

Be perfect: ‘Something that I’m no seen afore’

Jennifer Smith and Mercedes Durham
University of Glasgow

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

- Barnes, M. (1998). *The Norn Language of Orkney and Shetland*, Lerwick, The Shetland Times Ltd.
- Dorian, N. (1994). Varieties of Variation in a Very Small Place: Social Homogeneity, Prestige Norms, and Linguistic Variation. *Language* 70: 631–96.
- Kerswill, P. and Williams, A. (2002). ‘Salience’ as an explanatory factor in language change: evidence from dialect levelling in urban England. In Mari Jones and Edith Esch (eds.), *Contact- induced language change: an examination of internal, external and non-linguistic factors*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Kytö, M. (1997). *Be/have + past participle: The choice of the auxiliary with intransitives from Late Middle to Modern English*. In M. Rissanen, M. Kytö, K. Heikkonen (eds.) *English in transition: Corpus-based studies in Linguistic Variation and Genre Styles*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 17-84.
- Melchers, G. (1992). “Du’s no heard da last o’ dis”- on the use of be as a perfective auxiliary in Shetland dialect. In M. Rissanen (ed.) *History of Englishes: New Methods and Interpretations in Historical Linguistics*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 602-610.
- Pavlenko, A. (1997). The origin of the be-perfect with transitives in the Shetland dialect. *Scottish Language* 16, 88-96.
- Sundkvist, P. (2007). The pronunciation of Scottish Standard English in Lerwick, Shetland. *English World-Wide* 28 (1):1-21.
- Tagliamonte, S. (2000). The grammaticalization of the present perfect in English: Tracks of change and continuity in a linguistic enclave. In: O. Fischer, A. Rosenbach, D. Stein (eds.) *Pathways of Change: Grammaticalization in English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Tait, J. (2001) "Whit is Shetlandic?" *Lallans* 58, 7-16.
- Wolfram, W. (1996) Delineation and description in dialectology: The case of perfective I'm in Lumbee English. *American Speech* 70:5-26
- Wolfram, W. and Beckett, D. (2000). The Role of the Individual and Group in Earlier African American English. *American Speech* 75(1):3-33.