Recent research on varieties of English in the British Isles has led to claims that some local forms are disappearing in favour of supra-local features (e.g. Kerswill & Williams 2002). One such variety which is said to be undergoing change is the dialect spoken in Shetland, a group of islands situated to the far north of Scotland. The Scandinavian language of Norn was spoken in Shetland for over 800 years (e.g. Barnes 1998) but this came to be replaced by Scots from the 16th century onwards. This linguistic history has resulted in a number of distinctive features in the present-day dialect. However, these are said to be rapidly obsolescing, particularly in the main town of Lerwick, with a move towards standardised norms in the younger speakers (e.g. Tait 2001, Sundkvist 2007).

We examine these claims by conducting an analysis of three generations of speakers from Lerwick in a 300,000 word corpus of spoken data, stratified by age and sex.

We target the use of perfective be in place of have as in (1):

(1) a. We're been here ever since.
   b. And I'm often wondered what it was.
   c. It was a sledge that my father was made up in the loft.
   d. They kent over well what I was done and it was illegal.
   e. I was missed everything.
   f. This place was just new gone up when we moved in.

Be for have is attested in the history of English (e.g. Kytö 1997) and also in some present-day varieties (e.g. Wolfram 1996, Tagliamonte 2000). However, this variety may differ in the details of its use (e.g. Melchers 1992, Pavlenko 1997): perfective be appears with all subject types, with both transitive and intransitive verbs and with the present and past perfect.

Quantitative analysis of 611 variable contexts reveals robust variation across every middle aged and older speaker: approximately 50% use of be for have. However, with the younger speakers, a different picture emerges: some have frequencies of use of be in line with the two older groups, while others use the standard form categorically. Moreover, with the younger speakers who are variable, perfective be continues to be used across the range of contexts detailed above. Thus, despite the fact that the younger speakers comprise a homogeneous group both socially and demographically, there is strong maintenance of local forms with some younger speakers, but complete obsolescence with others.

These patterns of use reflect those found in a number of other varieties which are obsolescing (e.g. Dorian 1994) where there is no gradual retreat in the speech of each individual, but rather extreme intra-community variability. This leads us to suggest that despite a core of shared socio-cultural traits across individuals in this close-knit speech community, an ‘idiolectal dimension must still be recognized’ (Wolfram &
Beckett 2000:28) in the process of language change.

References
Tait, J. (2001) "Whit is Shetlandic?" *Lallans* 58, 7-16.