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**A Tipping Point in Dialect Obsolescence? Change across the Generations in Lerwick, Shetland**

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2  
3 *A Tipping Point in Dialect Obsolescence? Change across the Generations in Lerwick,*  
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5  
6 *Shetland*<sup>1</sup>  
7

8 Abstract  
9

10 The dialect spoken in the Shetland Islands is one of the most distinctive in the British  
11 Isles. However, there are claims that this variety is rapidly disappearing, with local  
12 forms replaced by more standard variants in the younger generations. In this paper we  
13 test these claims through a quantitative analysis of variable forms across three  
14 generations of speakers from the main town of Lerwick. We target six variables: two  
15 lexical, two morphosyntactic and two phonetic/phonological. Our results show that  
16 there is decline in use of the local forms across all six variables. Closer analysis of  
17 individual use reveals that the older age cohort form a linguistically homogeneous  
18 group. In contrast, the younger speakers form a heterogeneous group: half of the  
19 younger speakers have high rates of the local forms, while the other half use the  
20 standard variants near-categorically. We suggest that these results may pinpoint the  
21 locus of rapid obsolescence in this traditionally relic dialect area.  
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40 Key words: Lerwick, Shetland dialect obsolescence change  
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## Abstract in French

Le dialecte parlé dans les Shetlands est une des plus distinctives des Iles Britanniques. Cependant, certains prétendent que cette variété est en voie de disparition et que les formes locales sont en train d'être remplacées par des variantes plus standards dans le parler des plus jeunes générations. Dans cet article, nous analysons cette affirmation au travers d'une analyse quantitative de formes variables sur trois générations de locuteurs habitant la ville principale des Shetlands, Lerwick. Nous examinons six variables: deux lexicales, deux morphosyntaxiques et deux phonétiques/phonologiques. Nos résultats montrent que les formes locales sont en déclin pour les six variables considérés. Une analyse plus approfondie de l'usage individuel du langage montre que les locuteurs plus âgés forment un groupe linguistiquement homogène, tandis que les locuteurs plus jeunes forment un groupe hétérogène. La moitié du groupe des plus jeunes utilise un pourcentage élevé de formes locales, tandis que l'autre moitié utilise les variantes standards presque catégoriquement. Nous suggérons que ces résultats peuvent nous indiquer la source d'obsolescence rapide dans ce site où le dialecte a traditionnellement été maintenu.

## INTRODUCTION

Research on varieties of English in the British Isles over recent years indicates widespread loss of traditional dialect forms, resulting in dialect ‘attrition’ across many speech communities. Britain, for example, (2005:35), observes that ‘In most cases, and in most places, dialect variation seems radically less marked, less divergent and less locally oriented than that spoken one hundred years ago’. ‘Dialect levelling’ is seen to be at the core of this process (e.g. Foulkes and Docherty 1999, Kerswill 2003) where young speakers in particular are noted to avoid ‘variants which they perceive to be particularly indicative of their local roots’ (Foulkes and Docherty 1999:13). Moreover, evidence suggests that such attrition ‘has affected every structural level of the language’ (Britain 2009:123) resulting in ‘dedialectalisation’ (Trudgill 2002:33) and perhaps even dialect death.

The prevalence of loss of traditional forms is highlighted by claims regarding one of the most remote communities in the British Isles, the Shetland Islands in Northern Scotland. Because of Shetland’s peripheral geography, coupled with historical socio-cultural isolation, it is said to represent one of ‘the best examples of a relic speech form’ (Johnston 1997:447), where ‘the localised dialect is used by nearly everyone to insiders’ (ibid:449). However, it is claimed that socio-economic, cultural and demographic changes arising from a highly developed infrastructure in recent decades have led to ‘an unprecedented levelling of the local varieties in recent years’ (van Leyden 2004:18), particularly in the main town of Lerwick. Tait (2001:11) goes even further, stating that ‘the change which is taking place is not a gradual blending of one form of speech into another: it is the abrupt replacement of one language – phonology, morphology and syntax as well as vocabulary – by another.’

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These statements suggest that this geographically peripheral and historically isolated community may be undergoing rapid dialect erosion and perhaps even dialect death. However, the empirical evidence to support such claims is sparse: despite some excellent historical and contemporary research on the linguistic situation in the Shetland Isles, to date there have been no studies which provide a time-depth analysis of change in recent generations. In this paper we address this gap by conducting a quantitative, sociolinguistic analysis of a number of linguistic variables across three generations of speakers in Shetland. We expect to find change in the dialect: Shetland would be quite unique if there were none. However, our purpose in this paper is to uncover 1) how rapid this change is and 2) how the change proceeds. Do all individuals participate in the change? Do all linguistic forms? If traditional forms are shown to be obsolescing, is the change ‘incongruent and idiosyncratic’ (Cook 1989: 235), or characterized by more systematic retreat across the linguistic and social landscape (e.g. Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1999, King 1989)? Through this analysis, we hope to increase ‘our understanding of the linguistic process and the sociolinguistic context of language obsolescence’ (Wolfram 2002:764-5) in Shetland which may in turn inform more generally on the issues of dialect levelling, attrition and death in varieties worldwide.

We first situate the research in the wider context of the Shetland Isles past and present.

#### SHETLAND: LINGUISTIC AND SOCIAL HISTORY

1  
2  
3 The Shetland Isles is situated in the North Sea, between Norway to the east and  
4 Scotland to the south (Figure 1). Its social and linguistic history, both distant and  
5 more recent, makes it an ideal site for investigation of change in dialect norms.  
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9  
10 [FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]  
11

12 Shetland was invaded by the Vikings in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and with these invaders came  
13 the language of Norn. This language largely eradicated the indigenous languages of  
14 the time and was spoken in Shetland for over 800 years (e.g. Barnes 1998:2) until it  
15 started to be replaced by Scots from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Debate remains about exactly  
16 how, when and why Scots replaced Norn (e.g. Barnes 1998, Rendboe 1984) but a key  
17 point was the annexation of Shetland by the Scottish crown at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup>  
18 century (ibid). A situation of bilingualism is said to have existed in the following  
19 period (e.g. Smith 1996) and by the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Norn as a first  
20 language was rare and had largely died out by the end of that century (e.g. Barnes  
21 1998:27).  
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36 The present day Shetland dialect is described as a variety of Scots, with elements  
37 from both Older Scots and the Norn substratum still in evidence (e.g. Tait 2001:10,  
38 Melchers 2004a:285). This results in a number of traditional lexical, morphosyntactic  
39 and phonological forms, some of which are unique to the Shetland Isles, and some  
40 used more widely throughout Scotland, as shown in the following extract from Lisa,  
41 an 18 year old speaker:  
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50 (Extract 1) Yeah, this was Capetown. And we started driving oot and er I  
51 mind pullin' up outside this- we got into this, like, road, pullin' up outside  
52 this tiny peerie like hoose and there was all this like peerie kind of like  
53 corrugated iron shacks aroon' it. And all this- just all this folk just  
54 wanderin' about and that, just dirt and mess everywhere and I just mind  
55  
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3 thinking 'Oh please God, let yon be his, let yon be his house'. And then he  
4  
5 said 'This Lisa- this is where you're staying' and I was just like 'Ooh, what  
6  
7 have I done' sort of thing. And so I got oot of the car and then, the wife like  
8  
9 kind of introduced me to this folk and I gied inside this tiny, tiny, peerie  
10  
11 hoose, it was just two rooms. Probably the rooms put together was peerier as  
12  
13 this room. And er gied in, they started speaking in yon Xhosa, that's what  
14  
15 the- like the kind of dialect they spoke and they started speaking that the  
16  
17 whole time.  
18  
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21  
22 Gloss (sections glossed are in italics): Yeah, this was Capetown. And we  
23  
24 started driving *out* and er I *remember* pulling up *outside* this- we got into  
25  
26 this, like, road, pulling up *outside* this tiny *small* like *house* and there was all  
27  
28 this like *small* kind of like corrugated iron shacks *around* it. And all this-  
29  
30 just all *these people* just wandering *about* and that, just dirt and mess  
31  
32 everywhere and I just *remember* thinking 'Oh please God, let *that* be his, let  
33  
34 *that* be his house'. And then he said 'This Lisa- this is where you're staying'  
35  
36 and I was just like 'Ooh, what have I done' sort of thing. And so I got *out* of  
37  
38 the car and then, the *woman* like kind of introduced me to *these people* and I  
39  
40 *went* inside this tiny, tiny, *small house*, it was just two rooms. Probably the  
41  
42 rooms put together *were smaller than* this room. And er *went* in, they started  
43  
44 speaking in Xhosa, that's what the- like the kind of dialect they spoke and  
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46 they started speaking that the whole time.  
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53 It is said that highly localised features (e.g. *peerie* for *small*, *as* for comparative  
54  
55 *than*), in tandem with more Scotland-wide features (e.g. *yon* for *that*, a  
56  
57 monophthongal variant in words such as *out* and *around*) are widely used by speakers  
58  
59 in Shetland. For example, van Leyden (2004:17) points out that 'There is no Scottish  
60

1  
2  
3 Standard English speaking middle class and virtually all native speakers, from manual  
4 workers to university graduates, employ the local dialect in their everyday speech'  
5  
6 (see also Johnston 1997:449). Using a standardised form of Scottish English is said to  
7  
8 be much maligned (Melchers 1985:98), and even has a particular word to describe it:  
9  
10 *knapping*. However, this situation may be changing: in more recent years, Shetland  
11  
12 has seen an influx of outsiders due to the oil boom, and in particular the building of  
13  
14 the north sea oil rig terminal at Sullum Voe between 1973 and 1982, with up to 6,000  
15  
16 people employed on the site. Opinions differ as to the effects of this outsider  
17  
18 influence. Johnston (1997:449) states that it was felt to be something temporary,  
19  
20 which has left the region more prosperous 'but essentially locally-oriented'.  
21  
22  
23 Population statistics show that only a small percentage of the workers settled  
24  
25 permanently after the terminal was completed in the 1980s. On the other hand, the  
26  
27 2001 census showed that around 15% of people living in Shetland have come from  
28  
29 outside of Scotland and this figure may be growing (Scotland Census 2001). Whereas  
30  
31 in the past these in-migrants 'generally acquired the local dialect' (van Leyden  
32  
33 2004:18, see also Scobbie 2005), in more recent times it is claimed that rather than a  
34  
35 process of assimilation, a type of standardised Scottish English is becoming the norm.  
36  
37 Melchers (2004a:37) states that it is 'difficult to find truly monolingual speakers of  
38  
39 the traditional dialect today', even with families who have lived there for generations.  
40  
41 However, instead of complete dialect loss, she suggests that a situation of  
42  
43 bidialectalism prevails, where speakers 'have access to a choice of two discrete,  
44  
45 definable forms of speech: 'English' vs. 'Shetland' (ibid:37).  
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55 The view from the ground, as it were, indicates that the speakers of Shetland  
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57 themselves think that the dialect is under threat as evidenced from these extracts from  
58  
59 the present study:  
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3 Extract 2: Bob, age 72  
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5 (Bob) I was speakin' earlier on about, du kens, age groups. I don't think-  
6  
7 the young ains at school now is speaking the Shetland dialect or the Lerwick  
8  
9 dialect. Maybe- maybe there's still a touch o' dialect throughout the country  
10  
11 but I don't think youngsters in Lerwick now is speakin' the dialect or  
12  
13 whatever you think would be the dialect and er- I mean, I- I can see it to a  
14  
15 certain extent with wir own family. Du kens, it- it's no, certainly no separate  
16  
17 now. (Interviewer) Du'll ken with the younger ains yeah. No, no. And I  
18  
19 noticed like I don't know if du's noticed with your ains, your- boys and your  
20  
21 daughter-in-law when they're gettin' onto the bairns, will they go into  
22  
23 English? (Bob) They go into English. That's right. Yeah, that's right. Th-  
24  
25 they go into- whereas we- we were, when we were bairns we just spoke  
26  
27 away-. (Interviewer) They'll 'talk'. They'll give them a telling off in  
28  
29 English!  
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36 Gloss: (Bob) I was speaking earlier on *about, you know*, age groups. I don't  
37  
38 think- the young *ones* at school now *are* speaking the Shetland dialect or the  
39  
40 Lerwick dialect. Maybe- maybe there's still a touch of dialect throughout the  
41  
42 country but I don't think youngsters in Lerwick now *are* speaking the  
43  
44 dialect or whatever you think would be the dialect and er- I mean, I- I can  
45  
46 see it to a certain extent with *our* own family. *You know*, it- it's no, certainly  
47  
48 *not* separate now. (Interviewer) *You'll know* with the younger *ones* yeah.  
49  
50  
51 No, no. And I noticed like I don't know if *you've* noticed with your *ones*,  
52  
53 your- boys and your daughter-in-law when they're getting onto the *children*,  
54  
55 will they go into English? (Bob) They go into English. That's right. Yeah,  
56  
57 that's right. Th- they go into- whereas we- we were, when we were *children*  
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3 we just spoke away-. (Interviewer) They'll 'talk'. They'll give them a telling  
4  
5 off in English!  
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10 Extract 3: Mary, age 54

11  
12 (Mary) I suppose at a time as well when, uh, I wouldna say it was just as  
13  
14 popular to speak dialect. Certainly when we were at school, you werena  
15  
16 supposed to say anything in dialect at the school or you got- you certainly  
17  
18 got flitten on badly. But, uh, it's different now, I think, although the bairns  
19  
20 might be encouraged, sadly I would think there's probably a lot less dialect  
21  
22 spoken. (Interviewer) I think that's right. Du goes by the playground, du can  
23  
24 hear that. (Mary) But then there's- there are probably a lot more different  
25  
26 influences now. They've got, uh, well they've got the television for a kick  
27  
28 off (inc) the groundin' for the bairns, they've- they're been exposed to such a  
29  
30 huge range of different ways of speakin', which we werena.  
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36 Gloss: (Mary) I suppose at a time as well when, uh, I wouldn't say it was  
37  
38 just as popular to speak dialect. Certainly when we were at school, you  
39  
40 weren't supposed to say anything in dialect at (*the*) school or you got- you  
41  
42 certainly got *picked* on badly. But, uh, it's different now, I think, although  
43  
44 the *children* might be encouraged, sadly I would think there's probably a lot  
45  
46 less dialect spoken. (Interviewer) I think that's right. *You go* by the  
47  
48 playground, *you* can hear that. (Mary) But then there's- there are probably a  
49  
50 lot more different influences now. They've got, uh, well they've got the  
51  
52 television for a kick off (inc) the grounding for the *children*, they've- they're  
53  
54 been exposed to such a huge range of different ways of speakin', which we  
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56 weren't.  
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8 Extract 4: Valerie, age 17  
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10 (Interviewer) Ok, and can you recognise where people are fae, fae their  
11 accent? (Valerie) Yeah, kind of. You probably- well the islands are really  
12 obvious. Sooth end that sounds really the same. But like places like Yell and  
13 that you notice. But some folk dinna even- there's quite a lot of folk dinna hae  
14 a accent. One of my- a couple of my pals dinna speak the Shetland dialect at  
15 a'.

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24 Gloss: (Interviewer) Ok, and can you recognise where people are *from*, *from*  
25 their accent? (Valerie) Yeah, kind of. You probably- well the islands are  
26 really obvious. *South* end that sounds really the same. But like places like  
27 Yell and that you notice. But some folk *don't* even- there's quite a lot of folk  
28 *don't have* an accent. One of my- a couple of my pals *don't* speak the  
29 Shetland dialect at *all*.

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39 Thus on the one hand, the Shetland dialect is said to remain quite unique, but on  
40 the other hand, this uniqueness may be disappearing to be replaced by more supra-  
41 local norms. How can these differing claims on the current state of the dialect be  
42 corroborated? There are a number of works from both a diachronic and synchronic  
43 perspective, encompassing lexical, grammatical and particularly  
44 phonological/phonetic perspectives on the Shetland dialect which provide invaluable  
45 descriptions of the Shetland dialect (e.g. Bugge 2007, Catford 1957, Jakobsen  
46 1921/1928, Jonas 1996, Melchers 1985, 1991, 1996, Murison 1954, Robertson and  
47 Graham 1952/1991, Scobbie 2005, Smith 1996, Sundkvist 2004, 2007, van Leyden  
48 2004). However, as already mentioned, there are no studies which provide a  
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3 sociolinguistic time-depth analysis of this variety which would allow us to assess the  
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5 extent of *change* in the dialect over the past 100 years. It is to this question that we  
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8 now turn.  
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## 10 11 12 DATA

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17 For this study, we chose to focus on the main town of Lerwick (Figure 2), the  
18  
19 commercial and industrial centre of Shetland, as it is often pinpointed as the locus of  
20  
21 most rapid linguistic change (e.g. Tait 2001:8, van Leyden 2004).  
22  
23

24 [FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

25  
26 It has a population of approximately 7,500 (although half of the islands' 22,000  
27  
28 residents live within 10 miles of the town) and is the UK's northernmost town, being  
29  
30 closer to Bergen in Norway than to the city of Aberdeen. Since the late 1970s, in-  
31  
32 migration from the surrounding outer isles to Lerwick has been common, in addition  
33  
34 to a number of incomers from mainland Scotland and England brought by the  
35  
36 reorganisation of the local government structures and the oil industry. Unemployment  
37  
38 is well below the national average. As with most other areas, the biggest employer is  
39  
40 the service industry, although fishing is still an integral part of the Lerwick way of  
41  
42 life. The 2001 census shows that approximately 8% of the population are in Class 1  
43  
44 of the Registrar General's Social Class scale i.e. professionals: the remaining  
45  
46 population is spread fairly evenly between Classes 2-5, including skilled non-manual  
47  
48 occupations and unskilled labour. It has one high school with approximately 900  
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50 pupils, and five primary schools.  
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58 There is 'considerable regional diversity' (van Leyden 2004:17, see also  
59  
60 Johnston 1997:448) in the dialects spoken on the Shetland Isles, brought about by

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3 little contact in previous years between the islands dotted around the archipelago.  
4  
5 Whalsay, in particular is said to differ substantially from all other Shetland varieties  
6  
7 (van Leyden 2004:17). For this reason, we do not claim that Lerwick is representative  
8  
9 of the Shetland Isles more generally, but merely represents one particular variety (or  
10  
11 indeed varieties) of many on these islands<sup>2</sup>.  
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## 17 CORPUS

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22 Judgement sampling (e.g. Feagin 1979), where a number of predetermined categories  
23  
24 are sought, was used in the initial data collection stages of the project. The sample  
25  
26 contains 30 adults, equally divided by age and sex. Three age ranges were targeted  
27  
28 (17-21, 45-55, 70+) in order to assess change in ‘apparent’ time (e.g. Bailey 2002).  
29  
30 These groups represent three generations of speakers but also represent different ‘life  
31  
32 stages’ (e.g. Eckert 1998:151): the 17-21 year olds are all post-school ‘young adult’,  
33  
34 relatively new to the work context; the 45-55 year olds are well established in the  
35  
36 linguistic marketplace, but with family at the heart of their concerns; the 70+ year  
37  
38 olds have all been retired for some time. Males and females are included to test for  
39  
40 any possible gender effects on use of the variable forms (e.g. Labov 1994). To control  
41  
42 the sample as much as possible, participant selection was guided by the following  
43  
44 criteria: 1) informant born and raised in Lerwick 2) parents and spouses born and  
45  
46 raised in Shetland, 3) informants in Class 2-5 according to the Registrar General’s  
47  
48 Social Class Index. It should be noted that some of the speakers in all age groups had  
49  
50 spent time off the island. However this was not viewed as a barrier to inclusion in the  
51  
52 study, as this is a reflection of the Lerwick demographic, where people do often spend  
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3 at least some time away from the community. For this study, we did not include any  
4  
5 speakers who had spent more than one continuous year off the island.  
6  
7

8           Despite in-migration in the past couple of decades, Lerwick continues to be a  
9  
10 close-knit community (e.g. Melchers 1985), which has implications for gaining access  
11  
12 to potential informants (e.g. Labov 1972). To mitigate these problems, interviews  
13  
14 were conducted by three locals who are well-embedded within the community  
15  
16 structures. Participants were contacted directly by the interviewers and in some cases,  
17  
18 the 'friend of a friend' approach (Milroy 1980) was used. The data were collected  
19  
20 using standard sociolinguistic techniques (Labov 1984) and lasted from between 1-2  
21  
22 hours. To further mitigate the Observer's Paradox (Labov 1972) the interviews took  
23  
24 place in the informants' homes. A portable Marantz PMD671 Digital Audio Recorder  
25  
26 was used with lapel microphones in order that the equipment be as unintrusive as  
27  
28 possible.  
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34           The data are fully digitised and transcribed using Praat, software which allows  
35  
36 speech to text synchronization and spectrographic analysis. The transcriptions were  
37  
38 spot-checked by a native Shetlander in order to ensure accuracy of transcription.  
39  
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#### 43 THE LINGUISTIC VARIABLES 44

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48 Recall Britain's (2009:123) suggestion that dialect attrition affects 'every structural  
49  
50 level of the language', and more specifically Tait's (2001) claim that all aspects of the  
51  
52 traditional Shetland dialect – phonetic, morphosyntactic and lexical - are being lost.  
53  
54 To test these claims, we target six variables, two from each area of the grammar. The  
55  
56 variables are also differentiated in terms of national versus more local use in this  
57  
58 Scottish context. Three of the variables are attested throughout Scotland while the  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 remaining three are more local to Shetland (e.g. Millar 2007). We designate these  
4  
5 *Scotland-wide* and *Shetland-specific*. In this division we do not claim that Shetland-  
6  
7 specific features are unique to that area. Indeed, one of the variables to be analysed,  
8  
9 th-stopping, is widespread in dialects worldwide. This categorisation simply rests on  
10  
11 whether they are used throughout Scotland, or are more locally affiliated to Shetland.  
12  
13  
14

15  
16  
17 Britain (2009:123) describes attrition and death as ‘the erosion of traditionally locally  
18  
19 embedded dialect (including accent) feature or features in favour of one originating  
20  
21 outside the community or from another group within the same community’. In each of  
22  
23 these variables, there is variation between a local/traditional variant and a Standard  
24  
25 (Scottish) English variant (i.e. from outside the community). Our analysis focuses on  
26  
27 use of variable forms across the three generations of speakers. However, as has been  
28  
29 shown in previous analyses (e.g. Guy 1980, Petyt 1980:188-90), these types of  
30  
31 groupings may eliminate individual variation, particularly in cases of rapid  
32  
33 obsolescence where ‘speakers might show highly specific patterns of variable usage’  
34  
35 or ‘personal-pattern variation’ (Dorian 1994:634, see also Johnstone 2000) rather than  
36  
37 community shared norms documented more generally (e.g. Labov 1972). Thus, we  
38  
39 further analyse the variables across individual speakers. We then investigate a number  
40  
41 of linguistic constraints which may shed light on how the change proceeds.  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47

48 Specifically we test a number of claims with respect to language obsolescence and the  
49  
50 linguistic system: whether the pathway of attrition is characterised by over-  
51  
52 generalization or hypercorrection of language features (e.g. Cook, 1989: 235, Dorian  
53  
54 1994, Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1995), or more in line with ‘orderly differentiation’  
55  
56 (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog 1968), where even at the endpoint of change, there is  
57  
58 retention of constraints (Jones & Tagliamonte 2004). In the latter case, ‘it is probable  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 that language death does not differ in kind from other type of linguistic change, but in  
4  
5 the speed with which structural changes occur and in the number of phenomena  
6  
7 covered by the process' (Tsitsipis 1989: 117).  
8  
9

10 We now turn to the variables under analysis.  
11  
12

13  
14  
15 Lexical Variables  
16  
17

18  
19  
20 Shetland specific: *peerie*  
21  
22  
23

24 The first lexical variable is *peerie* and its variants *small*, *tiny* and *little* as in (1):  
25  
26

- 27 1. a. We first bade in Union Street, when I was *peerie*. (Doreen, old)  
28  
29 b. It seemed like quite far when we were *little*. (Michelle, young)  
30  
31 c. When I was *small*, we were at my granny's a lot. (Rory, young)  
32  
33

34 Although its etymology is uncertain (the OED describes it as 'probably < the  
35 unattested Norn reflex of the early Scandinavian word represented by Swedish  
36 *pirig...*'), it is first attested in writing at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. van Leyden  
37  
38 (2004:27) suggests that in present day Shetland it is 'employed as a kind of positive  
39  
40 shibboleth to emphasise ...Shetland loyalty'<sup>3</sup>.  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47

48 Scotland-wide: *ken*  
49  
50  
51

52 Use of *ken* for *know* as in (2) is another stereotype, although this time a national,  
53  
54 rather than specifically Shetland, one.  
55  
56

- 57 2. a. You'd sit in and you'd *ken* a' the tunes. (Lisa, young)  
58  
59 b. They *kent* over well what I was done (Jim, middle)  
60

1  
2  
3 c. Du *know*, sometimes you go into a shop here, du *kens*...(Bob, old)  
4  
5

6 This form has been around since the 1300s (OED s.v. *ken*) but is still  
7  
8 commonly used throughout Scotland (e.g. Miller 1993). We include both discourse  
9  
10 marker (2c) and lexical verb (2a, 2b) use. Figure 3 shows use of these variants across  
11  
12 the 3 generations. The total number of contexts of use are also indicated on the graph  
13  
14 to provide clear information on how robust (or sparse) the variable is across the 3  
15  
16 generations and the individuals (e.g. Guy 1980).  
17  
18

19  
20 [FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]  
21

22 Figure 3 shows that for the three generations, *peerie* and *ken* are the majority  
23  
24 variants, although the rates of these forms decrease across the age groups. There is a  
25  
26 statistically significant difference among the three groups for both *peerie* ( $\chi^2 = 22.89$ ,  
27  
28  $p < 0.001$ ) and *ken* ( $\chi^2 = 167.96$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The difference between the old and  
29  
30 middle groups is also statistically significant for both lexical items. Closer  
31  
32 investigation revealed that these local forms were also the majority variants across all  
33  
34 individuals in the middle-aged and older speakers. The younger speakers, in contrast,  
35  
36 are different, as demonstrated in Figure 4.  
37  
38  
39

40  
41 [FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]  
42

43 Figure 4 shows that for *peerie*, five of the younger speakers (Joanne, Valerie,  
44  
45 Jake, Stewart and Lisa) have similar rates of use to the older generations with *peerie*  
46  
47 the majority form. Mark and Rory use the form less and the three remaining speakers  
48  
49 – Sean, Michelle and Erika - don't use the specifically Shetland form at all. In other  
50  
51 words, the middle-aged and older speakers form a fairly homogeneous group, but the  
52  
53 younger speakers are characterised by a high degree of inter-speaker variability and a  
54  
55 local/non-local split in rates of use. The complete absence of use with three of the  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 younger speakers makes it impossible to test for statistical significance, although the  
4  
5 percentages clearly show the polarised use.  
6  
7

8 *Ken* provides an even starker contrast amongst the younger speakers: five of  
9  
10 the speakers use it near categorically and the other five use the standard equivalent  
11  
12 *know* near categorically.  
13  
14

15 We have examined a number of other lexical variables (e.g. *big* vs *build*, *aye*  
16  
17 vs. *yes*). These pattern in the same way, with the older speakers demonstrating  
18  
19 homogeneous patterns of use and the younger speakers demonstrating heterogeneous  
20  
21 use.  
22  
23

24 However, these patterns of use may be unique to lexical variables, as these are  
25  
26 said to be one of the most salient features of speech (e.g. Trudgill 1986: 24). We now  
27  
28 turn to the morphosyntactic variables to see if the same patterns apply.  
29  
30  
31  
32

### 33 Morphosyntactic variables

#### 34 Shetland specific: *be* perfect

35  
36  
37  
38  
39 In the Shetland dialect, *be* can appear in perfect contexts where Standard English  
40  
41 appears with *have* (e.g. Millar 2007:75, Melchers 2004a: 39, Pavlenko 1997,  
42  
43 Robertson and Graham 1991:11), as demonstrated in (3):  
44  
45  
46  
47

- 48  
49  
50 3. a. *I'm no been* in Imelda's in a start. (Joanne, young)  
51  
52 b. By the time you've *come* home... (Joanne, young)  
53  
54 c. Funnily enough, they *were* been coopers as well. (Brian, old)  
55  
56 d. I think he'd *been* in intelligence. (Brian, old)  
57  
58

59 *Be* perfect is described as 'perhaps the most striking structural feature' of the  
60  
Shetland dialect (Millar 2007:75) and its use is more productive when compared to

1  
2  
3 either the historical record (e.g. Kytö 1997) or present day varieties of English  
4  
5 elsewhere (e.g. Tagliamonte 2000, Wolfram 1996). It can appear with transitive and  
6  
7 intransitive verbs, present and past tense, and with a variety of subject types. This has  
8  
9 led to considerable debate surrounding its provenance - a reflex of a Norn substratum  
10  
11 or remnant from the history of English (e.g. Melchers 1996:291, 2004a, Pavlenko  
12  
13 1997). However this question is beyond the scope of this research: crucial for our  
14  
15 purpose is how this Shetland-specific variable patterns in apparent time<sup>4</sup>.  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21

22 Scotland-wide: singular distal demonstrative *yon*  
23  
24  
25  
26

27 The second morphosyntactic variable we analyse is the use of *yon* in variation  
28  
29 with *that* in singular distal demonstratives contexts, as in (4):  
30  
31

- 32 4. a. I was just like ‘What’s *yon*?’ (Joanne, young)  
33  
34 b. Still actually hae *yon* BMW that I met the girlfriend with. (Stewart,  
35  
36 young)  
37  
38 c. Buy another ain and get bored of *that* ain and sell it. (Stewart, young)  
39  
40  
41 d. Couldna mind a thing that she’d done *that* morning. (Helen, middle)  
42

43 Despite its appearance in the Middle English period, *yon* is first attested in  
44  
45 Scots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. King 1997:168). It was said to indicate ‘a person or  
46  
47 thing at some distance in time or space, generally more remote than *that*.’ (SND  
48  
49 1976:286). Melchers (1997) suggests that in Shetland, it is part of a three-dimensional  
50  
51 system, with *yon* used to signal emotional distance, demonstrated in its use with non-  
52  
53 Shetland phenomena. In contrast, Robertson & Graham (1991:4-5) suggest that *yon* is  
54  
55 ‘used of things near in time and place, while *dat* [that] is used of things past or more  
56  
57 remote’. Due to the debate over its semantic and pragmatic circumscription, in line  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 with Sankoff & Thibault (1981), we include all singular distal demonstrative contexts.  
4  
5 Figure 5 shows the use of these two variables across the three generations.  
6  
7

8 [INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]  
9

10 Note first the use of *be* for *have*. The middle aged and older speakers have  
11 fairly similar percentages of use – 62% and 54% respectively. The younger speakers  
12 have significantly lower rates: 25% overall. There is a statistically significant  
13 difference between the old/middle speakers and the young speakers:  $\chi^2 = 83.57$ ,  $p <$   
14 0.001.  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21

22 *Yon* patterns differently. First, across all age groups, there are very low rates  
23 of use of the dialect form. However, *yon* has always been a marginal form in the  
24 history of English (e.g. Dons 2004:146), thus it is not surprising to see its infrequent  
25 use in present day Shetland. It might be more surprising that marginal form such as  
26 *yon* appears to be ‘holding its own’ across the generations. In fact, the younger  
27 speakers have higher rates of use for it than the older generations. This difference is  
28 statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 9.02$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).  
29  
30  
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39 Again, we investigated further the use of these forms by individual speakers.  
40 For *be* perfect, in the middle aged and older age groups, all speakers show variable  
41 use although the range is quite wide: 23-85% (This may be due to small Ns across  
42 some individuals). For *yon*, 19 of the 20 older speakers use it in variation with *that*,  
43 ranging from 4-10%.  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49

50 Figure 6 shows how these variables pattern in the individual younger speakers.  
51

52 [INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE]  
53  
54

55 Although there is more of a continuum of use with *be* perfect when compared  
56 to the lexical variables, the same basic pattern emerges: 5 of the speakers use the local  
57 form, and 5 hardly use it at all. Note that for the variable speakers, there is a wide  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 range of rates of use, ranging from the high 80s to the low 20s. Again these divergent  
4 rates may be the product of low numbers of contexts of use, but whatever the reason,  
5 they are in line with the range found in the older speakers. We further investigated a  
6 range of internal constraints on use attested in the literature, including subject type,  
7 transitivity and tense (e.g. Dannenberg 2003, Tagliamonte 1997) across the older and  
8 middle-aged speakers and the younger variable speakers. Figure 7 shows one of these:  
9 use of the form by tense across the three generations.

10  
11 [INSERT FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE]

12  
13 Figure 7 demonstrates maintenance of constraints, where *be* is more likely to  
14 be used with the present tense than past. Across each age group, the difference is  
15 statistically significant. For the old speakers:  $\chi^2 = 21.15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; for the middle  
16 aged speakers:  $\chi^2 = 32.78$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; for the young speakers:  $\chi^2 = 35.05$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . A  
17 number of other constraints showed the same patterns of use (see Smith & Durham in  
18 progress).

19  
20 The results for individual younger speakers use of *yon* differ from the older  
21 and middle-aged groups. Only 4 of the speakers use the form to any extent - Valerie,  
22 Joanne, Lisa and Stewart. The 6 remaining speakers show (near) categorical use of  
23 *that* (Rory and Mark have one token each of *yon*). Second, Valerie and Joanne have  
24 extremely high rates of *yon*: 36%. This is far in excess of the frequencies of use  
25 found for the older generations.

26  
27 How do these younger variable speakers pattern in terms of constraints on use  
28 compared to the older speakers? We further divided the data into pronominal (4a)  
29 versus determiner use (4b). Figure 8 shows the results.

30  
31 [INSERT FIG 8 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 8 shows that for the older and middle-aged speakers there are higher rates of *yon* in determiner contexts when compared to pronominals. The variable younger speakers, including Joanne and Valerie, the extremely prolific *yon* users, show the same constraints on use. We also note however, the low Ns for Valerie. Chi square tests comparing determiners and pronouns for each of the age groups (the low Ns for the young speakers make it impossible to test them individually) show that the differences are highly statistically significant in each group (old,  $\chi^2 = 24.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , mid:  $\chi^2 = 88.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , young  $\chi^2 = 60.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Phonetic/phonological variables

Shetland-specific: th- stopping

The next feature we analyse is the use of so called th- stopping (Wells 1982: 565-6) where <th> is realized as a stop rather than a fricative, as in (5).

5. But I mind one particular day /ð/at I was bouncing in /d/e crib, and it broke. (Agnes, old)

Although there is debate regarding its etymology (see e.g. Melchers 2004b:42, Barnes 1998), it is claimed that the use of [d] and [t] for /ð/ and /θ/ in word initial and medial positions 'is a general feature of Shetland speech' (van Leyden 2004:20), especially amongst 'traditional dialect speakers' (Millar 2007:62). Melchers (2004b:42) goes as far as to say that it is '...categorical in Shetland accents, unless adapted to outsiders'. Here we concentrate on contexts of voiced dental fricatives only<sup>5</sup>. Despite the fairly straightforward claims that /ð/ is substituted by [d], what we found in our data was a cline of variants, some more stop-like and others more fricative-like. We initially

1  
2  
3 divided the data into two main categories: stops and fricatives, with further divisions  
4  
5 detailed below.  
6  
7  
8  
9

10 Scotland-wide: l vocalization  
11  
12  
13  
14

15 Johnson and Britain (2007:295) amongst others, note that l-vocalisation,  
16  
17 vocalisation of the phonetically 'dark' /l/ in syllable rhymes, is widespread in  
18  
19 Southern British English. However, in Scots, a different type of l-vocalisation exists:  
20  
21 syllable-final /al, ol, ul/ can be vocalized, as in (6) (e.g. Macafee 1983:38), resulting  
22  
23 in orthographically realized forms such as *a'* for *all*, *ba'* for *ball*, and *ca'* for *call*.  
24  
25  
26

27 6. a. So we /a/ gied down there. (John, old)

28  
29 b. What do you c/al/ it? (Valerie, young)  
30  
31

32 This type of l-vocalisation is no longer productive in Scots (e.g. Stuart-Smith,  
33  
34 Timmins and Tweedie, 2007:232) with the result that in present day varieties it is  
35  
36 restricted to a small lexical set. We include only those lexical items which were  
37  
38 shown to vary.  
39  
40

41 Figure 9 shows how these two variables distribute across the generations.  
42

43 [INSERT FIGURE 9 HERE]  
44  
45

46 For l-vocalisation, both older and middle-aged speakers have rates over 50%  
47  
48 and there is actually a rise in use of the local variant in the middle-aged speakers. This  
49  
50 decreases significantly in the younger speakers (Old compared to mid:  $\chi^2 = 8.75$ ,  $p <$   
51  
52  $0.01$ , young compared to old and mid:  $\chi^2 = 32.11$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The younger speakers  
53  
54 on the other hand, show a considerable decrease in use. Th- stopping shows a more  
55  
56 gradual decrease in use although, again, the difference between the generations is  
57  
58 statistically significant (Old compared to mid:  $\chi^2 = 9.89$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , young compared to  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 old and mid:  $\chi^2 = 213.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). What is probably more striking is the relative  
4 paucity of stop variants across even the middle aged and older speakers, despite the  
5  
6 claims that this variant predominates in Shetland speech. In fact, when individual use  
7  
8 amongst the middle aged and older speakers was investigated, 13 of the 20 speakers  
9  
10 used the dental fricative, i.e. the standard form, as the majority variant.  
11  
12  
13  
14

15 Figure 10 shows how the younger individuals pattern across these variables.

16  
17 [INSERT FIGURE 10 ABOUT HERE]  
18

19  
20 l-vocalisation replicates a now familiar pattern: half of the speakers have high  
21 rates of the local form, and the others have virtually none. The lexical set in which l-  
22  
23 vocalisation was used in the older speakers was replicated in the younger variable  
24  
25 speakers. In other words, no change in lexical constraints on use.  
26  
27  
28

29  
30 Th- stopping looks somewhat different when the younger speakers are  
31  
32 considered individually. Although there are three speakers who are near categorical in  
33  
34 their use of the standard variant, there is more gradient stratification amongst this  
35  
36 younger cohort. In other words, a monotonic, step-wise pattern. Moreover, there is no  
37  
38 evidence of the heightened rates of use with some speakers as exemplified in e.g. the  
39  
40 use of *yon*. Another intriguing pattern emerges in a further breakdown of the data: in  
41  
42 the stop category, two variants emerge: a dental stop and an alveolar stop. We now  
43  
44 further divide the data to reflect this split in the stop-like variants. Figure 11 shows  
45  
46 the results.  
47  
48  
49

50  
51 [INSERT FIGURE 11 ABOUT HERE]  
52

53 Note the use of the dental stop and the alveolar stop in Figure 11. For the  
54  
55 middle-aged and older speakers the hierarchy of use is dental fricative>dental  
56  
57 stop>alveolar stop but for the younger speakers the hierarchy of use is reversed:  
58  
59 dental fricative>alveolar stop>dental stop. We return to this point in the discussion.  
60

## DISCUSSION

Despite evidence for dialect loss in the British Isles, Britain (2009:123-124) points out that there have been very few studies of ‘the attrition process in action, for example through Labovian apparent time studies of individual speech communities’. We believe that this apparent time study provides a good demonstration of that process, and allows us to assess more fully the claims regarding language attrition and death in one community in Shetland. Specifically, is there an ‘abrupt replacement of one language – phonology, morphology and syntax as well as vocabulary – by another’ (Tait 2001)?

For all of the variables studied, whether lexical, morphosyntactic or phonetic/phonological, the results showed a decline in use of the local, traditional forms in favour of more standardised variants across the three generations of speakers. However, closer analysis of individual use within each age cohort demonstrated a generational divide: homogeneity in variable use in the middle-aged and older speakers, but heterogeneity amongst the younger speakers. In other words, sharp stratification in the younger cohort across most of the variables studied, with some of the speakers showing high rates of the local forms (in some cases even higher than the older generations) and the others having extremely high rates of the newer, standard variants. Thus, there is abrupt change and extreme dialect levelling with some speakers, as Tait (2001) suggests, but not with others. How can these results be explained?

1  
2  
3 We suggest that these results may be indicative of rapid dialect attrition. Language  
4  
5 change ‘is predominantly gradual, and very frequently regular’ (McMahon 1994:6),  
6  
7 with ‘small – and socially manageable increments – along the age continuum’  
8  
9 (Chambers 2002:366). However, these results look much more like ‘catastrophic’  
10  
11 change, with the replacement, at least with some speakers, of one variety by another  
12  
13 in the space of one generation. In these data, there are no ‘semi-speakers’ (Dorian  
14  
15 1977) characteristic of gradual language shift. Such catastrophic changes normally  
16  
17 occur in situations of extreme social disruption, e.g. invasions or massive  
18  
19 immigrations, resulting in radical rearrangement of the internal structure of the  
20  
21 community (e.g. Labov, 2001:262, Campbell & Muntzell 1989). As detailed in the  
22  
23 section on Shetland’s social history, there have been changes in the demographic of  
24  
25 Shetland over the past few decades with the advent of the oil industry, but no major  
26  
27 upheavals of the type Labov, amongst others, describes.  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33

34         Instead, we propose that social changes more generally may have precipitated  
35  
36 these linguistic changes in Lerwick. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006:118) state  
37  
38 that ‘As some of the more remote areas of the nation are open to intercommunication  
39  
40 with the outside world, their distinctive language varieties, fostered in isolation and  
41  
42 spoken by relatively small numbers of speakers, may be overwhelmed by encroaching  
43  
44 dialects’. While in the past Lerwick may have been a closed community, it is now  
45  
46 undoubtedly more open to external forces, in this case a more standard variety of the  
47  
48 language. This is echoed in Extract 3 above from Mary (amongst many other  
49  
50 speakers), who suggests that ‘there’s probably a lot more different influences now’  
51  
52 with the children ‘exposed to a huge range of different ways of speaking’ which the  
53  
54 older generations were not. This exposure may have produced a ‘tip’ (Dorian  
55  
56 1981:51, 1986) where ‘a language which has been demographically highly stable for  
57  
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1  
2  
3 several centuries may experience a sudden “tip” after which the demographic tide  
4 flows strongly in favour of some other language’. We suggest that this research may  
5 have pinpointed that change, with the tide flowing in favour of a more standardised  
6 variety in the younger speakers.  
7  
8  
9

10  
11  
12         However, if the Lerwick dialect has reached this ‘tip’ what can explain the  
13 polarised use of forms amongst the younger speakers? Gender might be an obvious  
14 starting point in explaining the split in use, with the expectation that males will have  
15 higher rates of vernacular forms when compared to females (e.g Labov 1972).  
16  
17 However, across the variables, three of the five females have higher rates of the local  
18 forms and only two of the five males. Thus, the variables do not pattern across  
19 established gender norms. Can the individual speaker profiles of the younger speakers  
20 provide any clues to the heterogeneous language use evidenced in this generation?  
21  
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23  
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31  
32         In general, the speakers share the same socio-cultural backgrounds (same age-  
33 group, all parents from Shetland, live in Lerwick, attended same High School). The  
34 speakers were differentiated however, in terms of one potentially important indicator:  
35 time off the island. Jake, Stewart, Erica, Sean, Rory had spent no time off the island  
36 other than for short trips. Lisa and Mark have had one year off the island to study (but  
37 with regular trips back home during this time). Michelle, Joanne and Valerie all  
38 intended to leave in the next few months for study. It might be hypothesized that this  
39 may have an impact on their language use through, for example, face to face  
40 accommodation with speakers of other varieties of English while living on the  
41 mainland (e.g. Trudgill 1986). However, Lisa is one of the more dialect speakers, and  
42 Mark one of the most standard. Jake and Stewart use local forms, but the remaining  
43 three are very standard in their speech. Joanne and Valerie use very high rates of the  
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3 local forms, while Michelle uses hardly any. Thus there is no simple correlation  
4  
5  
6 between time off the island and language use.

7  
8 Another influencing factor on speech patterns might be affinity with Lerwick  
9  
10 and Shetland more generally. Although the study did not set out to elicit specific  
11  
12 information on attitudes (e.g. Llamas 2000), the interviews contain many incidental  
13  
14 comments which reveal speakers' opinions. Crucially, all of the younger generation  
15  
16 spoke favourably of Shetland, expressing either a desire to stay on the island, or to  
17  
18 return at some point. A typical example is from Rory:  
19  
20

21  
22 (Extract 5) And then when I finished school I thought I would take a year  
23  
24 out and try and make up some money for actually goin' away but takin'  
25  
26 the year out I gained full employment, and I was quite happy. Got my  
27  
28 girlfriend up here and most of my family, a lot of my mates so I- I find it  
29  
30 quite difficult to go down South. I think I would get homesick, so decided  
31  
32 to stay where I was for the moment.  
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35  
36 This affinity with Shetland is at odds with his speech patterns: Rory is one of the  
37  
38 most standard speakers in the sample.  
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40

41 Another hypothesis might be different social networks within this age group  
42  
43 (e.g. Milroy 1980). Strikingly, the tightest network, Joanne, Valerie and Michelle,  
44  
45 who declared themselves 'best friends,' exhibited stark differences in dialect use.  
46  
47 Valerie and Joanne had the highest use of traditional forms across all variables, while  
48  
49 Michelle had the lowest. Moreover, while 'dialect death can be gradual and (to the  
50  
51 speakers at least) virtually imperceptible' (Hinskens, Auer & Kerswill 2005:11), the  
52  
53 younger speakers are very aware of these differences, as highlighted in the extract  
54  
55 from Joanne in Extract 6:  
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59  
60 (Extract 6) And with my pals, they were sayin' about me and Valerie,

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3 she 's just- me and her's just likely the broadest ains of the lot of wis.  
4

5  
6 Cos my other pals, they bide in Lerwick and their mother and father is  
7  
8 fae... Shetland but they just dinna hae the accent at a'.  
9

10  
11 Gloss: And with my pals, they were saying about me and Valerie, she's  
12  
13 just- me and her *are just probably* the broadest *ones* of the lot of *us*. Cos  
14  
15 my other pals, they *live* in Lerwick and their mother and father *are*  
16  
17 *from*... Shetland but they just *don't have* the accent at *all*.  
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21  
22 Thus none of the typical influences on language use – gender, networks,  
23  
24 attitudes, exposure to other varieties – can explain the split in the younger  
25  
26 speakers<sup>6</sup>. These *non*-correlations serve to highlight the ‘complex array of  
27  
28 factors which come into play, ranging from a variety of situational contexts to  
29  
30 the proactive personal initiative of speakers in the construction of a linguistic  
31  
32 self’ (Wolfram 2002:766) in the face of rapid language attrition. Uncovering  
33  
34 this complex array of factors may require more in-depth ethnographic study of  
35  
36 the community in future research (e.g Mendoza-Denton 1997). Whatever the  
37  
38 reasons for the split in this younger age group, the results across the individuals  
39  
40 demonstrate a highly unusual pattern in terms of language change. Hill (1989)  
41  
42 suggests that the only difference between language change and language death  
43  
44 is the speed at which it proceeds. These results suggest otherwise, with a severe  
45  
46 break in community norms with half of the younger speakers in the space of  
47  
48 one generation. Wolfram (2008:1) poses the question ‘what sociolinguistic  
49  
50 responses might be adopted by islanders who suffer the loss of an emblematic  
51  
52 language variety?’ In this case, the answer is ‘very different responses’.  
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3 While the reasons for the patterns of use across the individual speakers cannot  
4 currently be fully explained, can the linguistic details of change tell us anything about  
5 the processes involved in dialect attrition? As discussed above, the younger speakers  
6 conform to two broad patterns: variable use of dialect features vs. near categorical use  
7 of Standard (Scottish) English features. Beyond this broad categorisation, what can  
8 analysis of the linguistic details of use reveal? Dorian (e.g. 1994) suggests that in the  
9 process of rapid language attrition, a system of ‘personal pattern variation’ (Dorian  
10 1994) develops: severe intraspeaker variability with little or no correlation with social  
11 or linguistic factors, or to other members of the community. Christian, Wolfram and  
12 Dube (1988:79) find that ‘orderly progression of change and variation is not quite so  
13 neat as some variationists...would have us believe, particularly at the endpoints of the  
14 change’. Wolfram & Schilling-Estes (1995:711) also find that variables at the end  
15 point of change will exhibit upheaval in the ‘natural ordering of constraint effects’. In  
16 contrast, linguistic features on the verge of extinction may continue to retain  
17 systematic linguistic conditioning (Jones & Tagliamonte 2004). The rapidity of  
18 change with one group in the younger speakers makes it difficult to analyse potential  
19 endpoints of a change: they have simply adopted the standard forms more or less  
20 wholesale. Further analysis of the variable younger speakers in these data, however,  
21 reveal shared linguistic constraints across a number of variables, arising from  
22 transmission and maintenance of linguistic constraints from previous generations.  
23 There is no chaotic retreat of the system, but instead orderly differentiation and  
24 maintenance of constraints of the type found in language change more generally.

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A second important finding is that while constraints were similar, the analysis  
revealed heightened rates of use in the younger speakers with some variables, most  
strikingly demonstrated by the use of *yon*<sup>7</sup>. The question is why? Britain (2009:133)

1  
2  
3 points out that ‘some dialects under the potential threat of attrition, particularly  
4  
5  
6 isolated rural ones...appear to resist erosion and occasionally change in ways diverge  
7  
8 from the incoming innovation’. This was first demonstrated in Labov’s seminal 1963  
9  
10 study of Martha’s Vineyard and more recently in the moribund dialect of Smith Island  
11  
12 (e.g. Schilling-Estes 1997, 2000; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999), where the  
13  
14 dialect spoken is becoming more, rather than less, divergent with certain variables.  
15  
16  
17 Wolfram & Schilling-Estes describe these patterns as a *concentration model* in which  
18  
19 ‘structural distinctiveness is intensified among a reduced number of speakers’  
20  
21 (Wolfram 2002:769). Some forms take on ‘socio-symbolic meaning’ (Schilling-Estes  
22  
23 and Wolfram 1994, Schilling-Estes 2000), resulting from an increasing sense of  
24  
25 solidarity amongst the islanders in the face of potential attrition. A concentration  
26  
27 model may be signalled by both higher rates of use of particular features, and also  
28  
29 different patterns of use in some cases, demonstrated, for example, by the  
30  
31 remorphologisation of *was* and *were* (Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1994). In the  
32  
33 Shetland data, although the rates were higher with some younger speakers, the  
34  
35 structured heterogeneity evidenced in the older age groups remained intact. In other  
36  
37 words, these speakers are not using the forms hyperdialectally (e.g. Trudgill 1986:75)  
38  
39 - the extension of the local form to ‘linguistic contexts where it was not previously  
40  
41 used’ (Britain 2009: 135) - but simply using the local forms at higher rates. This may  
42  
43 be a form of *statistical* rather than *structural* hyperdialectalism (e.g. Wolfram &  
44  
45 Schilling-Estes 2006) on the part of the younger dialectal speakers in their resistance  
46  
47 strategies. However, in many cases ‘these resistance strategies can sometimes be  
48  
49 relatively short-lived... often appearing as a last gasp before final attrition’ (Britain  
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51 2009:133-4)  
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3 The one variable which stands out from the cohort in terms of patterning of  
4 use is th- stopping. First, none of the speakers showed remarkably high rates of use:  
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6 even the speakers with the highest rates used the stop variants at rates similar to, or  
7  
8 lower than, the older speakers. In other words, no evidence of statistical  
9  
10 hyperdialectalism. Second, its use is best characterised as gradient stratification  
11  
12 amongst the younger cohort, with intra- rather than inter-speaker variation. Third, and  
13  
14 perhaps most important, the non-standard variant used differed according to  
15  
16 generation: in the majority of cases, the older speakers used a dental stop, while the  
17  
18 younger speakers used an alveolar stop (see Smith, Durham and Holmes, in progress  
19  
20 for a detailed analysis of this variable). This variant might be interpreted as  
21  
22 intensification of dialect variants as in the concentration model, or structural  
23  
24 hyperdialectalism. This would be unexpected however, given that *all* the younger  
25  
26 speakers participate in this use, even those who are very standard with all other  
27  
28 variables analysed. Instead, the explanation may again lie in moribund dialect  
29  
30 features. Melchers (2004b:45) points out that ‘the articulatory setting in Shetland  
31  
32 speech is generally fronted’, and the Scandinavian substratum is the suggested  
33  
34 source<sup>8</sup>. In this case, the dental variant may be the result of substratum influence and  
35  
36 its decline across the generations may signal a decline in influence of the substratum.  
37  
38 The use of the alveolar stop in the younger speakers is not interpreted as  
39  
40 intensification of dialect forms but simply that the younger speakers are turning to an  
41  
42 already available phoneme in their phonological inventory as the influence of  
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44 Scandinavian features wane.  
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55 Taken together, these results provide support for Trudgill’s (2002:41)  
56  
57 observation that ‘In the process of dedialectalism...dialect variants disappear at  
58  
59 different speeds’. The type of linguistic variable may be implicated in this, with our  
60

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3 results pointing to a distinction between dialect and accent features (e.g. Petyt 1980).  
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5 It also demonstrates that some variables such as *yon* may be subject to ‘sociolinguistic  
6 focussing’ (Wolfram 2002:780), signaled by their extremely high rates of use. In  
7  
8 other words, they become symbolic, and hence used as ‘acts of identity’ (Le Page &  
9  
10 Tabouret-Keller 1985) in the portrayal of ‘Shetlandness’ or indeed ‘Scottishness’ in  
11  
12 the face of potential external threat. Others may not have such symbolism and simply  
13  
14 quietly slip away through time<sup>9</sup>.  
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## 24 CONCLUSION

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29 This study provides the first quantitative analysis of language change in Lerwick,  
30  
31 Shetland and highlights the complexities of obsolescence where decline in use of  
32  
33 forms ‘cannot be reduced neatly to a universally predictable regression slope’  
34  
35 (Wolfram’s (2002:766). The results show dramatic dialect shift in the space of three  
36  
37 generations which leads us to suggest that the dialect may be facing rapid dialect  
38  
39 attrition. However, as Hoenigswald (1989: 353) suggests, ‘demise can be predicted, it  
40  
41 seems, only at a terminal stage’, where there are, for example, only a few remaining  
42  
43 speakers of the dialect in question. Therefore, to paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of  
44  
45 dialect death may be greatly exaggerated. The only way we can be sure our  
46  
47 interpretation is ‘right’ is to return to Lerwick in 30 years time to see if we can still  
48  
49 hear *peerie, I’m no been there* and */d/ at wife /d/ ere*.  
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<sup>2</sup> One reviewer notes that ‘in a minor sort of way Lerwick speech is an urban variety’.

<sup>3</sup> Although one reviewer comments that this may be a rather exaggerated view of this lexical item.

<sup>4</sup> All perfect tense contexts were included. Contexts of contracted ‘s as in *It’s been a good shop to work in* were excluded as it is impossible to establish whether ‘s is *is* or *has*.

<sup>5</sup> In casual speech, /ð/ is frequently modified from its full form. In addition to stop-like realisations, it may also become nasalized, lateralized, or omitted all together. For the purposes of this study, we concentrate only on those cases where the contexts were realised as a dental fricative or a stop. All other variants were excluded.

<sup>6</sup> Schooling is traditionally cited as a cause of dialect loss. As pointed out by many of the older generations, they would have been ‘flitten on badly’ for speaking dialect in class. However, for the younger generation, there have been a number of dialect awareness programmes, particularly in primary schools in Shetland and a policy directed change in attitude towards use of the vernacular in the school setting. Hence it would be unlikely that the change in dialect use is due to schooling practices.

<sup>7</sup> This might be interpreted as ‘dialect performance’ (e.g. Coupland 2001, Schilling-Estes 1998), an ‘exaggerated’ version of their vernacular speech produced for the microphone. However, instead of demonstrating the switches normally associated with such ‘hyper-performance’ in the sociolinguistic interview (e.g. Schilling-Estes 1998) the speakers who used the forms at high rates did so throughout the hour long recording.

<sup>8</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing attention to this research.

<sup>9</sup> The results from this research may lend themselves to an entirely different – and apparently more upbeat - interpretation. Instead of dialect attrition, the younger speakers are bidialectal (e.g. Cornips and Hulk, 2006:355) as Melchers (2004: 37) has already suggested. We are currently exploring this possibility in further research (Smith 2007-9)

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FIGURES

Figure 1: Scotland, the Shetland Isles and Lerwick



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Figure 2: Lerwick, Shetland



Figure 3: Percentage of local lexical forms by speaker age

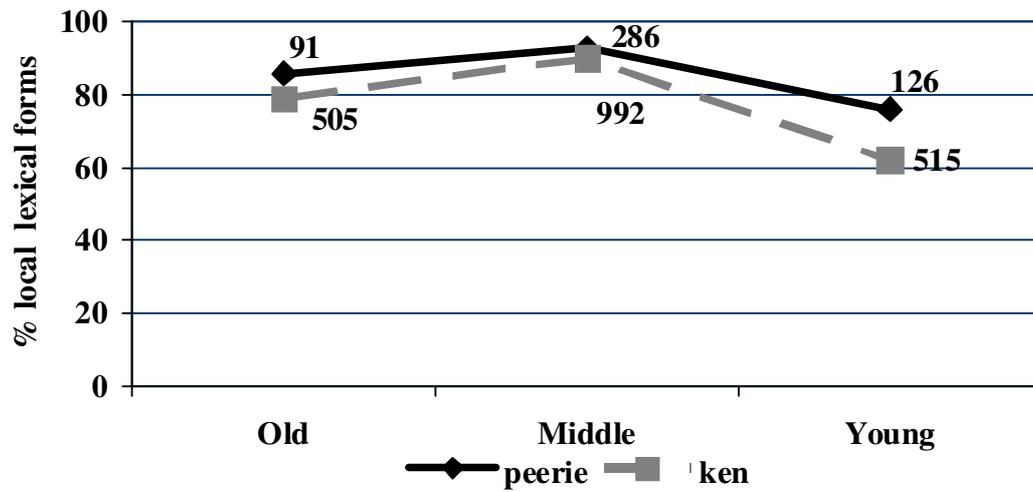


Figure 4: Percentage of local lexical forms by individual young speaker

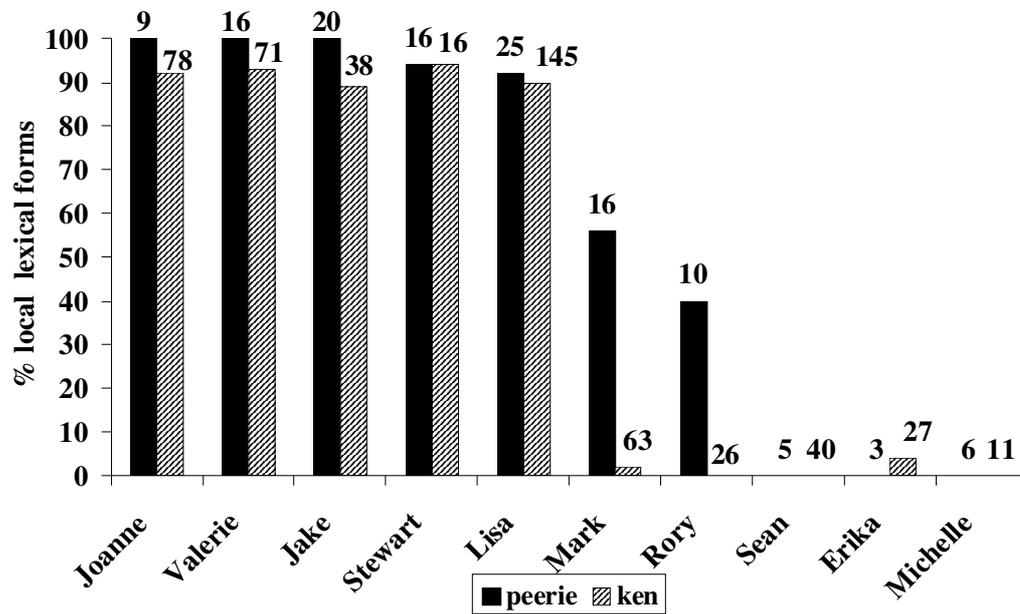


Figure 5: Percentage of local morphological forms by speaker age

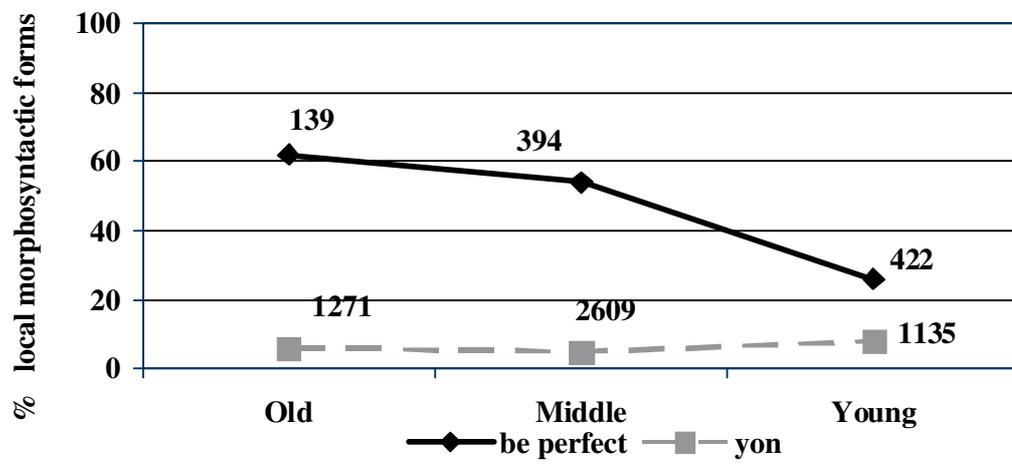


Figure 6: Percentage of local morphological forms by individual young speaker

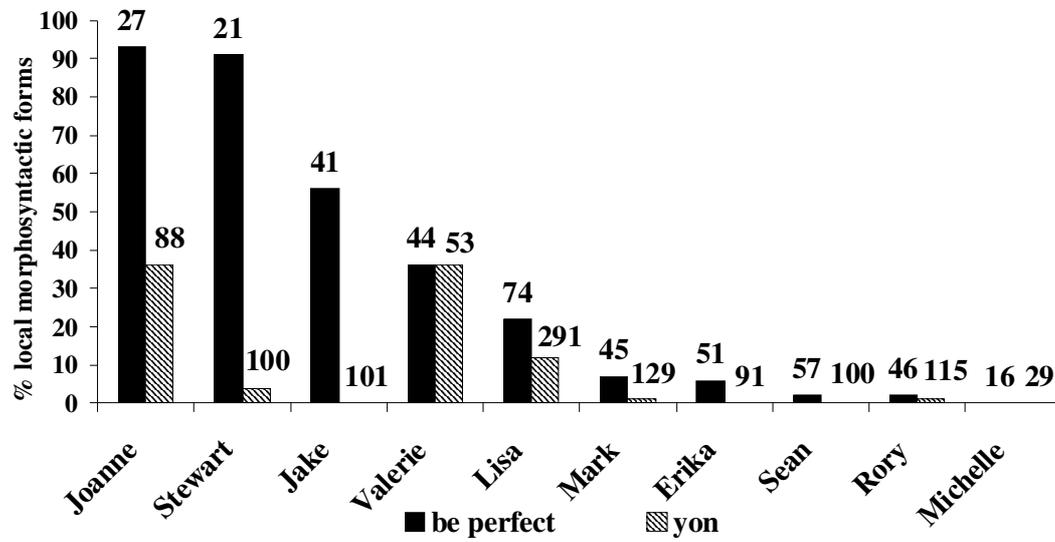


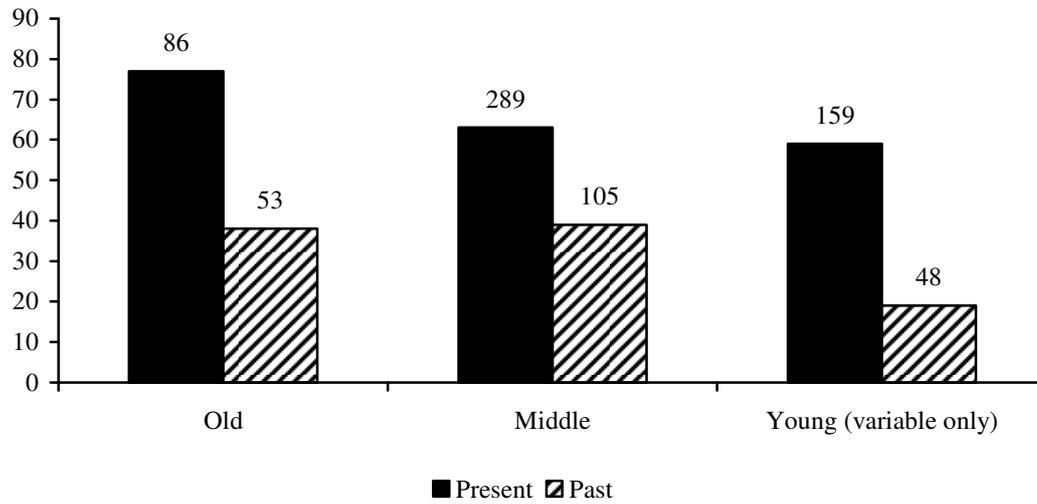
Figure 7: Percentage of *be* for *have* by tense and age

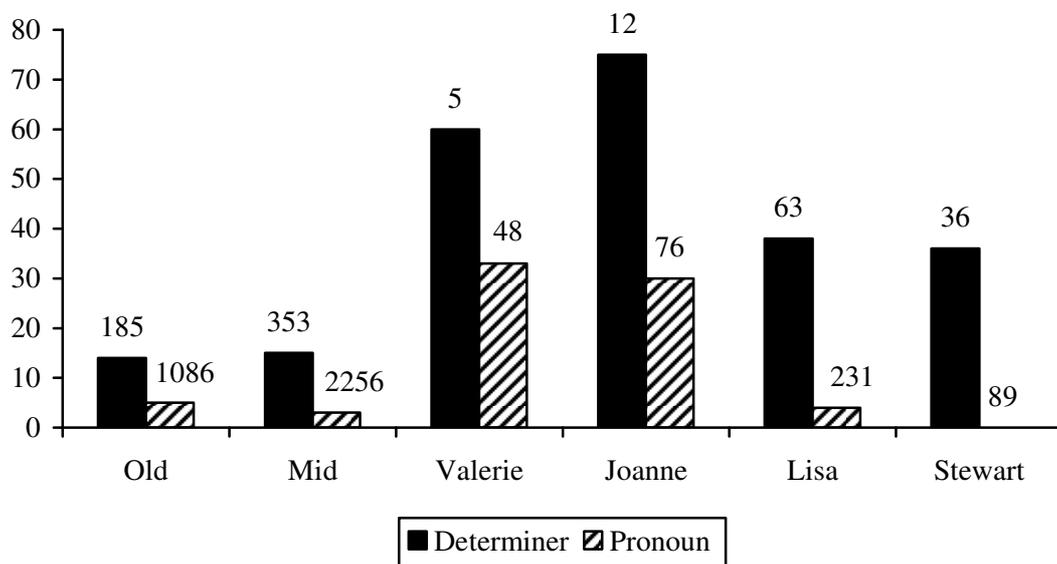
Figure 8: Percentage of *yon* by type and age

Figure 9: Percentage of local phonological forms by speaker age

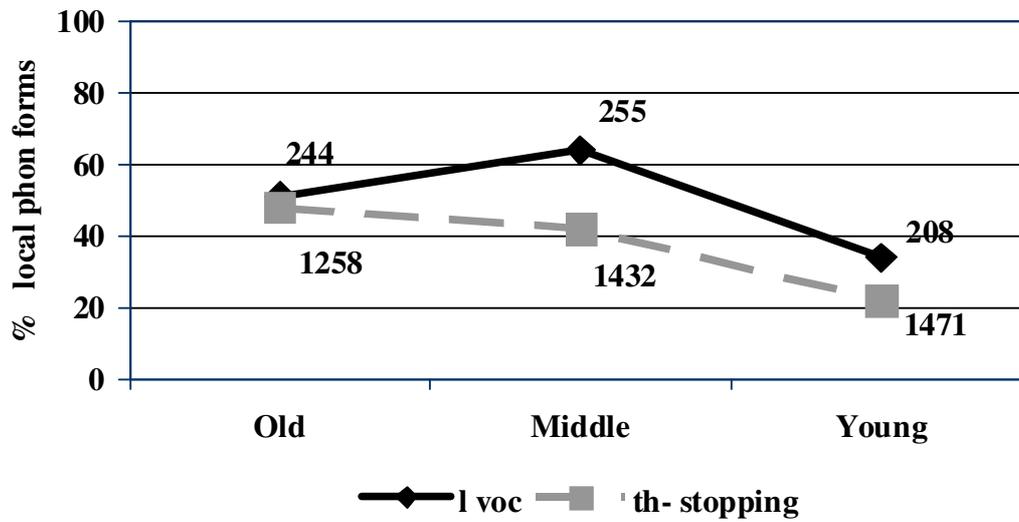


Figure 10: Percentage of local phonological forms by individual young speaker

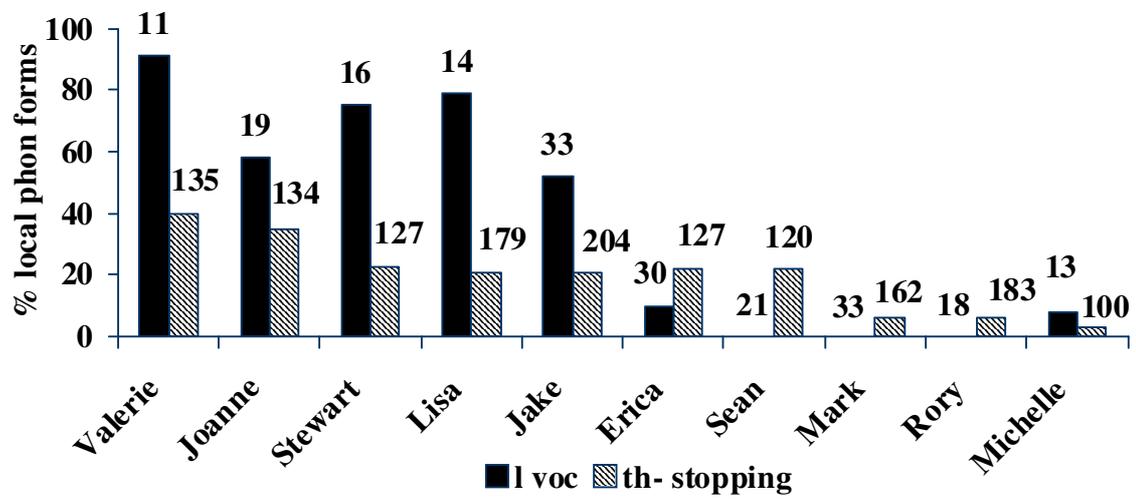


Figure 11: voiced &lt;th&gt; pronunciation by age

