

Language and my poetry

Christine De Luca

Much of my poetry is in Shetland dialect, a variety of Scots with considerable ‘interference’ from Norn at all levels. It is probably the most distinctive of the variants of Scots and as such pushes at the limit of the concept of a dialect. It was our mother tongue as children and we had to be forced to leave it outside the classroom door. But that’s fifty years ago. Today the situation is reversed: schools now encourage the use of dialect in the face of much social change.

By way of illustration, here is a poem about language: about dialect and Shetlandic in particular.

A Shuttle o Soonds

At da time at folk namit da nort end o Eden
a moothfoo o soonds gied frame tae da laand
every bicht, every knowe a wird pictir in Norn.

Dey hed böddies o wirds for da varg o da crofter

straw baskets; heavy, dirty work

soonds o da crö, da crub an da hill: some lost

sheep-fold; circular, stone enclosure for plants

on da wind owre da flakki o years.

straw mat over which corn was winnowed

An a kyist-foo o soonds for aa kind o sea wark

wi a hoidy-hol for queer luckin wirds

hiding-place; enticing

stowed far fae wir hearin ta keep herm awa.

Da Norn is lang gien, but hit’s left a waageng

aftertaste

at keetchins a tongue at can hadd ony heart

flavours; sustain

can rowe up wir feelings, unreffel wir tochts.

wrap up; untangle

For every haand’s turn, a mird o wird patterns

stroke of work; throng

lik an allover gansey, a wirkin man’s sark

Fair Isle patterned jumper

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med ta be worn, no laid up for best.

We man savour wir wirds is dey tirl on da tongue
lik snorie-ben, sneester an skaddyman's heid

snoring toy; private chuckle; sea urchin

wird laalies fur aabody, no jöst fur bairns.

playthings

For dey mak da warp in a pattern o livin, while
da weft comes fae places ootbye da Sooth Mooth.

South entrance to Lerwick harbour

Dey can blend i da waeve wi wir shuttle o soonds.

Da garb o wir language is pitten dagidder
in a wye at maks room for da new an da auld
baith pipeline an paet-bank; rap artist an skald.

This poem suggests that Shetlandic is old; that it has undergone much change; that there's been considerable attrition (it has been winnowed through time over *da flakki o years* - a flakki was a straw mat over which oats were winnowed with a flail); that it has had to stand firm against, and yet assimilate, other cultures (most recently during the oil era of 70s and 80s); that its Norse origins are very much alive, especially in Shetland's place names; that it is still full of vitality and functionality – use it or lose it; that it is capable of expressing emotion and thought (*keetchins a tongue at can hadd ony haert/ can rowe up wir feelings, unreffel wir tochts.*)

My experience from reading dialect poems to English-speaking audiences over twenty-five years or so is, that while they generally find the poems incomprehensible on the page, they find the spoken version much more accessible. This may be due in part to the onomatopoeic attraction of the dialect. Some examples from the poem are: *varg* is heavy, dirty work; *a crö* is a sheep-pen and *sneester* is a private chuckle. *Reffel* too, suggests its meaning - to tangle. Many of our words have no direct equivalent in English – an example would be *shörmal*: the area between the tidelines. ('*Shore*' is undoubtedly a fine word but *shörmal* is more specific and somehow more evocative.)

As a child I was aware that, although the bulk of the poetry canon of Britain was in English, Shetland had poets whose work was worth reading and that some of their best poems were written in dialect; and that it was

something rather distinctively different from the Scots of the Scottish mainland. The considerable value locally accorded that poetry has underpinned my attitudes to language and its importance in cultural transmission.

As a poet, I've always written in English as well as in Shetlandic. Looking back now I realise that, unconsciously, for the first decade or so I tended to compartmentalise my writing: I wrote in Shetlandic when the location or theme of the poem seemed to fit; and everything else I wrote in English. Given the relative 'size' of the dialect and, in particular, its lack of abstract nouns, it seemed sensible to write the more reflective type of poem in English; that wonderfully rich, subtle, pliable language of the south. In terms of having work published, I tended to send poems in Shetlandic mainly to the local literary magazine, *The New Shetlander*, where I thought they were more likely to be read and possibly appreciated, and poems in English mainly to other poetry journals. I was living in Edinburgh and only gradually did I show – I should say 'read' – some of my dialect poems to other city-based poets. They responded positively to them, even seemed to prefer them to my poems in English. This came as a genuine surprise. It was as if a light went on in my head. (To be honest, I think it may well have been the slightly pseudo-ethnic, semi-exotic flavour of the dialect that attracted them rather than any inherent quality in the poems.) No one seemed to have heard the full force of Shetland dialect before, probably due to the accommodations Shetlanders tend to make when speaking with people from the south. Many said that although they did not understand the poems, they enjoyed the sound of the language, and felt as if they understood what it was saying to them. It was therefore helpful that, when in 1994, 1997 and 2002 the Shetland Library published my first three collections, each was accompanied by a tape or CD. The decision to include an audio version was important as, even within Shetland, reading proficiency remains a problem for full appreciation of dialect writing. This is particularly the case for poetry, as much of the quality of a poem is in its sound and rhythm, its 'music'.

This response in Edinburgh poetry circles encouraged me to break through that personal linguistic barrier which I had unwittingly erected and to change my practice in three ways: to be less parochial thematically when writing in Shetlandic; to have the confidence to plan my readings accordingly; and to send more poems in Shetlandic to 'mainstream' journals. In other words I moved from a passive linguistic approach to a more active one.

Checking through my various poetry collections it is possible to see how this largely unconscious decision manifested itself. The proportion of poems in Shetlandic in my first three collections, published within Shetland, increased from 30% (1994) to 44% (1997) to 47% (2002). Then in 2005 Luath Press in Edinburgh published *Parallel Worlds* – it had 64% of the poems in Shetlandic, 70% if one counted the actual pages. Gavin MacDougall of Luath seemed intrigued with the language of the poems and suggested I write an introductory chapter on this. My most recent collection, *North End of Eden* (Luath Press, 2010), has a similar percentage (68%) of poems in Shetlandic. So I have switched completely in terms of language balance since I first started writing, with two-thirds now being in Shetlandic rather than in English. There was no plan on my part, just a growing confidence over the years in offering poems in Shetlandic beyond the shores of the northern isles and in not being hidebound or restrictive in the ideas or themes I might tackle in dialect. It has also come about through the willingness of editors of poetry journals and of publishers to take a broad view of Scottish writing. There was considerable spadework needed, and it could never be seen as other than a suicidal decision from a commercial and critical point of view. Not that one writes poetry expecting to earn a living or win prizes.

What else might have so markedly affected my attitude to language choice, particularly since having *Plain Song* published in Shetland in 2002? I think that the later, but equally critical, influence on my perceptions about language in my poems was having an interest taken, specifically in my dialect poems, by foreign poets, frequently Nordic writers, and their warm-hearted translation of them. And finding that I could render their poems into Shetlandic with little recourse to English. This respect shown for our dialect by other European writers had a big influence on my linguistic confidence.

Given that they all spoke fluent English they frequently remarked that they found more difference between Shetlandic and Standard English than between some of the other Nordic languages which are inter-related. It was as if they had discovered a long-lost half-brother or cousin. This ‘linguistic family re-union’ could not have happened without the interest and support of the Scottish Poetry Library and such bodies as Literature Across Frontiers. Paradoxically it appears that the extension of the European Union and what might be seen as more power drawn to the centre has been balanced by a realisation on the margins of Europe of the need to work together to take care of our minority cultural and linguistic heritage. Sometimes we only appreciate things when there is a threat of extinction. It

is also probably true that some European money has reenergized the margins.

The icing on the cake for me was when a French publisher wanted to make a book-length translation of my poems. French: that elegant language of precision; of complex discourse, of abstract, difficult poetry. How on earth would my dialect poems translate? However the resultant book, a New and Selected, won the *Prix du Livre Insulaire* for poetry in 2007.

What seemed like problems of a small audience have now virtually disappeared. I find people are interested in minority tongues all over the world, and I have read dialect poems in countries including India, Finland, Norway, Italy and several times in France. Interestingly, I have never read a poem in England.

To illustrate the joy of translation I include here a poem by the young Bengali writer, Srijato. This is a sizeable linguistic and cultural gap for the Shetland dialect to leap across. (I was lucky to be invited to the Kolkata Book Fair in January 2009 and had a chance to spend some time with him and another poet.)

Man, wife, der laalies

their playthings

Jöst a bare mont gien

I stöd eence mair at da kirk door

whaar apö dis day, ee mont sin syne, we wir maerried

Maet – a gadderie – lichts – photos

food; gathering

Naethin daday

but twartree aald fock nönin wi da organ

a few; humming

Göd wirts

prayers

Furt

outside

hit's mirknen apön a crane

dusk falling

Umbrella i ee haand

airrands i da tidder

shopping in the other

A'm soved lik Jesus

stunned

hingin

Tak me doon

The ambivalent feelings of the young man, somewhat trapped by the new responsibilities of marriage, are bleakly represented by the crucifixion metaphor, in any language or dialect.

In Annex 1 to this essay are a few translations I have made of poems in Norwegian, Icelandic and Frisian, with the help of the poets in question; our common language in each being English. Linguistically it is interesting to look across at some similarities and differences. For example, the final two lines of Thor Sørheim's *Luftning* (Norwegian)

smake calde, søte bær
etter ei natt med frost.

becomes, in Shetlandic, the not dissimilar

taste caald sweet berries
eftir a nicht o frost.

But the Shetland 'greff' – that wet trench at the base of a peat bank, in Norwegian is the compound noun 'slåpetornkløftene'.

In the Icelandic of Aðalsteinn Ásberg Sigurðsson's *Í trúnaði*, the phrase 'Þú spurðir mig' becomes 'du spöred me' and the lines

baðstu mig að ganga með þér
út á grænan völlinn.

seems to have a linguistic echo in the Shetlandic

du bade me geng wi dee
oot ta da green mödow.

In the translation of my poem 'Plain Sailin' into Icelandic, there is a similar echo, for example in the final stanza, where I could have used the word *hund* for 'dog':

Dunts an shudders: nor'aester
head on trowe da Roost.
A'm seek as a dug.

becomes

Högg og skjálfti: norðaustur
höldum við gegnum Röstina.
Ég er hundlasin.

The muscularity and compact nature of these northern languages match well the sparseness of the Shetlandic.

This also applies to the Frisian of Elmar Kuiper. In his poem *Blyden* several phrases display this similarity.

Lit blyden
as boartlike hûnen
oer elkoar hinne tûmelje
lit blyden bylje yn stegen.

Lit frachten blyden yn wollene rokken
pearelje en switte
as ynpakte skiep ûnder simmersinne.....

In Shetlandic:

Lat eemages
lik filskit hunds
tummel owre een anidder
lat eemages yalk in trenkies.

Lat a fraacht o ooey eemage
pearl an leep
lik unroo'd sheep anunder simmer sun.....

I could have used the phrase 'bördly hunds' rather than 'filskit hunds' which would have provided a stronger linguistic link but felt that the 'friskiness' rather than the 'strength' was a preferable choice of meaning. For the same reason I chose 'leep' rather than 'swaet' which seemed to emphasise the extremity of heat.

In Annex 2, a rather unusual poem in English by Celaen Chapman is set out with two versions in Shetlandic added: the first by Celaen who,

without understanding the dialect, tried to do a version just using the dictionary. Presumably this was a linguistic experiment. She then sent it to me for comment as she wanted to submit it to a journal. Once I got over my initial shock I did a version for her, which is included along with her originals. Twenty-first century Shetlandic is not quite as linguistically exotic as she may have thought it was.

It is interesting to note a small trend in these linguistic experiments or ‘forays’. Several non-Shetlandic speakers have proudly told me recently that they have written a poem in Shetlandic. My personal view is that one must always pay due respect to any dialect or language in which one is not fluent. This is particularly important when it is a minority tongue and, by definition, under pressure of extinction. It is not ‘quaint’ to those whose culture it carries. However, one must be open to those whose linguistic and cultural interest is genuine.

While it is all very well being taken seriously in France or Finland, even in Bengal, if my poems do not speak to the average Shetlander, I might as well give up. It is their language, their heritage and not there to be used merely as a literary device even if one is a fluent dialect speaker. The writing has to be authentic, should respect the dialect’s cadence, the way it reflects the physicality of the environment. If writers do not take the speakers of the dialect with them on that journey the dialect will, I fear, become a literary artefact, of interest only to academics. It is wonderful that the Shetland dialect is considered to be worthy of academic study. But, much as the interest of academics in the linguistic evolution and richness of the islands is crucial to writers, I believe – from a writer’s point of view – that it is secondary to the need to write in a way that excites the linguistic antennae and imagination of native speakers. Happily the dialect is not contaminated by class-consciousness and is still a vibrant mother tongue for many Shetlanders.

As writers, our task is also to create imaginative resonance for others. I think that is important in this era of sound bites and globalisation. ‘Fusion’ food and music may be all very well, but there is a danger of blandness, of lack of distinctiveness, in fact lack of the very thing we enjoy when we travel somewhere new. A love of place and sense of heritage is fundamental to our sense of well-being; we allow its erosion at our peril. Also I think this love of place is enriched if we have both an historical and an imaginative backdrop on which to draw, based on that sense of place. The Hamnavoe of George Mackay Brown must be a great source of rootedness to the imagination of Orcadians.

One can look on issues such as local variation in vocabulary and lack of agreement on spelling as problems. However, it is good that I can still hear new words when I meet someone from a different part of Shetland. And the difference in pronunciation adds extra flavour. Rather than try to stay within the sound of my own area of Shetland, I try to use an orthography that allows relatively easy reading and for individuals with a different set of vowels to make their own music of the poems.

I have now gone a stage beyond the passive and the active linguistic approach. Even beyond the ambassadorial role. Realising the parlous state of the dialect in a fast-changing world, I am now like an evangelist in a post-Christian society; I feel a sense of duty as a writer to help in the task of developing more reading ability amongst children in what has been a largely aural culture and thus nurture the next generation of dialect writers. I would want to commend the dedicated work of the committee Shetland ForWirds in this area. It is hugely influential. I am also involved in a small group, Hansel Cooperative Press, which not only publishes poetry pamphlets and art-based booklets of island writers but also children's stories.

And there is another task for the writer in these circumstances of language shrinkage. As words gradually fall into the 'hardly ever used' category, writers, perhaps particularly poets with a bit of figurative flair, can find new uses for them; and can bend and stretch the dwindling language resource at their disposal, can help allow for a little language evolution. We are not really in the business of making up entirely new words, although I think we could stretch the old word *noost* (beach hollow sheltering a boat) to a new plural *noostras*, instead of the very elegant English word *marina*. Words like *skyumpie* are much too good to let slip into disuse. We have to catch them as they are about to fall – perhaps due to technological changes – pick them up and recycle them. (A *skyumpie* is a big mossy end piece of peat. When I was working recently in one Shetland primary classroom and asked the children if they understood what this word meant in the context of a story, one little boy said that his dad used it to name the end of a loaf of bread! Given that the end of a loaf bears exactly the same relationship to the other slices of bread as a *skyumpie* does to a row of peats, this seemed to me a refreshingly inspired linguistic addition to a breakfast table! But then some Shetlanders from another area would possibly argue with me and say that *skyumpie* already has a more generic meaning – a spatial variation worth researching.)

So, the greater goal for me is now well beyond any personal desire for appreciation of my work. It is about helping hold back the monoglot tide,

helping raise the status of the dialect within the islands partly by working with young people and partly by trying to have work published within and beyond the shores, beyond Shetland's *shörmal*.

Is it not the case that the status of the dialect will, to some extent, be affected by the value accorded to its literature, yes, among academics but also among ordinary people who speak with the same tongue? Let us hope there are always people in Shetland able to read, write, and speak in an authentic mother tongue.

To conclude, a poem inspired by the word 'yarbent' used by one of my aunts who was a crofter-knitter all her life. I had never heard the word used before nor have I heard it since; but it seemed too fine and specific a word to let slip.

Yarbent

i m my Aunt Ella

You took time ta mak sure I'd gotten
ivery tirl, ivery whenk o da wird
you'd used: dat een I'd aksed aboot.
Sic an owld wird hit sooned: 'yarbent'.

odd movement

I can still see you luik ta Mousa, say
'Weel, hit's a boo o wadder fae da sooth-aest,
laid on herd an dry, no lik ta shift,
maybe roond voar, or eftir hairst.'

spell of weather

springtime; harvest

Der a yarbent settled apön me fae you gud:
sic a peerie wird, but nirse. A'll varg

small; bitter, tart; work in difficult conditions

i da face o him, an keep i da mind's eye,
as you wir wint tae, da bigger pictir.

Looking up Jakobsen's *Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland* I find *jardbind*, *jardbend*, *jardbent* – a cold and dry continuous north-east wind (generally in spring: earthbinder, to make it dry and hard, thus damaging the corn).

Maybe she did say north-east.

Annex 1: Translations

Luftning

Thor Sørheim

Himmelen hviler
på bakkekammen, passe tung
for prestekrager, engsoleie
og rylliken i graset.

Det er god luftning
mellom skyene, alt tyder på
at sommeren vil stå
imot angrep av sopp og rate,

og seinere kan vi søke
ly i slåpetornkløftene,
smake calde, søte bær
etter ei natt med frost.

Í trúnaði

Aðalsteinn Ásberg Sigurðsson

Þú komst um nótt
ég kannaðist við
margt í fari þínu.

Þú spurðir mig í Þaula
ég þorði ekki að svara
og segja þér einsog var.

Á meðan dagurrin
var ennþá langt undan
baðstu mig að ganga með þér
út á grænan völlinn.

Ég lét sem ég vilda koma
leiddi þig í ógöngur
brást ekki við óttanum

Airin

Da lift dips her
apö da heichts, da richt weicht
apö seggies, blugga
an da yarrow i da girse

Der a göd sough
atween clouds, at shaas
simmir‘ll staand
a slockin o rot an fungus,

an eftir we nicht skyug
ita da greff,
taste caald sweet berries
eftir a nicht o frost.

In confidence

Du cam ee nicht
I kent
dat muckle aboot dee.

Du spöred me wi questions
I tocht da better o answerin
an tellin dee foo hit raelly wis.

Still a while
ta da dimriv
du bade me geng wi dee
oot ta da green mödow.

I löt on sam is I wanted ta geeng
led dee a mirry dance
didna anse tae da faer

í augum þinum.

ithin dy een.

Nústendurðu hér
steinrunnin við hús mitt.

Noo du's staandin here
steyn-fleggit bi mi hoose.

Blyden

Elmar Kuiper

Lit blyden
as boartlike hûnen
oer elkoar hinne tûmelje
lit blyden bylje yn stegen.

Lit frachten blyden yn wollene rokken
pearelje en switte
as ynpakte skiep ûnder simmersinne.....

Plain Sailin

Christine de Luca

*On reading the Orkneyinga Saga
en route to Shetland*

Waves tummelled
Jarl Rognvald aff a Sardinia.

Dan steekit stumbas.

I can aa but see him
skilin fur laand: guid wirts
fur safe pilgrimage.

I da saga he wrat
'roarin sea maks sport
o wir sturdy timbers.'

Eemages

Lat eemages
lik filskit hunds
tummel owre een anidder
lat eemages yalk in trenkies.

Lat a fraacht o ooey eemages
pearl an leep (or swaet)
lik unroo'd sheep anunder
simmer sun.....

Venjuleg sigling

Translation by Aðalsteinn
Ásberg Sigurðsson

*Við lestur Orkneyinga sögu á leið
til Hjaltlands*

Bylgjur lömdu
Rögnvald jarl sem lá undan
Sardiníu.

Síðan féll þétt þokan á

Ég get næstum séð hann
skyggnast til lands: bænir
um örugga pílgrímsferð

Í sögunni skrifaði hann:
,,... en leika lögur tér
á við fögrum ... “

Wir peerie pilgrimage
on da boat ta Shetland
isna plain sailin.

Dunts an shudders: nor' aester
head on trowe da Roost.
A'm seek as a dug.

Litla pílgrímsferðin okkar
á skipinu til Hjaltlands
er ekki venjuleg sigling.

Högg og skjálfti: norðaustur
höldum við gegnum Röstina.
Ég er hundlasin.

Annex 2

English and ‘Shetlandic’ originals by Celaen Chapman, published with permission.

A Waking Phoenix Addresses a Sailor

Beware of me

I am no artie skua sitting to dry in your ash bucket

I will perch on my blazing burial ground

And watch the ants flicker in froth and fire

But throw on my embers a wild female sheep

– between first and second shearing that has not yet had a lamb –

And I will perch on the chickweed and peck out its eyes

It will soften my swelling fury to a smoky rest

You have a dark and dirty face with a mouth like the anus of a fish

You look shocked and cold

Come closer to my harsh and frothing fire

Do not be afraid

I will appease your wild salt heart with the flap of my flames

Waaken Mareel Draa Up A Trooter

Faerd a me

I an nae skootie alan dippin reestit in dy essy-bucket

I weel baak en mi azin helli-mold

En skoit de mooratoog blatter wi skoom an bass

Bit pitch en mi emmers a halliget gimmer

En I weel baak en de quigga an pick eets ins eens

Et weel foizen mi hivvet birse du a reeky smoor

Du hae a gurmullit wi a gab fain a gutriv

Du skoit sholmet an ateri

Mak stengle du mi harsk an froadin roose

Dö no be faerd

I weel cöllie aboot dy halliget saat hert wi di flaag mi lowes



A version by Christine De Luca, based on the English above.

A waakenin Phoenix lays aff tae a Seaman

Be faert o me,

A'm nae skootie-alan crubbit athin dy essiecan.

A'll dry me apö da baak o mi azin helli-möld
an stime at mooratoogs skrovvellin i da froad an fire.

Bal a gimmer, a almark, apö mi emmers;

A'll set me apö da arvi an pylk oot hits een –
hit'll saafen mi reekin birse as I salist.

Dy face is dark an aggled, dy gab a gutriv.

Du has a caald, gluffit luik.

Draa dee inta mi siccar, azin fire.

Dunna be faert,

A'll cöllie aboot dy halliget haert wi loupin lowes.