves as a case study for a prototypical G-L Mixed Language as per Bakker's 2017 model.

5 The status of Shaetlan then and now

As mentioned in Section 1 above, Shaetlan now finds itself in a continued displacive diglossic relationship with Shetland English, where English is considered 'proper' (and is referred to as such, as in the admonition *tae spaek proper* 'to speak English') with the implication that Shaetlan is not. This falls back on at least 200 years of stigma, where the language was increasingly associated with the socioeconomic lower strata of manual and menial labour and was thus seen as adverse to socioeconomic advancement (see Velupillai forthcoming for details).

The socioeconomically dominant culture, such as clergy, administrative and law functionaries, despite its numerical minority, increasingly looked down upon the language. The language of the Church in Scotland gradually shifted from Scots to English, a process which was accelerated by the Union of the Crowns in 1603 and the subsequent translation of the Bible into English (not Scots) by James VI/I. This development also gradually spread to Shetland. Organised and eventually universal schooling spread to all areas of Scotland (including Shetland), and the language of the classroom was English (not Scots). As mentioned, children were told to speak 'proper' (i.e. English) in the classroom. It was very common until recently that children were punished, also physically, for using Shaetlan in the classroom.¹⁶ The notion that the language associated with such base occupations as the most menial ones of society would actually be a language in its own right, with a structure and a value in its own right, was, if it was even voiced, dismissed or ridiculed. This kind of attitudinal bias is not uncommon in contact situations, especially in situations with a displacive contact, where the register of a minority of power holders is seen as more valuable than the register of the majority local population (cf. e.g. Velupillai 2015 and Faraclas 2021, with further references). It is especially common in colonial situations, or situations where a minority of power holders seek to exploit the resources of some environment through the efforts of a majority labour base (ibid.).

As is common worldwide in these kinds of displacive contact situations, the stigma of the local language is internalised and then in fact actively perpetuated by

¹⁶ As publicly objected by one parent in 1880: "Da skülmaisters hae nae bishiness ta interfere wi' wir guid midder tongue. We pay dem fur laernin' bairns English, no fur unlaernin' wir Shetlan' speech." (*Shetland Times* Saturday 20 November 1880: 3).

the speakers themselves (cf. Aikhenvald 2006). It is seen as backward, crude and undesirable, but yet there is a fondness for it because it is the language of the home. Consequently it may acquire a kind of token value as a code for entertainment, for comic relief and for nostalgia, appropriate for songs, comic and satirical stories, and poetry, but not for the daily running of a modern society, and not for education or administration. In short it becomes a plaything for the literary elite, who on the one hand enjoy and ‘promote’ a well-defined and symbolic niche place for the language, but on the other hand deny (quite vehemently) its value in its own right as a perfectly ordinary and systematic language. This despite the fact that Shaetlan has been recognised as a highly distinct variety for centuries (see, e.g., Laurenson 1860, Lyngby 1860, Edmondston 1866, Ross 1893-93, Jakobsen 1908-21, Angus 1914 for early such works). And here we find the contradictory position of speakers who on the one hand are eager to ‘promote’ the language for entertainment and symbolic purposes, and who are keen to continue adding to the already large body of poetry, children’s books, dramas, translations, films, etc., but who on the other hand do not themselves transmit the language to their own children and who adamantly object to its use as a general medium of instruction in schools beyond occasional curiosity and/or story telling sessions.¹⁷

However, Shaetlan does enjoy a covert prestige status, and is also used as a language of subtle subversion, where register divergence is used as a marker of social distance indicating disapproval (cf. e.g. Bourhis & Giles 1977 and subsequent). For example, in a situation or meeting where Standard English would have been the default, the Shaetlan speaker might shift more and more into Shaetlan the more annoyed s/he gets at the interlocutors. Most typically this kind of distancing happens when the interlocutor treats the Shaetlan speaker in a haughty manner, or in similar such situations. Furthermore, Shaetlan has acquired a noticeable street cred, possibly

¹⁷ I not only have numerous independent reports about this from Shaetlan speakers in numerous independent interviews, but have myself been able to longitudinally observe speakers active in the emblematic ‘promotion’ of Shaetlan who (1) consistently speak English to their own children and whose children therefore are only exposed to Shaetlan by others than their own parents, e.g. grandparents; and (2) who openly oppose to the recognition of the variety as a language. Furthermore, I have numerous reports of Shaetlan speaking teachers who have been told off by Shaetlan speaking parents for the fact that they have used Shaetlan in their own classrooms.

as an anti-establishment marker, particularly among teenage males (of varying linguistic backgrounds).¹⁸

Furthermore, as is very common worldwide with stigmatised and marginalised varieties, Shaetlan has for the last couple of decades been used vigorously in *digitalk*, the informal written register used in digital media, especially text messaging, and social media messaging or posts (text/similar, WhatsApp and Facebook dominate, but Shaetlan can also be found in some Twitter/X and Instagram posts). The use of Shaetlan in *digitalk* has been discussed extensively by Walterson (2020); see also Karam (2020). The informal nature of these spaces provides a safe, non-corrective, space for the informal register (i.e. Shaetlan). The effect if this is in turn that Shaetlan gets more and more normalised as a written language: the sheer repetitive habit of using Shaetlan with the gadget (which by necessity involves using a keyboard) has a normalising effect, which in turn might lead to a greater acceptance of the language as a written medium beyond entertainment pieces (cf. Velupillai 2021, 2022). However, the average Shaetlan *digitalk* user has to fight against English autocorrect and spellchecking. For this reason *Da Shetlan Project* secured a place for Shaetlan on the Microsoft SwiftKey keyboard as of November 2021, the first time ever that Shetlanders saw their language included in an international list of languages (see Velupillai 2022 for details). Our subsequent launch of *Wirdle* provided the community with the first ever digital game in Shaetlan and was immediately popular: it was launched at 22:00 on 12 February 2022 and twelve hours later, at 10:00 on 13 February 2022, the game had 500 players. It is still played daily (Andrew Blance, p.c. 9 October 2023).

In July 2022 the University of the Highlands and Islands Shetland College adopted in totality the *Shaetlan Language Plan*, authored and submitted by Dr. Beth Mouat. It was subsequently made public in September 2022 (Mouat 2022). This is the first time ever that Shaetlan gets de facto recognition as language in its own right by a major body. The key aims of the *Shaetlan Language Plan* are to

¹⁸ I have repeatedly observed both of these phenomena through participant observation spanning over 8 years.

- I. normalise Shaetlan
- II. include Shaetlan in the next census
- III. include Shaetlan in signage
- IV. bring Shaetlan into both L1 and L2 learning
- V. produce education materials in Shaetlan
- VI. offer research projects on Shaetlan
- VII. bring new education offers in Shaetlan

Point (II) is, as mentioned in Section 1 above, the only method to get a more reliable figure of the actual number of speakers. At the moment only English, Scots and Gaelic are included in the Scottish census. However, Shetlanders by and large do not identify as Scots speakers: by ‘Scots’ Shetlanders mean Lallans – essentially the variety represented by Robert Burns and the Lowland areas of Scotland, which is quite justified in itself. However, that is not the variety Shetlanders speak. Numerous (anonymous) interviews and discussions have shown me that the absolute majority of Shaetlan speakers will therefore not tick the box for ‘Scots’, but only tick the box for ‘English’ (Gaelic has never been a major language in the Shetland archipelago).¹⁹ This in turn creates a skewed picture of language use in Shetland, with data that indicates a much higher level of monolingual English use than is actually the case. An independent confirmation of that general picture is that since Shaetlan was included in the Microsoft SwiftKey keyboard, fewer than 2.5% of the Shaetlan SwiftKey users have downloaded the Scots keyboard: the vast majority have downloaded either only Shaetlan or both Shaetlan and English (J. Baley, p.c. 14 March 2023). Including Shaetlan in the next census is therefore critical in order to get an accurate and inclusive picture of language use on the islands.

All other points of the Shaetlan Language Plan demand an orthographic convention, which, as mentioned in Section 3 above, has been devised and made available by *Da Shaetlan Project*. This orthography is currently implemented in the Shaetlan SwiftKey Keyboard, Wirdle, all Shaetlan material produced by *Da Shaetlan*

¹⁹ In fact, by and large Shetlanders do not regard themselves as Scottish, but as Shetlanders. The statement “I am not Scottish, I’m Shetland” is old and still very common. The following quote by and large still holds true today:

A Land Distinct from Scotland

We found the people in many ways just like ourselves, in many ways quite different. They do not regard themselves as Scots, and always speak of Shetland as a land quite distinct from Scotland. ... The language, too, we found strange ... (Addison 1932: 3)

Project,²⁰ including the *Primer* (Velupillai & Mullay 2022), and *Da Spaektionary*²¹. It is also the orthography implemented in the Shaetlan version of the information leaflets commissioned by Historic Environment Scotland for Jarlshof, a major archaeological site in Shetland. These leaflets were also a major step towards recognition and normalisation: for the first time ever, Shetlanders get to read about their tangible heritage in their own language.

These are encouraging steps, which will hopefully lead to further inclusion and recognition of Shaetlan, possibly even to the extent that it will one day be a normal and ordinary medium of instruction in schools, and that we will one day see exams, essays, and theses in Shaetlan.

6 Conclusion: Shaetlan is an endangered G-L language in the North Sea

This chapter has shown that Shaetlan is a G-L Mixed Language of Norn and Scots ancestry, with a noticeable historical contact influence from the continental Low Country Germanic languages. Its grammar is predominantly Scandinavian while its lexicon is predominantly Anglian but with such a high degree of Scandinavian still in it, as well as some Dutch/Low German traces, that it remains more lexically distinct from Scots and English than Swedish is from the two Norwegians.

The primary formation period of Shaetlan was between the 15th and 17th centuries, i.e. before English became a sociopolitically dominant language in the archipelago. For the last 250 years or so, English has been seen and valued as the ‘proper’ language, as projected by the Church, the education system and the administrative system. Shaetlan, on the other hand, has throughout been identified as a highly distinct linguistic code, but never recognised as valid in its own right. Instead it has at best been seen as a quaint and quirky brogue, or, with more hostility, as rude and backward gobbledygook that should be eradicated.

Shaetlan is today endangered, with dwindling transmission. It is still not accepted as a medium of instruction in schools or as a generally valid language of administration. However, it does enjoy considerable covert prestige, and is seeing growing use in *digitalk*. Furthermore, it has recently received de facto recognition by the University of the Highlands and Islands Shetland College in the form of the

²⁰ See <https://www.iheardee.com/shaetlan/ootpits> (in Shaetlan) or <https://www.iheardee.com/english/output> (in English).

²¹ <https://www.iheardee.com/spaektionary>.

Shaetlan Language Plan, as well as by Historic Environment Scotland in the form of Shaetlan language information leaflets at a major archaeological site in Shetland.

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Abbreviations

1, 2, 3	first, second, third person	N	noun
ADJZR	adjectivizer	N	neuter
ADVZR	adverbalizer	NEG	negation
APL	associative plural	NMLZR	nominalizer
COMP	comparative	O	object
COP	copula	OBJ	object
DEF	definite	PART	particle
DEM	demonstrative	PL	plural
DIST	distal	PN	proper name
DPOSS	dependent possessive	POL	polite
DUM	dummy	POSS	possessive
DUR	durative	PREP	preposition
EXIST	existential	PROG	progressive
F	feminine	PROX	proximate
FAM	familiar	PRS	present
FUT	future	PST	past
INDF	indefinite	PTC	participial
IPOSS	independent possessive	PURP	purposive
M	masculine	REFL	reflexive
MIR	mirative	REL	relative

REM	remote	SG	singular
S	subject	VBLZR	verbalizer
SBJ	subject		

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