Scottish Standard English as spoken in Lerwick: an overview of pronunciation features[*]

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1. Introduction

Previous research on Shetland speech has devoted little explicit attention to the way Shetlanders speak (Scottish) (Standard) English (SSE), as opposed to Shetland dialect, the local Scots dialect. There are several reasons why the local form of SSE has attracted less interest overall than Shetland dialect. The dialect displays a greater number of features that are specific to Shetland and features that may provide clues to Shetland's linguistic past, which traditionally has been of particular interest to Nordic scholars. The dialect is in decline in a way that SSE – as a dialect rather than a local accent – is not. The same regional pride is not awarded to SSE in Shetland; on the contrary, the slightly derogatory term *knappin* is sometimes used among Shetlanders to refer to the use of Standard English in certain circumstances.

Even if not explicitly stated, it seems that a common view has been that the speech displayed by Shetlanders when using a mode of 'English' as opposed to 'Shetland' primarily represents a set of temporary modifications towards Standard English, rather than a 'variety'. There is some evidence for this view, especially concerning rural Shetlanders. During the course of interviews conducted at rural localities, there is often significant intra-speaker variation between two end points that may be labelled 'Standard English' and 'Shetland dialect', in a way suggestive of a 'modified' dialect or temporary adaptation. Phonological examples include alternations of stressed vowels: *away* [e^i] ~ [aː ~ ɑː]; *about* [ʌu] ~ [u]; *speak* [i] ~ [e ~ ɪ]. In Melchers and Foldvik's corpus (Melchers 1983), several statements are also made by rural informants which generally support this view. During a discussion about whether they feel it is natural and automatic to code-switch to English, the following response was obtained:

(1) **Scandinavian fieldworker**: *But you're not doing it in a way consciously? I mean, it's sort of automatic, or?*
   Shetland man: *No, to speak English, we've got to think, all the time, too. It's so much different that we've got to, we try to speak English. If you hear us hesitating, it's finding the English word, you see.*

However, most observers would probably agree that the status of English varies significantly depending on the type of Shetlander concerned. While it admittedly sometimes appears to represent a 'modified' dialect or temporary adaptation at rural localities, it currently seems hard to escape the following two conclusions regarding the main town of Lerwick. First, there are a significant number of people who are very used to speaking Standard English, while not being mono-lingual speakers of Standard English. While retaining a number of localised Shetland features regarding grammar and lexis, the speech displayed nevertheless represents a form of Scottish Standard English. Second, among this type of speakers, there is to a significant extent a shared local norm for the pronunciation of SSE, i.e. a local accent of SSE.

This essay presents an overview of the pronunciation features displayed by this specific type of Shetlander when speaking SSE, with a focus on vowel features, for which more data was available. It is based on data collected in 1999, 2000–2003 (for Sundkvist 2004) and 2009 by the author, as well as data collected 1980–1983 by Gunnel Melchers and Arne Kjell Foldvik (Melchers 1983). It also draws upon observations made during visits to Shetland over a ten year period. The study conducted for Sundkvist (2004) aimed at gaining access to frequent, yet localised, bi-dialectal speakers of SSE in Lerwick. A judgment sample was therefore obtained of middle-aged, middle-class speakers who were born and had lived all or most of their lives in Lerwick. The informants were clearly bi-dialectal and do not represent the reportedly mono-lingual SSE speakers of a younger Lerwick generation (Tait 2000).

2. Vowel features

The vowel inventory displayed by the group in question is illustrated with the use of Wells's Standard lexical sets in Table 1 below.

KIT	ɪ	THOUGHT	ɔ
DRESS	ɛ	GOAT	o
TRAP	a	GOOSE	u
LOT	ɔ, (ɒ)[1]	PRICE	ai [ʌi][3, 4]
STRUT	ʌ	PRIZE	ai [aˑe]
FOOT	u	CHOICE	ɔi
BATH	a	MOUTH	ʌu, u
CLOTH	ɔ, (ɒ)	NEAR	i
SKIRT	ɪ	SQUARE	e
HURT	ʌ	START	a
PREFER	ɛ	NORTH	ɔ
FLEECE	i	FORCE	o
FACE	e	CURE	u
PALM	ɑ[2]		

Table 1: Vowel inventory

Notes

[1] The contrast between LOT and THOUGHT is variable (see further below).

[2] Arguments for this phonemic assignment are outlined in Sundkvist (2004).

[3] As for various other Scottish varieties, it remains a matter of debate whether or not the two vowels displayed within the PRICE/PRIZE set have phonemic status or, indeed, whether a categorical decision on this matter is even possible (see further below).

[4] The phonetic symbolisation used here for short PRICE vs. long PRIZE somewhat exaggerates the quality difference. A more accurate symbolisation would be [ɐ̌ɪ] PRICE and [ǎˑɪ] PRIZE.

The following account of systemic aspects is anchored in Abercrombie's (1979) typology of SSE accents. The TRAP-PALM contrast is clearly present; it was displayed by all speakers across all types of data in words such as *Pam ≠ palm*. However, the contrast is subject to various phonological and morphological constraints, as outlined in Sundkvist (2004, 2007). Probably this contrast does not represent a modification towards

standard varieties but is simply supported by vowels within Shetland dialect. Second, the LOT-THOUGHT contrast is a more complicated issue. Evidence for a contrast was obtained from a minimal pairs test and a commutation test. However, negative evidence against the presence of a contrast may be gained from observations of natural speech. On balance, the status of the LOT-THOUGHT contrast within the Lerwick community needs to be assessed further, taking into account such factors as contextual variation, style and inter-speaker variation. Third, no traces of a PULL-POOL contrast were found. Finally, the type of speaker in question tends not to display the additional vowels present in Shetland dialect, such as front rounded vowels ([ø, y]) or additional long items (e.g. *meid* 'landmark for navigating on the sea' /miːd/ : *need* /nid/).

Turning to phonetic-realisational matters, one of the most significant localised realisational processes for vowels is Shetland Vowel Mutation (SVM) (Tait 2000; Sundkvist 2004, 2007). Its often highly salient effects have been commented on by several previous scholars, yet the first explicit account is Tait (2000), although Johnston (1997) also covers it to some extent by means of his Insular Clockwise Vowel Shift. Briefly, the process involves raising and/or fronting of a number of vowels in certain voiced contexts. Some vowels also develop salient off-glides. For the speakers in question, KIT, DRESS, TRAP, STRUT and THOUGHT are subject to SVM. Examples of non-mutated vs. mutated allophones include: *bat* /a/ [a] : *bad* /a/ [æ ~ æ̞ ~ æ̞ⁱ]; *pet* /ɛ/ [ɛ] : *bed* /ɛ/ [ɛ ~ ɛ̝ ~ ɛ̝ⁱ]; *bit* /ɪ/ [ɪ̈] : *bid* /ɪ/ [ɪ ~ ɪ̝]; *hut* /ʌ/ [ʌ] : *bud* /ʌ/ [ʌ̈]. In sum, SVM is a major localised feature firmly retained by the type of Lerwick speaker in question, and was displayed even in the most formal types of data elicited for Sundkvist (2004).

The Scottish Vowel Length Rule (SVLR) (Aitken 1981) is a significant factor in Shetland phonology (Millar 2007; van Leyden 2002). For the Lerwick speakers in question the following formulation is suggested: /i, u, ai/ are short unless followed by a voiced fricative, voiced affricate, /r/, a morpheme boundary, a vowel, or (variably) /b, g/. The vowel input set thus agrees with modern accounts of SVLR (cf. Scobbie *et al.* 1999), but the set of consonantal contexts triggering long vowels is somewhat extended. As regards this extension (i.e. /dʒ, b, g/), /i, u, ai/ are long before /dʒ/ and /g/, although, admittedly, some of the combinations are not available: e.g. */aig/ word-finally, however *tiger*, *tigress*, *Tigris*, *hygro-* consistently displayed long vowels. Before /b/, /i, u/ are long whereas /ai/ is short.

A question often asked in examinations of the SVLR is to what extent the distribution of long PRIZE [aˑe] and short PRICE [ʌi] is predictable, and whether an allophonic treatment is salvageable (cf. Wells 1982: 406). In comparison with accounts of various other Scottish varieties, the data elicited from this particular set of speakers points to a fairly regular distributional pattern. The context where predictability primarily breaks down involves PRICE trochees with an intervocalic consonant that would otherwise trigger a preceding short vowel. Words with a morpheme boundary after the consonant regularly displayed short PRICE: *rider*, *tighten* [ʌi]. However, words with no morpheme boundary variably displayed long PRIZE: *Ryder*, *Titan* [aˑe] ~ [ʌi]. Thus, pairs such as *rider* [ʌi] : *Ryder* [aˑe] may variably be found. Scobbie and Stuart-Smith (2008) provide a review of analytical options for similar situations, a discussion of various phonological implications, and arguments against forcing a categorical decision as to whether the variation involving PRIZE and PRICE is allophonic or phonemic. For the outline purposes of this paper, however, suffice it to say that this particular group of speakers display a comparatively regular pattern, which appears to differ from Shetland dialect as well as Insular Scots more generally (Millar 2007: 54–57).

In studies of Scottish speech, the lexical distribution of vowel phonemes is often identified as one of the phonological matters displaying the greatest variation between SSE and Scots (cf. Aitken 1984a, b). This seems to be the case also for Shetland, and the vowel chart in Table 1 therefore requires further comment. The view of lexical distribution that follows from it is rather similar to standard descriptions of SSE (cf. Wells 1982). While this is true for the type of speaker and speech mode concerned, it must be clearly stated however that the lexical distribution varies greatly depending on, for instance, interlocutor and the type of Shetlander. The stated distribution does not apply to speakers using a mode of speech closer towards Scots/Shetland dialect. In order to capture the distributional variation displayed across a broader speech range, involving both SSE and Shetland dialect, an alternative lexical framework such as that of Johnston (1997) would also have to be considered.

3. Consonant features

The inventory of consonant phonemes, with marginal or variable items within brackets, is as follows:
/p, b, t, d, k, ɡ, tʃ, (dʒ), ʍ, f, v, (θ, ð), s, z, ʃ, (ʒ), x, h, w, j, m, n, ŋ, r, l/. Contrary to reports for Shetland dialect, <wh-> /ʍ/ and <qu-> /kw/

sequences are mostly in contrast: *white* /ʍait/ : *quite* /kwait/. However, occasional confusion may be observed in natural speech, such as *white* /kwait/. TH-Stopping is only variably displayed: *then* /ðɛn/ ~ /dɛn/ : *den* /dɛn/, and it is also fairly common to display contrastive /dʒ/, in both word-initial and word-final positions: *gin* [dʒɪnʲ ~ tʃɪnʲ] : *chin* [tʃɪnʲ].

As for realisational aspects, /r/ is frequently realised as a tap or short trill by the Lerwick speakers in question. However, approximants are also common, and in fact appear to be the norm among younger Lerwegians. /l/ is velarised or 'dark' in all positions: *lead* [ɬid], *deal* [diɬ]. /d, n, ŋ/ are palatalised in contexts that overlap with the application of Shetland Vowel Mutation: *bad* [bædʲ], *ban* [bænʲ], *bang* [bæŋʲ]. Many speakers in the group display a Voice Onset Time (VOT) system for stops characterised by voicing lead ('pre-voiced') for /b, d, g/ vs. short lag VOT for /p, t, k/, a system referred to as 'traditional Shetlandic' by Scobbie (2006). As should be apparent from the above account, there is a general need for variationist methods in the study of consonant features especially.

4.   Summary

This essay has suggested that, in Lerwick, a group of people may be identified who are used to speaking Scottish Standard English (SSE), in addition to Shetland dialect. For these speakers, a local Lerwick accent may be identified. The aim of this paper was to provide an overview of pronunciation features within this accent.

It was suggested that the accent is both standardised *and* localised; it displays standardised features as well as localised ones. While it admittedly contains fewer localised features than Shetland dialect, it nonetheless contains a number of features that sets it apart from accents of SSE in the Scottish mainland.

For vowels, standardised features include the lexical distribution (although, as pointed out, this matter is highly sensitive to speech style and interlocutor). Among the localised features are a wider range of vowel contrasts than typically reported for mainland accents, the phenomenon of Shetland Vowel Mutation, and a slightly modified form of the Scottish Vowel Length Rule. As to consonants, standardised features include the contrast between <wh-> /ʍ/ and <qu-> /kw/ sequences, as well as the variable inclusion of /dʒ, ʒ, ð, θ/. Localised features include palatalisation and the VOT system for stop consonants.

While this paper stresses the importance of explicitly identifying SSE in studies of Shetland speech, the goal must be the construction of a model

that can account for the full range of speech forms currently in use in Shetland, from SSE to Shetland dialect. An attempt limited to vowels is made in Melchers and Sundkvist (2010), and current work by Smith *et al.* (Smith and Durham 2009; Smith *et al.* 2009) appears to address this overall issue.

LOCALISED FEATURES
- Extended set of vowel contrasts
- Shetland Vowel Mutation
- Slightly modified version of the Scottish Vowel Length Rule
- Palatalisation of /d, n, ŋ/
- VOT system for stop consonants

STANDARDISED FEATURES
- Lexical distribution of stressed vowel phonemes
- Contrast between <wh-> (*white*) and <qu-> (*quite*) sequences
- Variable /dʒ, ʒ/
- Variable /ð, θ/

Table 2: Principal localised and standardised pronunciation features in the Lerwick accent

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