Middle English

English, Not Norse

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Abstract

The Viking hypothesis is fatally flawed, in part because syntax is readily borrowed in intense contact situations, while inflectional morphology usually is not—and Middle English inflectional morphology is overwhelmingly of West Germanic origin. The dismissal of lexical evidence is also misguided: the vast majority of basic vocabulary items come from Old English, not from Norse.

Keywords

historical syntax – language contact – history of English – Germanic

Emonds and Faarlund (E&F) make a number of methodological and factual assertions that don't stand up to close scrutiny. In this commentary I'll outline the main methodological problems. The most Norsified dialects of Middle English—which do not include the dialect that became Modern Standard English—had extensive structural and lexical interference from Norse, but the overall amount was not extreme.

E&F have a highly idiosyncratic notion of what is required for a demonstration of genetic relationship among languages—that is, a demonstration that two or more languages have descended with modification from a single parent language. By far the most important method in the historical linguist's toolbox is the Comparative Method, which in turn rests to a large extent on the regularity hypothesis of sound change: this method involves the identification of systematic sound correspondences in morphemes with (usually) similar meanings between candidates for genetic relatedness. Without any mention of the fact that they are in effect rejecting the Comparative Method, together

with the massive evidence of its successful application over the past 150 years, E&F claim that syntactic similarities alone, even without sound/meaning correspondences in morphemes, can provide sufficient evidence for genetic relationship. They also assert that syntax = grammar, a move that allows them to ignore almost all the morphological evidence, as well as the lexical evidence, for the phylogenetic status of Middle English and Modern English. Not taking the morphological evidence into account is damaging because inflectional morphology is much more rarely transferred even in intense contact situations.

E&F's view that syntactic correspondences suffice is especially unpromising in light of the fact that syntax is readily transferred in intense contact situations. They claim that syntactic borrowing happens much less often than lexical borrowing. Their belief is correct only for cases of borrowing in which bilingual speakers introduce features from one of their languages into their other language: in these cases, loanwords are almost always the most numerous transferred features. Structural interference, especially in the phonology and syntax, often occurs as well when the contact is intense and of long duration. But E&F's claim is incorrect for situations in which a group of people shift to another group's language: if the shifting speakers are not fully fluent in the target language, the most prominent and numerous transferred features are phonological and syntactic features; lexical transfer, which usually occurs even in shift situations, is rarely as extensive (see Thomason and Kaufman, 1988, especially Chapter 3). The standard view of Norse-English contact in northern England is that Norse invaders settled early in the 10th century CE, interacted with English speakers as rulers and then as fellow farmers, and shifted to English by about 1150 CE (the date of the latest Norse inscriptions in England; see Thomason and Kaufman, 1988: 285). On this scenario, Norse speakers would have shifted to English. If they did so without becoming fully bilingual in English, they would have made learners' errors, and many of these errors would have entered into the English of native speakers as well as shifting Norse speakers, given the relative prestige of the Norse speakers. The transfer of some syntactic features in such a situation is therefore expected.

The unusual combination of phonological, morphological, syntactic, and extensive lexical transfer is surely due to the fact that English and Norse were, at the time of contact in England, genetically and typologically very close. Proto-Germanic split into its several daughter languages around 500 BCE, and Proto-Northwest Germanic split into North and West Germanic even later. Compare Slavic languages, which split from Proto-Slavic around 1100 years ago: Slavic languages are still very similar, not very far from mutual intelligibility. Old English and Norse weren't much more different when they came into contact. This

is important here because typological congruence facilitates contact-induced change; even features that are ordinarily rarely borrowed are often transferred between closely-related languages (Thomason, 2014) when the languages are in close contact.

Significantly, E&F also ignore the possibility that some of the syntactic features they discuss might have arisen independently in Norse and English, through the familiar process known as drift. Related languages, especially in the centuries immediately following their divergence from the protolanguage, share the same inherited pattern pressures (features that are relatively hard to learn) and therefore undergo some similar or even identical changes. Drift is the source of internally-motivated language change, driven sometimes by universal tendencies in structure or learnability and sometimes by language-specific imbalances in inherited structures.

E&F believe that the many 'obvious cognates' in the basic vocabularies of English and Norse make lexical evidence 'irrelevant for deciding' whether Middle English descended from Old English or Norse. They don't. Many of those obvious cognates are phonologically quite distinct, so that their etymologies are unmistakable, as in examples like these Norse/English cognate sets (the Norse forms are from Gordon and Taylor, 1957): *fimm* : *five*, *tveir* : *two*, *nú* : *nine*, and *sjau* : *seven*. In fact, only about 7 percent of the items in a 200-word Swadesh list of basic English vocabulary come from Norse, and another 7 percent come from French; the basic vocabulary of English is overwhelmingly of Old English origin (see Thomason and Kaufman, 1988: 275–306 for a detailed analysis of Norse influence on English).

The great majority of English grammatical morphemes are also of Old English origin, and of course morphology forms a major part of the language's grammar. E&F's claim that their proposed Norse-origin syntactic features in Middle English are diagnostic for the language's genealogical status cannot be sustained. At the very least they would need to explain how it happens that the inflectional morphology is so heavily drawn from Old English. Borrowing of all those inflectional Old English morphemes, including entire paradigms, is not a viable hypothesis, even with such closely-related languages.

References

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