Too Good to be True

English is Not Norse

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Abstract

The grammatical items are not Norse, speakers never called it Norse, and Germanic speakers almost always learned their conquerors' language rather than imposing it—Old English is not Norse.

Keywords

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Emonds and Faarlund's (henceforth EF) thesis is deliciously challenging. However, the idea doesn't go through.

It is based, first, on certain erroneous assumptions. Traditionalists are not encumbered with a “task” of explaining how Middle English emerged so “suddenly” from Old English. Current consensus is that the West Saxon written standard was quite different from spoken English likely as far back as the first centuries of interaction between English speakers and the indigenous Celtic speakers, and later when Scandinavians took up the language. EF occasionally acknowledge this line of reasoning as something one must “resort to” to bolster the traditional theory, but such cases of diglossia are quite ordinary worldwide.

Also, that Scandinavian vocabulary was not incorporated as a “high” layer is not evidence that the language spoken was still actually Norse. Languages can take in massive amounts of even basic vocabulary from other ones and still remain members of their family. The Semitic and Slavic components of Yiddish are hardly always “high” or “cultural”—*yam* ‘sea’ is Hebrew, *ozere* ‘lake’ is Slavic, *tsi* ‘whether’ and *khotsh* ‘although’ are Slavic—and yet Yiddish's membership in Germanic is clear.

This leaves EF with a certain burden of proof. We are to believe that Scandinavians maintained their language in Britain despite the fact that Germanic-speaking tribespeople elsewhere regularly adopted the languages of their conquerors (the Normans just across the Channel gave up their Germanic, as did the Germanic-speaking tribes who dissolved the Roman Empire). We are to believe that the Scandinavians in Britain retained their Norse but immediately started calling it “English” because they were now in England, despite the fact that in the Orkneys and Shetland Islands in the north, Norsemen who actually did retain unmistakable Norse duly called it Norn (not “Scottish” or English) until the language died out a few centuries ago. Finally, we are to consider a language Norse in which about nine in ten words in the 100-word Swadesh list trace back to Old English.

EF’s main, and most valuable, demonstration is that a great many syntactic features of English have parallels not in Old English or West Germanic but North Germanic. Even here, several of the parallels trace more gracefully to effects of adult acquisition, such as the disappearance of inherent reflexives, v2 order, subjunctive marking, and other features.

However, there remains a core of parallels upon which EF are convincing, too numerous to be waved away, and almost none of them plausible as chance developments. Still, the question would be why the Scandinavians would *not* have transferred a great deal of syntax into their rendition of English. EF’s findings along these lines are welcome but in their way unsurprising. The more important issue would be: even if English retains no specifically West Germanic syntax, does this make it Norse?

To be sure, EF surmise that lexicon makes the case as well, claiming that more English vocabulary must trace to Norse than has been supposed, given that so often English and Norse had cognate forms. But this works better as rhetoric than as demonstration. From their own data, here are the subject pronouns plus *this* and *that* in Old English, Middle English, and Norse:

OE:	ic, þu, he, we, ge, hie, þis, þat
ME:	ik, þu, he, we, ye, þey, þis, þat
N:	ek, þu, he, ver, er, þeir, þetta, þat

This chart hardly suggests that Modern English is best treated as Norse. Or, if English is Norse, where are Norse’s reflexive *-sk* suffix and its suffixal articles? EF claim that English speakers would have failed to acquire these in their rendition of Norse. However, this would mean that they denuded Norse of all of its inflectional morphology and yet somehow mastered its syntax perfectly, down to complex rules on preposition stranding and Exceptional Case Marking. More

economical: Norse speakers learned English morphology highly imperfectly and transferred their syntax.

Ultimately, EF leave this question: is this sentence plausibly analyzed as a North Germanic language rather than a descendant of Old English? *I need to find out what he wants to finally put the dogs in.* EF would say so, given the subject-to-subject raising with *need*, the verb-particle construction *find out*, the split infinitive and the stranded preposition (not to mention, I suppose, that *want* is from Norse). However, most would judge that the source of the basic vocabulary and grammatical items in Old English, as well as what inflection remains (plural *-s* is indisputably English, not Norse) render this an English sentence.

EF note that the theory of language classification was developed before the existence of modern conceptions of syntax, such that we might open up to an analysis of English as Norse largely on the basis of its syntactic structures. However: one thing language contact theory has shown is that syntax is highly mutable as languages share mouths, more so than phonological and morphological patterns. English indeed took on a syntax more North Germanic than West Germanic. This, however, was a latterly development, in a language whose roots in West Germanic are clear in its lexicon and morphology—its DNA.