The Descent of English

West Germanic, Any Way You Slice It

*Cristopher Font-Santiago**

University of Wisconsin, Madison
fontsantiago@wisc.edu

Joseph Salmons

University of Wisconsin, Madison
jsalmons@wisc.edu

Abstract

Emonds & Faarlund judge subgrouping by problematic criteria and do not actually employ their stated criteria, while those criteria in fact show English to be West Germanic.

Keywords

historical syntax – language contact – history of English – Germanic

Emonds and Faarlund (E&F) challenge the traditional position of English within Germanic, as have others recently and in different ways, within linguistics (e.g., McWhorter, 2002; Trudgill, 2011) and beyond (e.g., Forster et al., 2004, 2006; Oppenheimer, 2006). We show that:

- (1) E&F's stated criteria for determining descent are idiosyncratic;
- (2) E&F don't follow those criteria;
- (3) by E&F's criteria, English is clearly West Germanic (WGmc).

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First, E&F write (2014: 57) that “no principles of linguistic descent even remotely depend on differences in sources of vocabulary.” Instead, a language’s descent is (2014: 57–58):

[...] in accord with an often unarticulated linguistic practice of 200 years, [...] properly determined by its grammar, including its morphosyntactic system, and patterns of regular sound change.
[...] structuralists at least understood that syntax must play a central role as well.

E&F give no source for these views, but actual practice and theory align closely with Barbançon et al. (2013: 146; also Longobardi et al., 2013: 122):

In the current state of the art, linguistic characters are of three types: lexical, phonological, and morphological. (Syntactic characters are not generally used because not enough is known about syntactic change to justify confidence that any syntactic character could provide good evidence for linguistic descent.)

E&F (this volume) provide “lexical and above all syntactic arguments” that English is North Germanic (NGmc), though admitting that the lexicon “ended up as more English than Scandinavian” (2014: 53).

Similarly, “Middle English phonology, especially its phonetics, is very much a continuation of Old English phonology” (2014: 157). English shows trajectories parallel to WGmc but not NGmc, e.g., losing front rounded vowels (like Yiddish, many German dialects, but unlike NGmc), and using alveolar rather than dental articulation for /t, d, n/ (Haugen, 1976: 477–478). Norse speakers would have presumably continued this articulatory feature rather than adopting WGmc patterns.

Morphological discussion focuses on loss, not shared innovation, basically case deflection. Only shared innovation can speak clearly to kinship (Ringe and Eska, 2013: 256, others). Still, core English inflection matches WGmc, not NGmc, reflecting different developments from Proto-Germanic. For instance, ME plurals are formed with typically WGmc *-(e)n* and *-(e)s*, cf. Dutch, Frisian; NGmc relies heavily on *-Vr* forms, lost in English (Blake, 1992a: 126–133, 1992b: 105; Booij, 2002: 24; Haugen, 1976: 76).

In short, E&F find lexical evidence unhelpful yet use it, and see phonological evidence as central, but both types of evidence show English as WGmc. Their morphological evidence is not probative and even divergent inheritance shows English to be WGmc, not NGmc.

Their case thus rests entirely on syntax: “Syntactic evidence for the ancestor of English [...] all goes one way,” i.e. with NGmc, not WGmc (this volume). They rely on standard German and Dutch, ignoring rich dialectal variation in German, Low German, Dutch, and Yiddish, which shows precisely the NGmc-like characters they find in English. First, contrary to E&F’s claim (2014: 91), invariant relative particles or complementizers are widespread across WGmc (e.g., Harbert, 2007: 423–435). Second, E&F maintain that English future modals reflect Norse *skulu*, *munu* (2014: 79–81), yet many WGmc dialects use the WGmc cognates here, *wollen* and *sollen* (Schirmunski, 2010: 645–646). The development of modals was slow and complex across the family (e.g., Diewald, 1999), making this ill-suited as a diagnostic.

Syntax is further claimed to be resistant to borrowing: “Syntactic continuity and stability through history is a clear indication of a genealogical linguistic relationship” (this volume). Two of their central examples, parasitic gaps and preposition stranding, do transfer in bilingualism. Wisconsin German heritage bilinguals produce parasitic gaps (Bousquette et al., 2013, 2016a, 2016b; Sewell and Salmons, 2014). Bousquette (2015) shows preposition stranding in the same communities, exemplified by his title. The adoption of stranding under contact is widely attested in heritage bilingualism, e.g., King (2013) on Acadian French and Pascual y Cabo and Gómez (2015) on heritage Spanish. Stranding is also attested in WGmc, especially Low German, as shown by Fleischer (2002) (see Bech and Walkden, 2016 on Old English stranding.)

In conclusion, E&F’s stated criteria for determining descent are at odds with longstanding practice and theory, especially for syntax. E&F do not consistently rely on their claimed criteria, particularly using lexical and not using phonetic/phonological evidence. Most importantly, they ignore extensive phonetic, phonological, morphological and syntactic evidence from across WGmc showing English-like patterns that E&F portray as exclusively NGmc. Beyond that, the assumption that syntax is less vulnerable to contact (this volume), while perhaps intuitively appealing, proves incorrect for critical examples. The list of examples given could be greatly expanded.

In short, distinctively Norse-like characteristics of English reflect contact, shared heritage or parallel innovation, but crucially *not* Norse ancestry.

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