The history of language in Shetland

Pre-300AD Before the Picts

Pictish people carve symbols into stone and speak a 'Celtic' language.

300AD-800AD Picts

Vikings occupy the isles and introduce 'Norn'. They carve symbols called 'runes' into stone. The Picts and their language are then wiped out by Vikings.

800AD-1500AD Vikings

Scotland rule gradually influences life on the islands. The Scottish language eventually becomes the prominent language.

1500AD onwards Scots

The dialect Shetlanders speak with today contains Scottish and Norn words.

Today Us!

We don’t know much about the people of Shetland or their language.

Language in Shetland
**THE PICTS**

The Picts lived in mainland Scotland from around the 6th to the 9th Century, possibly earlier. Indications of a burial at Sumburgh suggest that Picts had probably settled in Shetland by 300AD.

The Picts spoke a Celtic language, originating from Ireland. Picts may have travelled from Ireland, Scotland or further afield to settle on Shetland.

Picts also carved symbols onto stone. These symbols have been found throughout Scotland—common symbols must have been understood by many Picts all over ‘Pictland’.

Some stones appear to be memorials; the symbols chosen for a memorial stone may represent the individual or family.

Some symbols were abstract; some depicted animals or human figures. Others represented aspects of paganism or Christianity. Abstract symbols sometimes accompanied each other, or accompanied figures, such as animals or beasts.

The Papil Stone (left) is an example of a Pictish symbol stone from 7-8th Century. It was found in 1877, and depicts a cross, monks, a lion and two unusual ‘bird-men’.

Some carvings are part of an alphabet called ‘ogham’. Ogham represents the spoken language of the Picts, by using a ‘stem’ with shorter lines across it or on either side of it.

There are seven ogham inscriptions from Shetland (including St Ninian’s Isle, Cunningsburgh and Bressay) and one from a peat bog in Lunnasting.

Some stones appear to be memorials; the symbols chosen for a memorial stone may represent the individual or family.

The side, number and angle of the short lines to the stem indicates the intended sound.

This inscribed sandstone was dug up from the area of the ancient church in Mail Churchyard in Cunningsburgh.

Photo: c1903, from Shetland Museum

The Bressay Stone (right) shows elaborate decoration on both large sides, and an ogham inscription on each end. The inscription reads:

**CRROSCC : NAHHTVVDADDSS : DATTR : ANNBENNISES : MEQQDDROANN**

Which translates as:

“The Cross of Nordred’s daughter is here placed.”

“Benises son of Droan.”

shetlopedia.com

ogham.celt.dias.ie
The aural language was exterminated without much trace, and any written forms, on wood or other perishable materials may have been lost over the years.

Only a few written artefacts have been found; they are mostly formal memorials, such as the inscription on the Bressay stone, and they do not help us establish what the ‘everyday’ language was like.

Because of this, we know very little about the Pictish language. We also know only a little about the spoken language the Vikings brought with them to Shetland.

Both the Pictish and the Viking languages that were prominent in Shetland are likely to have been communicated aurally, and seldom written down.

The majority of the population were illiterate at this time.

The Picts and their culture were strongly rooted in Shetland for around 500 years before the Vikings invaded the isles from around 800AD onwards.

Charles Thomas (1973) suggests that the spirals seen on this slab may represent the sea, and, with the monks, may indicate the early missionaries travel to Shetland.
The Vikings travelled by sea from areas of Scandinavia—mostly Norway. Once they invaded Shetland, they settled down. They took control of land and made a living as fishermen and crofters.

Vikings spoke an Old Norse language originating from their homeland in Scandinavia. This language got broken up into distinct dialects once Vikings settled in different areas. The 'strand' of Old Norse that became prominent in Shetland and Orkney was given the name 'Norn'.

Norn was closely related to the dialect in South-West Norway—the Norn language most likely travelled from this area, and Shetland's geographical connections with this area were greater than with other parts of Norway.

The word Norn derives from the Old Norse adjective Norrønn, meaning 'Norse' or 'Norwegian' and the corresponding noun Norrønna, meaning 'Norwegian/Norse language'.

Norn was, in a sense, a dialect of Old Norse, just as Shetland now is a dialect of Scots.

Norn was spoken in Shetland for centuries until the islands came under Scottish rule.

Norn was mostly an aural language. We don't have many written records of Norn—it was perhaps rarely written down, or perhaps written records have perished over time.

The descriptiveness of place names indicate that Norn was perhaps quite a descriptive language. The Shetland dialect today contains many adjectives relating to specific types of weather, nature and actions. 

Steekit mist—very dense fog
Voar—spring
Knap—Shetlander’s attempt to ‘speak proper English’

To identify areas and establish ownership, Vikings named many specific areas of land, including small parts of field and hill—the names assigned by Vikings were often very descriptive.
Latin Scaldic Verse: A distinct genre of Old Norse poetry. Examples were found in Orkney, but may have originated from Scandinavia.

Jakob Jakobsen gathered Norn words in the 1890s—Norn was not spoken by this time, but Jakobsen managed to retrieve around 10,000 Norn words known or remembered by Shetlanders at the time.

The remnants of language we have found in Orkney and Shetland include:
- Runic inscriptions
- Documents written in Latin
- Fragments of spoken Norn written down before the language died
- Words preserved in Scaldic verse
- Place-names
- Remnants recorded after Norn had already died

Orkney has 52 surviving runic inscriptions—Shetland has only 7. They are difficult to understand, but we do know that they bear some relation to the West Scandinavian language.

Latin documents found on the isles were likely written by Norwegians, perhaps even written in Norway—they provide no clear insight to the language in Shetland.

Runic script: a set of related alphabets using letters known as runes to write various Germanic languages.

Like Pictish symbols, runes in Shetland were often carved into stone as memorial inscriptions.

Germanic languages were used before the Roman alphabet (Latin) came into use (at around 1100AD in Northern Europe).

The latest known example we’ve found in Shetland is a gravestonel from around 1300AD, from Eshaness.

Altogether we’ve found only seven surviving runic inscriptions in Shetland—around fifty have been found in Orkney.

Fragments of Norn were written down at a time of linguistic change, by George Low, a man with no prior knowledge of Norn or Scandinavian—they give us restricted insight to a changing language in only one isolated area of Shetland.

Latin was probably already present in Shetland by this time (though the majority were illiterate), but it’s possible that runes were used for some time after the introduction of Latin.

Place-names indicate a real presence of Norn, but give us little information about the structure of the language.
Scottish Influence

Life in Shetland immediately after the annexation of the isles to Scotland changed very little —Scottish laws were introduced in 1611, and from then the transition to the Scottish language, economy and customs was a gradual process.

The main reasons for an increase in Scottish influence were:

- Scottish rule
- Governmental/economical connection to Scotland
- Immigration
- Emigration
- Changes in trade

Shetlanders sold their goods through Hanseatic German merchantmen from the 15th century onwards. They exported wool, butter and salted fish, and imported cloth, salt, beer and other goods.

A decrease in young Shetlanders living on the isles meant the native language had more difficulty surviving.

Young Shetlanders were leaving the isles to find better economic climates and more opportunities, whilst Scots were moving into the isles.

The Scots who settled influenced the language on the isles, and also brought their customs and religious observances with them.

Scottish Influence

Shetlanders were linguistically adept—they picked up languages they needed for trade, such as German, and could converse with the Dutch fishermen who came ashore.

There was a clause in the pawn document which could allow a Danish ruler to redeem the islands by a monetary deposit. There was also an obligation to retain the language and laws of Norway.

The Danes did attempt to redeem the isles over a number of years, to no avail—Scotland simply ignored their requests.

For 200 years after the pawn, the islands were passed back and forth 14 times between the Scottish Crown and Scottish courtiers as a means of extracting income.

Dowry: money or goods a bride's family brings to her groom at their marriage.

At the end of the 14th Century Norway entered into union with Denmark. Shetland was passed from Norwegian to Danish governance.

Less than a century later, in 1469, Shetland was handed over to Scotland, along with Orkney. This was to serve as part of a dowry for the marriage between Princess Margaret of Denmark and King James III.

King Christian I of Denmark (and Norway) was not legally permitted to pawn the islands (he was king of the people, but under Udal Law—the Norse legal system—he had no overall ownership of the land). However, he did so anyway, without consenting the ‘Norwegian Riksråd’ (Council of the Realm).

Scottish Influence

Scottish rule

11

Life in Shetland immediately after the annexation of the isles to Scotland changed very little —Scottish laws were introduced in 1611, and from then the transition to the Scottish language, economy and customs was a gradual process.

The main reasons for an increase in Scottish influence were:

- Scottish rule
- Governmental/economical connection to Scotland
- Immigration
- Emigration
- Changes in trade

Shetlanders sold their goods through Hanseatic German merchantmen from the 15th century onwards. They exported wool, butter and salted fish, and imported cloth, salt, beer and other goods.

A decrease in young Shetlanders living on the isles meant the native language had more difficulty surviving.

Young Shetlanders were leaving the isles to find better economic climates and more opportunities, whilst Scots were moving into the isles.

The Scots who settled influenced the language on the isles, and also brought their customs and religious observances with them.

Scottish Influence

Shetlanders were linguistically adept—they picked up languages they needed for trade, such as German, and could converse with the Dutch fishermen who came ashore.

There was a clause in the pawn document which could allow a Danish ruler to redeem the islands by a monetary deposit. There was also an obligation to retain the language and laws of Norway.

The Danes did attempt to redeem the isles over a number of years, to no avail—Scotland simply ignored their requests.

For 200 years after the pawn, the islands were passed back and forth 14 times between the Scottish Crown and Scottish courtiers as a means of extracting income.

Dowry: money or goods a bride's family brings to her groom at their marriage.

At the end of the 14th Century Norway entered into union with Denmark. Shetland was passed from Norwegian to Danish governance.

Less than a century later, in 1469, Shetland was handed over to Scotland, along with Orkney. This was to serve as part of a dowry for the marriage between Princess Margaret of Denmark and King James III.

King Christian I of Denmark (and Norway) was not legally permitted to pawn the islands (he was king of the people, but under Udal Law—the Norse legal system—he had no overall ownership of the land). However, he did so anyway, without consenting the ‘Norwegian Riksråd’ (Council of the Realm).

Scottish Influence

Scottish rule

11

Life in Shetland immediately after the annexation of the isles to Scotland changed very little —Scottish laws were introduced in 1611, and from then the transition to the Scottish language, economy and customs was a gradual process.

The main reasons for an increase in Scottish influence were:

- Scottish rule
- Governmental/economical connection to Scotland
- Immigration
- Emigration
- Changes in trade

Shetlanders sold their goods through Hanseatic German merchantmen from the 15th century onwards. They exported wool, butter and salted fish, and imported cloth, salt, beer and other goods.

A decrease in young Shetlanders living on the isles meant the native language had more difficulty surviving.

Young Shetlanders were leaving the isles to find better economic climates and more opportunities, whilst Scots were moving into the isles.

The Scots who settled influenced the language on the isles, and also brought their customs and religious observances with them.

Scottish Influence

Shetlanders were linguistically adept—they picked up languages they needed for trade, such as German, and could converse with the Dutch fishermen who came ashore.

There was a clause in the pawn document which could allow a Danish ruler to redeem the islands by a monetary deposit. There was also an obligation to retain the language and laws of Norway.

The Danes did attempt to redeem the isles over a number of years, to no avail—Scotland simply ignored their requests.

For 200 years after the pawn, the islands were passed back and forth 14 times between the Scottish Crown and Scottish courtiers as a means of extracting income.

Dowry: money or goods a bride's family brings to her groom at their marriage.

At the end of the 14th Century Norway entered into union with Denmark. Shetland was passed from Norwegian to Danish governance.

Less than a century later, in 1469, Shetland was handed over to Scotland, along with Orkney. This was to serve as part of a dowry for the marriage between Princess Margaret of Denmark and King James III.

King Christian I of Denmark (and Norway) was not legally permitted to pawn the islands (he was king of the people, but under Udal Law—the Norse legal system—he had no overall ownership of the land). However, he did so anyway, without consenting the ‘Norwegian Riksråd’ (Council of the Realm).

Scottish Influence

Scottish rule

11

Life in Shetland immediately after the annexation of the isles to Scotland changed very little —Scottish laws were introduced in 1611, and from then the transition to the Scottish language, economy and customs was a gradual process.

The main reasons for an increase in Scottish influence were:

- Scottish rule
- Governmental/economical connection to Scotland
- Immigration
- Emigration
- Changes in trade

Shetlanders sold their goods through Hanseatic German merchantmen from the 15th century onwards. They exported wool, butter and salted fish, and imported cloth, salt, beer and other goods.

A decrease in young Shetlanders living on the isles meant the native language had more difficulty surviving.

Young Shetlanders were leaving the isles to find better economic climates and more opportunities, whilst Scots were moving into the isles.

The Scots who settled influenced the language on the isles, and also brought their customs and religious observances with them.

Scottish Influence

Shetlanders were linguistically adept—they picked up languages they needed for trade, such as German, and could converse with the Dutch fishermen who came ashore.

There was a clause in the pawn document which could allow a Danish ruler to redeem the islands by a monetary deposit. There was also an obligation to retain the language and laws of Norway.

The Danes did attempt to redeem the isles over a number of years, to no avail—Scotland simply ignored their requests.

For 200 years after the pawn, the islands were passed back and forth 14 times between the Scottish Crown and Scottish courtiers as a means of extracting income.

Dowry: money or goods a bride's family brings to her groom at their marriage.

At the end of the 14th Century Norway entered into union with Denmark. Shetland was passed from Norwegian to Danish governance.

Less than a century later, in 1469, Shetland was handed over to Scotland, along with Orkney. This was to serve as part of a dowry for the marriage between Princess Margaret of Denmark and King James III.

King Christian I of Denmark (and Norway) was not legally permitted to pawn the islands (he was king of the people, but under Udal Law—the Norse legal system—he had no overall ownership of the land). However, he did so anyway, without consenting the ‘Norwegian Riksråd’ (Council of the Realm).

Scottish Influence

Scottish rule

11

Life in Shetland immediately after the annexation of the isles to Scotland changed very little —Scottish laws were introduced in 1611, and from then the transition to the Scottish language, economy and customs was a gradual process.

The main reasons for an increase in Scottish influence were:

- Scottish rule
- Governmental/economical connection to Scotland
- Immigration
- Emigration
- Changes in trade

Shetlanders sold their goods through Hanseatic German merchantmen from the 15th century onwards. They exported wool, butter and salted fish, and imported cloth, salt, beer and other goods.

A decrease in young Shetlanders living on the isles meant the native language had more difficulty surviving.

Young Shetlanders were leaving the isles to find better economic climates and more opportunities, whilst Scots were moving into the isles.

The Scots who settled influenced the language on the isles, and also brought their customs and religious observances with them.

Scottish Influence

Shetlanders were linguistically adept—they picked up languages they needed for trade, such as German, and could converse with the Dutch fishermen who came ashore.

There was a clause in the pawn document which could allow a Danish ruler to redeem the islands by a monetary deposit. There was also an obligation to retain the language and laws of Norway.

The Danes did attempt to redeem the isles over a number of years, to no avail—Scotland simply ignored their requests.

For 200 years after the pawn, the islands were passed back and forth 14 times between the Scottish Crown and Scottish courtiers as a means of extracting income.

Dowry: money or goods a bride's family brings to her groom at their marriage.

At the end of the 14th Century Norway entered into union with Denmark. Shetland was passed from Norwegian to Danish governance.

Less than a century later, in 1469, Shetland was handed over to Scotland, along with Orkney. This was to serve as part of a dowry for the marriage between Princess Margaret of Denmark and King James III.
For some time Shetlanders were bilingual—they could speak both Norn and Scots, but gradually Norn became less relevant.

Names, particularly forenames, were the first to go—Norse forenames were refused by Scots clergy at baptisms, with but a few exceptions, such as Magnus.

Gradual disintegration

Words remain in a language for longer:
✓ where they have a necessary use (in the workplace)
✓ where they are used informally (in the home)
✓ and where there is no equivalent in another language

Norn wasn’t a literary language—when Scots threatened the Norn oral tradition, its complete existence was jeopardised. After it’s demise, very few relics of the language were found or recovered.

The lack of written Norn has also made it difficult for us to map out the development, and disintegration, of the Norn language.

Sem Kløv—used for driving on røvs (the washers clinched onto boat nails)

Norn words survived in fishing, farming and the home, as well as specific adjectives which do not have a sufficient Scottish/English equivalent (words for weather, seasons, nature and other descriptive words for people, characters and actions).

The transition of the language from Norn to Scots was complex—the language in different areas of Shetland changed at different rates. Even today we hear different dialects in different areas of Shetland.

Geography, travel and isolation from immigrants, sea-farers and other areas of Shetland determined how the language in a particular area changed.

The Norn language fragmented throughout the 17th century.

By the 18th century the dominant language spoken in Shetland was Scots.

A summary of the main reasons for the gradual demise of the Norn language is below:

✓ Scotland acquiring rule of isles
✓ A growing legislative and governmental connection to Scotland
✓ Emigration of Shetlanders
✓ Immigration of Scots
✓ Importation and exportation business between Shetland and Scotland only

Map of Scotland, 1761—both Shetland and Orkney are in an inset at the top right of the map. © scran.ac.uk
Replacing ‘th’ with ‘d’ is an example of how the Norn language has some survival in Shetland today.

Like Norn, the Shetland dialect comes from an aural tradition—how we spell dialect words is debated regularly, and can vary just like pronunciation, depending on the area of Shetland you come from.

There are differences in dialect throughout different areas of Shetland. The history of the area, travel limitations and isolation of each area can be attributed somewhat to the linguistic differences that exist in Shetland.

The amount of linguistic influences Shetland has experienced makes it difficult to assign origin to some words we use—most we can trace back to Old Scots, Norn, or standard English.

We have retained some influences from lesser known sources, such as the Dutch fishermen who frequented Shetland during the 18th and 19th centuries—our dialect word ‘cabbi-labbi’ (meaning hubbub, or confused noise) stems from their ‘kibbelen’—to wrangle.

Norn can be identified in our place names, our pronunciation of Scottish/English words, and in words unique to the Shetland dialect.

Dialect in prose and poetry

Dialect can be found in the local press, local radio and in an increasing number of local non-fiction material, particularly published memoirs.

There are a number of dialect stories written for young children.

Dialect is also found in literature, in poetry, in drama and in song.

Da Sang o Da Papa
Men, in ‘Da Sangs At A’Ill Sing Ta Dee’, 1973, Shetland Folk Society
Aald Daa

Da tap, tap, tap o his staff apu da brig-stanes;
He clears oot o his craig, an gies a kreks;
Sneets his nose atween two müldy fingers,
Dan comes in trow, an for da pipe he reks.

Biits lowsed aff, da sock feet ta da fire;
An wi a bit o pocky faalded in a steek,
He boos him for a light, an draas contentit;
Neebin ower among da bacha reek.

Time’s steady haand is scored in monny a wrinkle;
Shortened da stride, an draan da sinnan tight.
Bit still da blue een hadd a mirry twinkle,
Laek bright stars idda hidmist day-a-light.

Aald Daa, by well-known
Shetland poet Rhoda Butler,
1929-1994

Bibliography

Books:
Laurensen, A., 1860 (original), *The Shetland Dialect*, translated by John Nicolson, (Johnson & Greig, Lerwick)
Low, G., 1978, *A Tour through the islands of Orkney and Shetland*, (Bookmag, Inverness)
Stewart, J., 1964, *Norn in Shetland*, (Serpent, Torshavn)

Online resources:
Shetland Forwirds: www.shetlanddialect.org.uk
Shetland Museum and Archives: www.shetland-museum.org.uk
Scran: www.scran.ac.uk

All photos from Shetland Museum Photo Library or Scran unless stated otherwise.

Good Reads:
Deary, Terry, 2010, *Viking Tales*, (A&C Black;London)