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**DR.JAKOBSEN'S ETYMOLOGICAL DICTIONARY OF
SHETLAND NORN REVISITED
(Some Observations on the Macro- and Microstructure
of the Lexicographical Masterpiece)**

As is known Shetland is an archipelago off the northeast coast of Scotland. The islands lie to the north-east of Orkney between the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the North Sea to the east. The islands' administrative centre and the only town is Lerwick. Out of the approximately 100 islands, only 15 are inhabited. The main island of the group (where Lerwick is situated) is Mainland. The other inhabited islands are: Fetlar, Muckle Roe, Unst, Yell, Foula and some smaller ones.

The Shetland dialect or Shetlandic, like Orcadian, belongs to the so called Insular Scots. It is derived from the Scots dialects brought to Shetland in the late fifteenth century by the Scottish settlers, mainly from Fife and Lothian (cf. Flom 1929: 145-6).

Unlike the other dialects of Scots it has a considerable Scandinavian element inherited not only from the speech of the Danelaw region but also and mainly from the Norn language, which was spoken in the islands until approximately the mid 18th century. W.Grant and J.M.Dixon characterize the Shetland dialect quite imaginatively as “Mid Scots grafted upon an original Scandinavian stock” (Grant, Dixon 1921: 398).

Consequently Shetlandic contains many words of Norn origin and has numerous pronunciation peculiarities. These structural features along with geographical remoteness and isolation from the mainland dialects let Shetlandic retain a high degree of autonomy. The tradition of studying languages of Shetland is nearly 250 years old and it would not be an exaggeration to say that its most conspicuous achievement is Dr. Jakob Jakobsen's Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland.

Focussing on the Norn element of Shetlandic this work also has been widely known as an important achievement in Scandinavian studies. These days it is still an indispensable source of information on both local Norn and the origins of the Shetland dialect of Scots. The dictionary is based on Jakobsen's field-work conducted in Shetland during the seasons of 1893-95. The dictionary was first published in Danish in four volumes between 1908 and 1921. The English two volume version was completed between 1928 and 1932.

The Dictionary is definitely a mile-stone both in Scandinavian dialectology and etymological lexicography. Besides, it has been extremely popular with Shetlanders interested in the history of their native tongue as a unique reference-book and an inspiring symbol of local culture and patriotism. The fact that it appeared about 100 years ago makes it clear that the Dictionary deserves a thorough critical review based on the modern principles. However, our paper is only aimed at a general description of the Dictionary and hopefully will be followed by a detailed analysis in the future.

We would like to focus further on the English edition of the Dictionary. Late Mr. John J. Graham, formerly the President of Shetland Folk Society, wrote that the popularity of the dictionary was such that by the IIWW it had been no longer available and the second-hand prices used to reach £400 plus due to ever-increasing demand. Demand had made this outstanding word-book unaffordable for most Shetlanders and for those interested outside the archipelago. Therefore, in order to enable a wider public to have access to the dictionary the Shetland Folk Society headed by John J. Graham decided to publish a second edition at a reasonable price (Graham 1985: III).

Shetland Islands Council and the Highlands and Islands Development Board supported the publication what allowed to reduce the price of the new two-volume edition. It was published in 1985.

Dr. Jakob Jakobsen himself dreamt his Dictionary («Etymologisk Ordbog over det Norrene Sprag pa Shetland») to appear both in a Danish and in an English edition, but he was too busy with further research to carry out this plan. He was working both on the collection of Orkney Norn and on his Faroese dictionary. His early death in 1918 prevented him from implementing this intention. When he died even the Danish version was not altogether complete. The dictionary was finished except two final pages of the

letter “ø”. Besides, the Introduction was not ready, too.

The work was carried out later by his nearest relatives, including his sister, Anna Horsbøl, who prepared for publishing first the Danish original and several years later the English translation. Dr. Jakobsen's understandable wish to issue his work in English, what could enlarge his audience dramatically, was perfectly known to his relatives and friends. Thus, his dream came true due to their devotion and enthusiasm.

Fortunately, the materials collected by Dr. Jakobsen for his dictionary in Shetland were put down by him in English. Thus, it was Dr. Jakobsen's own English Introduction to some extent that appeared in that edition. The dialect map of the Shetland Islands, which accompanied the English version, was also included in accordance with Dr. Jakobsen's own choice.

Many distinguished scholars, folklorists and antiquarians contributed to the preparation of the English edition of the Dictionary. They were Dr.W.A.Craigie, Professor of Chicago University at that time; Mr. G.Watson of the Oxford English Dictionary; Dr. H.Marwick from Orkney and Mr. J.J.Haldane Burgess from Shetland, both experts on the local lore and speech, as well as some others.

A peculiarity of the Dictionary consists in its really big and rich introductory chapter containing 117 pages (see, Jakobsen 1985: V-CXVII). Due to this Introduction the user gets acquainted both with the area, its history, dialect as well as the lexicographer's general approach to the material and the field-work procedure the dictionary is based on.

The Introduction which is a very important part of the Dictionary and has its independent value, contains:

1. the explanation of the sophisticated system of labels and abbreviations;
2. the historical and geographical chapter as well as a brief history of the Shetland studies;
3. a detailed account of J.Jakobsen's expeditions and his field-work including the sources of lexical material, the list of the informants and the assistants;
4. data on the origins of Shetland Norn and its relations with the other Scandinavian languages;
5. a brief description of its morphology, syntax and phonology based on the collected

and reconstructed material;

6. the criteria for selecting the entry-words for the Dictionary;
7. special appendix containing lexical correspondences between Norn and other Scandinavian languages and dialects;
8. the old Shetlandic place-names of Scandinavian origins;
9. other lexical correspondences between Shetland Norn and some Germanic and Celtic languages;
10. some Shetlandic words having no obvious correspondences;
11. some Shetlandic words which acquired new meanings;
12. a special section devoted to the place-names of Celtic and mixed origins;
13. the appendix containing the monuments of folklore and their fragments collected and commented by J.Jakobsen.

Thus among other items of the Introduction, Dr.Jakobsen gives a detailed description of his expeditions and field-work techniques (which were state of the art for those days). Also he provides some information on his informants and assistants along with his acknowledgements. Of course, he worked according to a sophisticated plan elaborated in a detailed way, but his accounts of the field-work procedure show that his approach was quite flexible and had a considerable, so to speak, psychological dimension.

He visited all the inhabited islands and all the dialect areas. In Lerwick, the capital, he also collected a lot of information from people who had moved into the town from the country, and had retained their native dialect. Among his techniques used during his field-work, he practised interviewing people who did not belong originally to the place, but had moved into it from some rural area. These people quite naturally took particular notice of such words and expressions as differed from those used in their original homes (ibid. XXVII).

Dr. Jakobsen had to face all the usual difficulties of the dialectological field-work. Old people who had good knowledge of the matters he was interested in, were often difficult to question, for they (unlike the younger people) were afraid of being recorded and lacked the positive attitude to the project. In his work Jakobsen used to take up two separate subjects for discussion in one session, in order to reveal the relating older words and expressions. Quite naturally, he suggested his informants subjects like everything to

do with the household; routine activities; seasonal activities; weather; sea; fishing; the sea-terms and the fishermen's tabu-language (which had to be handled with special care); etc.

He says, for him it was of special importance to get the rarer words brought out, such words as had either become obsolete, or were about to become obsolete (ibid., XXVIII). While it was comparatively easy for J.Jakobsen to get names of material objects, it was much more difficult with notions and concepts, as, for example, words denoting states of mind, feelings, behaviour, jocular words etc.

He points out that his Shetlandic experience showed him the necessity of visiting as many places as possible, because of the wide regional variation not only in phonology, but also in the vocabulary inherited from ancient Norn (ibid. XXIX).

In his dictionary J.Jakobsen also lists the principal peculiarities of phonology and grammar of Norn. Besides, he mentions some conspicuous facts of the structure and use of the modern dialect of Scots spoken in the islands, what makes the Dictionary even more important as an indispensable source.

Phonology. Already in J.Jakobsen's time the phonology of most surviving Shetlandic words of the Norn origins was badly corrupted, what was caused by the strong influence of Scots. In numerous cases, different varieties of the same word might coexist (depending on the district, or sometimes even a particular settlement within the same district). Such varieties frequently represented different stages of development. Indeed, phonological changes were naturally much more rapid and conspicuous in Lerwick and other areas of Mainland, than, say, in the remote isle of Foula.

The Introduction to the Dictionary contains detailed description of :

- 1) Stem vowel-changes as compared with the Old Norse condition (including changes before certain consonants and the fate of the old diphthongs);
- 2) Mutation;
- 3) Consonantal changes (including palatalization and insertion of [j]);
- 4) Peculiarities of stress;
- 5) Dialect differences of pronunciation;

Every phenomenon mentioned is illustrated by numerous quotations supplied with comments.

Grammar. In what had survived of the Norn grammar by the late XIX c. the old inflections had mostly been lost, and as Dr.Jakobsen characterises it «the simple English (or, it is better to say, Scots) method of inflexion has become general» (ibid. XXXVII).

In various words, however, old endings could be found preserved in a so to speak «fossilized» state (i.e. having lost their grammatical meaning). For example, as regards nouns the Scots possessive and plural inflections –s could be added on to these old endings. Several words had adopted Scottish and English suffixes. This also justifies the opinion on the modern Shetland dialect as “the product of the merging of three distinct languages – Norn, Middle Scots and English (Robertson, Graham 1991: VII).

The lexicographer includes a detailed description of the remnants of the Norn grammar:

- 1) of the Norn noun-system with the traces of its inflexion;
- 2) The system of adjectives;
- 3) The surviving pronominal forms;
- 4) The scarce traces of verbal inflexion. On the contrary he mentions that old verbal constructions have been preserved to a great extent.

J.Jakobsen makes by the way many important observations on the contemporary Shetland dialect of Scots as regards its grammatical system. For example, he mentions the use of «to be» instead of «to have» as a perfective auxiliary. He underlines that it is characteristic of more recent Shetlandic and illustrates the phenomenon with the following examples: I'm been ill; I'm done it; etc. (ibid. XLIII). This peculiar feature is still alive and has become the subject of some specialised studies (e.g. Melchers 1987; Pavlenko 1996).

Dr.Jakobsen's selecting the entries and modelling the whole structure of the Dictionary were based on his concept of language death of local Norn. The latter issue has been discussed by scholars for more than 200 years (cf. Rendboe 1984; Barnes 1991; Melchers 1991, etc.).

In general, Jakobsen's concept consists in the following. The first portions of the old language to be affected, as appears from the fragments preserved, were the grammatical endings, since assimilations became common, step by step, as the forms were obliterated; next the syntactic words frequently recurring in speech, such as conjunctions, prepositions, and common adverbs; also adjectives and verbs, as well as abstract nouns

(ibid. XX).

A special and very rich class of words that has survived consists of: a) jocular and derisive names, characterising a person or an object whose appearance differs from the normal and b) pet names (ibid.).

The fact that many old words and phrases relating to the weather (especially the wind and the state of the sea) had been preserved by the time of Jakobsen's field-work, is not at all surprising taking into account the Shetlanders' traditional way of life and main occupations, i.e. fishing, sailing and sheep-breeding.

Of the other classes of words that had been preserved, Jakobsen mentions those expressing anger; verbs that denote abnormal or comical behaviour; adjectives that denote the colour pattern of domestic animals (especially of sheep and cows). In the meantime the old names of the chief colours had been lost (ibid.).

He also mentions that the traditional superstition of the fishermen, and the corresponding tabu-language saved from oblivion numerous old words and roots. He also underlines that that tabu-language had almost vanished by the late XIX c.

Of the words of Norn origin, more than ten thousand in number, that Jakobsen was able to collect in Shetland, not more than half could be said to be in general use in those days. The other half was divided by Jakobsen into the following two classes:

- 1) those words that had survived only in single districts or in single islands, and
- 2) those obsolete words that were only known, and occasionally used, by old people.

According to Dr. Jakobsen since his first and longest stay in the Islands in 1893-95 the number of obsolete words continuously increased because of the fact that since that time a great many people of the older generation had died and a great part of the traditional vocabulary had not been acquired by the younger generation.

Very many words that were still in use in the late XIXth c., (i.e. the time of Dr. Jakobsen's field-work), occurred in different meanings and usages in different places: e.g., **aber**, adj., one of the first words in the Dictionary.

aber [], adj., 1) sharp; keen, e.g. of the edge of the cutting tool, esp. a knife, a **a.** edge, a **a.** knife; *West.*, *Nmw.* 2) with sharp outlines; clear and distinct; ... a **a.** sky... a clear deep-blue sky which is becoming overcast (harbinger of wind); *Un*; cf. *Ampel*, *amper*, adj. 3) sharpsighted; keenly observant; watchful; vigilant; *Nmw.* (*Esh.*).

Most words collected in the Dictionary can be traced back to Old Norse, in some instances even to Proto Norse. Among the modern Scandinavian languages most cognates can be found in Norwegian, what is no surprise, as Shetland was inhabited chiefly from the South-West of Norway.

A small part of the Shetlandic vocabulary cannot be clearly defined as going back to Old Norse or being loan-words from Scots or Northern English dialects. No special proofs are needed here because both Scots and Northern English are rich in Scandinavian lexical element going back to the times of the Dane Law.

In such ambiguous cases the lexicographer also does not hesitate to include the material concerned. According to his approach even in cases where the words did not altogether comply with the phonology of Norn, but were rather Scots in form, they still could be of Scandinavian origins, as Norn had been strongly influenced by Scots for so many centuries. That influence resulted in assimilation both in the physical appearance and in the meaning of the words.

Several Shetlandic words, although they are Scottish in form, are considered by Jakobsen to be of Norse origin because of their presence in Scandinavian languages, especially in Norwegian, Icelandic and Faroese. In Jakobsen's opinion when such words were either not found at all or only very rarely in Scots or in Northern English dialects, they were included in the Dictionary. Giving proof of his choice the lexicographer mentions the word «dorro» sometimes spelt as "dorrow" (*a fishing-line or to fish with an angling-line*) originating from Old Norse «dorg». In Shetlandic it got assimilated according to the English pattern with *-orow (-orough)* ending, corresponding to Old Norse *-org*, as English *sorrow* - O.N. *sorg*; English *borough* - O.N. *borg* (ibid. LXVI).

In case the Shetlandic words have meanings that are partly Scandinavian, partly Scottish, all the meanings are given except those that had come in from Standard English by the time of Jakobsen's field-work. Jakobsen includes a special Appendix containing characteristic words belonging to Shetland Norn, naming at the same time those parts of Norway where corresponding meanings are to be found:

e.g. 1) *bengel*, vb. (in carrying out a piece of work in a clumsy manner: to make something uneven and crooked; mostly used adjectivally in the perf. part., *bengeld*, *twisted*; *uneven*, *with many notches and bends*. – Telemarken: *bengla*, and Far. *Bongla* =

Shetl. Bengel.

2) bergfall, sb. crash of something falling, prop. of a fragment of rock; tremendous crash; ... – Hardanger: bergfall (ibid. LXVII).

Structure of the entry reflects the character of the material collected and interpreted by J.Jakobsen. The head-words are spelt in a sufficiently normalized way what is quite a natural solution taking into account the character of the material, i.e. obsolete words.

To transliterate his Norn entries the lexicographer employs all the appropriate characters of the Scandinavian alphabets (e.g., ö; æ; ø; ð; and å). Definitions and/or translation equivalents are in English and are printed in italics.

The normalised head-word is followed by a phonetic transcription rendered by means of the International Phonetic Alphabet. Sometimes more than one pronunciation variants are included. The label denoting the part of speech is added. Then follows the definition or translation – in some cases other meanings or variants of the same meaning are included. These variant meanings can be provided with the labels denoting the areas (i.e. islands, regions and settlements).

Entries may contain quotations taken either from the recorded informants' speech or from the fragments of the Norn monuments. Special labels denoting either the informants' initials or those of the experts in Shetland studies are provided.

Each entry is supplied with cognate words from the ancient or modern Scandinavian or other Germanic languages. In cases when the origin of the word is uncertain the compiler may provide alleged cognates from other languages, mostly Celtic, along with his argumentation. Here there is an example of an entry:

brimer [], sb., *male of a large species of seal*. An older and obs. form: *brimel. Uⁿ. Edm. has: «brimeld, a very old female seal». O.N. brimill, m., *a species of large seal*; No. brimul, m., id.; Icel. brimill, Fær. brimil, m., *a large male seal*.

Here: *sb.* – substantive; *Un.* – the label for the island of Unst; *Edm.* – the label for the source (reference to T.Edmondston's work); *m.* – masculine.

To define the genre of this lexicographical work as merely «an etymological dictionary» would be far from sufficient.

In general, each entry combines certain features of etymological, monolingual, translation, even encyclopedic and terminological dictionaries. The lexical material treated, i.e. Scandinavian words with levelled and «fossilised» endings – in fact, often just the stems of uncertain form and meaning – predetermined the design of the entry. The definitions and comments are usually far from being categorical and often look like a discussion in which the author compares possible etymologies selecting the most verisimilar ones. As has already been mentioned, J.Jakobsen sought to enter only the words whose direct or indirect Scandinavian origins he was convinced in. The words of the Lowland Scottish, English or Celtic origins were excluded.

Dr. Jakobsen's Dictionary exceeds by far the genre of «etymological dictionary». Besides, for the Shetland Islands it has become a kind of linguistic and cultural encyclopedia. It can be said that by no means every regional dialect or even a language “in its full right” can boast of a lexicographical masterpiece like the Dictionary in question. The dialect and culture of Shetland deserved such a monument and they were lucky to obtain it due to Dr. Jakobsen.

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