

# Exploring da Isle

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## ***Exploring da Isle***

*Wander ower tae da sea,  
spaegie tho dy legs may be,  
an spy da scouries on da Knab,  
wi dir shinin beaks an wings aa drab*

*Fra da freezin winds an saat air,  
still der's nare an isle as fair,  
wi nature, culture, folk galore,  
an tammie norries by da score*

*Cliffs tae climb, an fish tae catch,  
tak a dook an ha a splash,  
da seals will gluff an den tak aff,  
orcas swim by an ha a gaff*

*Den awa fae whar da seaside bides,  
an du kaens du's blyde tae find,  
dy's hame an safe fra aa da cauld,  
exploring da island niver gits auld*

## ***Exploring the Isle (Standard English translation)***

*Wander over to the sea,  
aching\* though your legs may be,  
and spy the seagulls on the Knab\*,  
with their shining beaks and wings all drab*

*From the freezing winds and salt air,  
still there's not an isle as fair,  
with nature, culture, people galore,  
and puffins by the score*

*Cliffs to climb, and fish to catch,  
take a dip\* and have a splash,  
the seals will startle and then take off,  
orca's swim by and have a laugh*

*Then away from where the seaside lives,  
and you know you're glad to find,  
you're home and safe from all the cold,  
exploring the island never gets old*

Dialect is a highly important feature of linguistics—it showcases the evolution of language use in a specific area and has cultural significance for those who use it. This essay will analyse an original poem in Shetland Dialect (or Shetlandic as it is sometimes known), and explain the key choices made in its creation, with consideration of the forms used and the effects produced, both semantic and practical. It will also explore how writing this poem has deepened the author's understanding of language variation and how that applies in a literary

\*1 *Spaegie* doesn't have a direct English translation, it loosely means the feeling of aching muscles after overexerting yourself

\*2 The Knab is a cliff located in Lerwick, the main town in Shetland. It has a WW1 monument on it and is a famous local landmark

\*3 *Dook* translates to dip or take a dip, but in the context of water specifically

context. Due to the complicated nature of Shetland Dialect, a Standard English version of the poem has been added above for the sake of simplicity.

Shetland Dialect was chosen as the main component of the poem as it is the dialect that the author is most familiar with; additionally, it was chosen because it is an extremely distinctive type of dialect with a rich past. Although it is commonly regarded as a type of Scottish Dialect, it has roots in both old Scots and Norn (a type of Old Norse speech). This is due to Shetland originally belonging to Norway, before being given to Scotland as a part of an engagement/settlement (De Luca 2017). As time went on, Scots grew more popular in Shetland, and it was embraced by the population, leading to a majority Scots based dialect which still holds aspects of Norn (Trudgill 1984). Because of the dialect's roots in both Scots and Norwegian, it can be highly difficult to understand for anybody who is unfamiliar with the area, as the remaining Norwegian aspects of it are unlike those found in "Standard Scots". For example, Shetlandic makes a distinction between an informal "du" and a formal "you" which is not found anywhere else in Scotland (Trudgill 1984). The complexity of Shetlandic has a positive effect within the local region, as using this method of speech conveys that someone has "insider knowledge" and creates a sense of community and belonging. One of the ways this is demonstrated in the poem is through the use of the lexical field relation, association. This is achieved by highlighting several implied locations across the island: as "tammie norries" or puffins are usually only seen at Sumburgh head on the southern tip of the island, whereas the Knab is in Lerwick (Shetland's capital) several miles away. The gathering together of different aspects of the main island creates a cohesive effect and presents the island as a whole, despite how spread out it is. In doing so, the sense of community through language and location across Shetland is highlighted to the reader. This in turn adds another possible layer of analysis, as some knowledge of the area is needed to pick up on how the different geographical locations are tied together, again highlighting the "insider knowledge" that adds to a sense of community. Endeavouring to convey this sense of community in writing, while also trying to produce a cohesive poem which ties in different local areas, has made clear to the author the amount of thought that is needed to convey language variation in a way that makes sense to a non-native speaker, thus highlighting the difficulty of translating language variation into a literary context.

The dialect of a community is heavily tied to the culture that uses it. The words and their meanings have developed over time to reflect the people using it and their surroundings. The social status of those using the dialect, and the contexts where its use is considered acceptable also play a huge part in how that dialect operates. Non-standard dialects typically

have low prestige, meaning that they are commonly considered to be “lesser”. Although this view is incorrect, people who speak in the standard variety of a language are considered to be smarter and more confident than those who do not (Hodson 2014). As a result, the majority of schools and workplaces expect those who frequent them to use the standard variety of English, even going so far as to reprimand those who do not. However, this is usually not the case with Shetlandic. From as far back as the 1870s, both teachers and students have been recorded using the local dialect in schools (Smith 1996), and it is not uncommon to hear those with authority, e.g., local politicians, increase their usage of dialect when making a speech. Because the community is fairly isolated from the outside world, the local dialect holds just as much prestige within the community (if not more so), than the standard one does. To highlight this, the poem is set outside, where usage of Shetland Dialect is somewhat neutral, i.e., it is neither encouraged nor discouraged, as it increases connection with other locals, while also preventing alienation from any who don’t speak the dialect. The use of the dialect when mentioning “hame”/home and “folk”/people highlights its function in the wider community as well as in private. This use of dialect is also an example of foregrounding through grammatical deviation, as the unusual spelling of Shetlandic draws the reader’s attention and emphasises the importance of what is being said, while also making the use of Standard English within the poem stand out by comparison (Wales 2011). Through the poem, emphasizing the ability to use or not use the dialect in any given context within the community, allows the reader to gain a sense of the huge amount of pride that Shetlander’s place in their traditional speech and how important it is to everyday life there. Showcasing the importance of the local dialect, while also considering its wide usage, was trickier than one would assume at first, highlighting the importance of balancing different aspects of language variation when applying them to a literary context.

The ocean is a key feature of the poem, as it holds a lot of importance in Shetland, both from a practical and cultural point of view. It is no surprise that Shetlandic has so many words that describe or are connected to the sea, as it dictates fishing, shipping, and can be viewed from almost anywhere on the isle. Although the island holds a lot of different species of animals and birds, all the ones featured in the poem live on or right by the sea. Additionally, the use of the word “dook” is important as it can only be applied in the context of water, and therefore is most commonly used when discussing taking a swim in the ocean. Phonological and graphological deviation are also utilised to give the poem an oceanic feeling when read (Wales 2011). For example, the poem’s structure is made up of four quatrains, with the simple repeated stanzas mimicking the repetition of the ocean. The

particular use of punctuation further mimics the movement of the sea, as the poem contains commas but no periods, resembling how the tide occasionally slows, but never stops. This in turn makes the poem flow smoothly when read aloud, giving it a rhythmic feel reminiscent of the comings and goings of waves on a calm day. This was done in order to reflect the importance of the ocean to Shetland culture as a whole, as it is hard to find an aspect of life there that is not affected by the sea. It also has the added effect of making the poem easier to translate into Standard English, as keeping a similar sense of rhythm helps to convey a sense of the ocean, even if some nuance from the language is lost. Writing "Exploring da Isle" in this way has highlighted to the author how the environment in which a dialect is used affects its development, as well as the importance of considering the best usage of a dialect to reflect a chosen theme, and the consideration of how well it will translate into a standard language variety.

Despite an increase in modern written Shetlandic, it can be difficult to find set examples of what words mean or how they operate in a sentence. As Shetland is largely a bidialectal community, a lot of its dialect is passed on through oral tradition rather than written down. Due to this, the use of the dialect is more instinctual than rigid, and although there are some spellings of words that are more commonly seen, there are no set spellings that are considered more valid in their usage than others (Melchers 2000). An example of how the instinctive spelling of Shetlandic is utilised within the poem is the use of both "du's" and "dy's" in the last stanza. While both words technically mean "you is", they are used as "you're" and serve different functions in a conversation. While "du" is more informal and has a wider range of use, "dy's" is perceived as more definitive and direct, and instinctually sounds wrong when not used in an exact context or a definitive statement. There is also an intentional lack of full stops in the poem, which mimics the way Shetlandic sounds, as it is usually spoken fairly fast and, in the way it is typically pronounced, the words flow together, meaning it can be hard to tell where one sentence ends and another begins. Writing the poem in this way has highlighted how important the use of language variation in literature is as a means of preservation. Writing in dialects allows for them to be recorded in an organic manner that facilitates the differences between non-standard and standard dialects, while also ensuring that the dialects are kept alive for study in the future.

This essay has examined an original poem titled "Exploring da Isle" written in Shetland Dialect. It has considered the evolution of the dialect, its many ties to the local culture, its significance and the way it's recorded by highlighting and utilizing different aspects of the aforementioned poem, including word choice, structure, allusions to

geographic locations, punctuation, and spelling. It has also showcased the usage and impact of lexical cohesion and deviation, through the use of lexical field relations, grammatical, graphological, and phonological deviation. Writing the poem helped to expand the author's understanding of language in a literary context by conveying the difficulties of translating dialect correctly, emphasising the importance of understanding the context of a dialect—as well as how it is utilised—and furthering understanding of the reasons it is so vital to record dialects.

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