Norse against Old English: 20-0

Anders Holmberg

Newcastle University

anders.holmberg@newcastle.ac.uk

Abstract

The conclusion seems inescapable, if the facts in Emonds & Faarlund are more or less right: Middle English would be the outcome of a shift from West Germanic grammar to an eccentric form of North Germanic grammar.

Keywords

historical syntax – language contact – history of English – Germanic

The question is whether Middle English is a descendant of Old English, the language of the Anglo-Saxon immigrants, or Norse, the language of the Scandinavian immigrants who came a few hundred years later. Putting the question a bit more precisely, is Middle English Norsified Old English or is it Anglicized Norse? Emonds and Faarlund (2014, this issue; henceforth E&F) argue that it is the latter. In that sense, Middle English would be North Germanic rather than West Germanic. Consequently, since Modern English is a descendant of Middle English, it, too, would be a North Germanic language. E&F put it poignantly (p. 156): “Modern English might more aptly be called Modern Norse.”

The argument is primarily, but not exclusively, based on a comparison of the grammars of Old English, Norse, and Middle English. Their findings are striking: in the book, they discuss about 20 syntactic properties/features that Middle English shares with Norse (and its descendants in Mainland Scandinavia) that are not shared with Old English. As for syntactic features that Middle English shares with Old English that are not shared with Norse, they don't find any! Late Middle English and Early Modern English also have some features that are unique to them, among the Germanic languages (including *do*-support and the

progressive *-ing* suffix), but these are irrelevant for the question whether they descend from Old English or Norse. In terms of syntax, then, Middle English would be the outcome of a complete shift from West Germanic grammar to an eccentric form of North Germanic grammar. I don't really see any way around that conclusion, if the facts in E&F are more or less right. The question then is how to explain this, in historical terms. E&F have a stab at it which seems plausible enough.

E&F partition the grammatical constructions/rules that they discuss into those that were present in Norse, but not Old English, before the Scandinavian migration to Britain and those that have developed since, as innovations common to Middle English and Mainland Scandinavian but not the continental West Germanic languages. For the question whether Middle English descends from Old English or from Norse, the first category is more important. It includes post-verbal particles, Raising to Subject, Raising to Object (ECM), v_2 (not v_3) with subject pronouns, and several more. The alternative explanation would be that these properties, or at least many of them, would have evolved independently, in parallel, but later in Britain than in Scandinavia. It's hard to completely rule out this possibility. But which is more plausible, independent parallel evolution of a host of grammatical properties in a West Germanic language in Britain and a North Germanic language in Scandinavia, or shift from Old English grammar to Norse grammar among people living together in the same region for several hundred years? I would think it's the latter. Radical change due to extensive language contact is commonplace. Parallel change of a wide range of partly independent features is less widely attested, I would think. The burden of proof would seem to be on those who want to claim it is independent parallel evolution. I hope people will take up the challenge, though, and try to account for the fifteen or so grammatical features/constructions that would have evolved in parallel in Britain and Mainland Scandinavia. It could be a fruitful enterprise with interesting consequences for the theory of syntactic variation.

The role of the innovations in this scenario is less clear. They include the possessive clitic *-s*, default objective form of pronouns, and analytic grading of long adjectives. How did those changes happen in Mainland Scandinavia as well as in Britain, if they happened after the migration from Scandinavia to Britain had ceased? Either it must have been independent, parallel development or there was fairly extensive contact still, across the North Sea in the Middle English period, enough to lead to shared innovations. It is less clear which explanation is *a priori* more plausible in this case. Investigation of the historical diffusion of these grammatical features in Scandinavia ought to provide some indications.

Another feature which looks like a shared innovation in English and Mainland Scandinavian, not mentioned in E&F, is complementizer deletion and the presumably associated avoidance of ‘that-trace’ (where it occurs) by deletion of the complementizer. The fact that complementizer deletion doesn’t occur in Icelandic suggests that this is not an ancient North Germanic feature.

References

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