Anglicized Norse, or Anything Goes?

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Abstract

This response mostly addresses the comments, but its main point is that 11th c. “language contact” syntactic changes suggest that Norse was expanding while West Saxon was contracting.

Keywords

historical syntax – language contact – history of English – Germanic

Most commentators apparently feel that the hypothesis of *English: The Language of the Vikings* (hereafter *ELOV*) is extreme and wish to refute it. But they only offer informal alternative scenarios in which Middle English directly descends from Old English. Parts of these alternatives include well-known facts, most already discussed in *ELOV*, parts are transferred from linguistic considerations not specific to English, and parts are speculations about languages not preserved in texts.

We should keep in mind that *ELOV*’s hypothesis as presented in (1) is simple enough, and concerns *only three grammars*, including their grammatical lexicons: (i) the *written language of English texts* prior to c. 1140 (OE), which were mostly from Wessex, (ii) written English from c. 1140 to 1400 (ME), and (iii) the grammar of early western Mainland Scandinavian (Norse). In classificatory terms, Norse is North Germanic and OE is West Germanic, and since our book concludes that ME has the syntax of Norse and not of OE, we conclude that

ME is North Germanic.¹ When Font-Santiago and Salmons (FSS) reveal that our argument “rests entirely on syntax,” they only repeat what that book already claims (*ELOV*: 58, 131, 157).

- (1) **North Germanic Grammar of English.** ME grammar developed without major change from the grammar of Norse, and not from that of OE.

It's hard to see what rational grounds there are for considering this hypothesis extreme. All agree that two Germanic languages were spoken in England in c. 850–1150, whose lexicons were remarkably similar, though their syntactic systems were not. The issue is, which one gave rise to ME? The formulation (1) includes the possibility that ME speech, whether of OE or Norse ancestry, had been heavily ‘anglicized’ in phonology and other non-syntactic aspects. Thus, Thomason's claim that in such areas, ME owes more to OE than Norse, is still consistent with (1).

However, her statement that “whole paradigms” of OE morphology were brought into ME is just wrong; case declensions and both verbal and adjectival agreement paradigms were lost. Nor is there any basis for her accusation that *ELOV* excludes inflectional morphology. Its Chapter 8 is devoted to it, and our arguments for (1) include adjectival comparison, pronominal case, infinitival marking, and possessive inflection.

1 Syntactic Argumentation for the Hypothesis

Holmberg's summary understands that *ELOV* is centered on comparisons of the morphosyntax and syntax of the three languages and accurately depicts

1 FSS and Thomason stress non-syntactic typological criteria for separating North from West Germanic, without specifying their content beyond the fact that they must be phonetic and morphological. Our book is not concerned with this point.

FSS consider that noun plurals in *-n* and *-s* are typical of West Germanic, in contrast to Norse productive plurals in *-r*. Indeed, WG plurals in *-n* were plentiful in southern ME, influenced by dialects that continued OE before dying out. ME *-s* plurals are often assumed to generalize the nom.-acc. plurals of OE masculine *a*-stem nouns. However, McWhorter's history of English plurals (<http://ed.ted.com/lessons/a-brief-history-of-plural-word-s-john-mcwhorter#review>) attributes the spread of *-s* to Scandinavian immigrants' preference for one regular plural to several based on declensions. For us, these immigrants relexified their productive *-r* to *-s*, encouraged by early contact with West Saxons and hearing *-s* as a frequent plural. The spread southward of *-s* plurals evident by 1200 (cf. https://www.uni-due.de/SHE/HE_Grammar_OE-ME_nouns.htm) is then a part of the southward spread of Anglicized Norse.

our line of argument. Furthermore, he is the only commentator who mentions our so far unaddressed challenge (Section 6.8) to find counterexamples to our claim (2).

- (2) **The OE-ME Split.** No syntactic properties, outside of some absent inflections, link ME to OE rather than to Scandinavian.

In fact, Holmberg adds another link between ME and Scandinavian, namely complementizer deletion in finite clauses.

Usefully, Holmberg ranks our arguments as to which are *prima facie* the more convincing, and suggests that certain “shared innovations” (phrasal possessive -s, parasitic gaps, tag questions) might, in the absence of textual evidence, turn out not to bear on our claim.

Nonetheless, as our Chapter 6 tries to explain, there are reasons why evidence for a common source of these constructions is lacking.

- (i) It is difficult to search for the negative properties needed for parasitic gaps, missing complementizers, and N-s where N is *not the head* of a possessive phrase.
- (ii) Tag questions seem associated with discourse, rather than the literary, legal and religious texts of medieval corpora.
- (iii) Finding -s on phrases rather than heads requires that a language allow multi-word pre-nominal possessives, but many (Dutch, German) do not seem to.

When such factors prevent documenting a construction, shared innovations still constitute arguments for a common source, because, as Holmberg concludes, in areas of language contact, the hypothesis of a single source is simpler than independent parallel developments.

In some places, commentators misunderstand our arguments for (1)–(2). Van Kemenade reports that some medieval West Germanic languages used a modal for future tense and two modals in sequence, but since these languages did not affect the development of English, we continue to follow the sources cited in *ELOV*: Section 3.5, which classify these (Scandinavian) patterns as typical of early ME but not OE. Van Kemenade also misreads our argument based on the disappearance of many OE lexically reflexive verbs (McWhorter, 2004). The argument (Section 5.4) is that the loss of the Norse *bound* reflexive morpheme -sk (in ON → ME) is more expected diachronically than the loss of the OE *free pronoun* reflexives (in OE → ME), especially given the massive loss in ME of other inflectional paradigms. The existence of cognates of -sk in other West Germanic languages is irrelevant.

To take another construction, Los argues that ME replacement of separable OE verb prefixes by post-verbal particles follows from the ME verb-complement order. Yet the eventually complete loss of separable prefixes in ME is more extensive than in Mainland Scandinavian. The very fact of this variation (e.g., between English and Norwegian) shows that the two factors (word order and prefixal status) are independent. Since ME is for us a (syntactic) North Germanic language like any other, nothing prevents it from developing a North Germanic property further than in Mainland Scandinavian. Both variants still share a property widely observed to be lacking in OE, extensive systems of both idiomatic and literal post-verbal particles.

Finally, FSS repeatedly misrepresent our views in *ELOV*: of course we do not “see phonological evidence as central,” and while we don’t contest certain ideas (that ME phonology might be “a continuation of Old English phonology,” or that the ME lexicon may have “ended up as more English than Scandinavian”), the contexts in *ELOV* make clear that we don’t assent to them either.

Our perspective assumes that natural language grammars have relatively fixed properties, and that changes are of interest precisely because they don’t just happen willy-nilly.² Several commentators dismiss this conception a priori, and operate with unfalsifiable premises.

For example, though Trudgill agrees with our conclusion that English owes to the syntax of Old Norse “very much more than has generally been thought,” he sees no reason to call ME ‘Anglicized Norse’ rather than ‘Norsified English’ (the term of Thomason and Kaufman, 1988). For him Middle English simply illustrates “contact and mixture.”³ For us, however, the nouns in these labels indicate a language’s syntactic basis, as exemplified in Scots Gaelic (Celtic syntax) and Irish English (Germanic syntax). This is what makes (2) falsifiable.

We thus deny that, in a given system of syntax, a native speaker can set binary parameters or choose lexical properties in contradictory ways. The Germanic infinitive marker is a bound prefix or not, embedded Vs in neutral discourse precede phrasal objects or not, etc. In this way, *ELOV* indeed reflects what Trudgill calls the “generative mindset” which excludes free syntactic ‘mixtures.’⁴

2 While ME may have been a lexical creole (*ELOV*: footnote 24), the term doesn’t apply to ME syntax.

3 Several commentators seem to feel that linguistic theory provides no basis for certain language contact outcomes to be more or less expected than any others. This is because language contact is not a theory, but an ill-defined phenomenon.

4 Another such unprincipled mixture (rejected by our mindset) is that, under language contact,

Another misunderstanding of *ELOV* concerns its discussions of the open-class ME lexicon (Chapter 2). McWhorter's commentary favoring OE as the origin of high-frequency words in the Swadesh list repeats a lexicographic error pointed out in *ELOV*, namely the circular assumption that a modern word with an OE root must be from OE. A glance at the Swedish cognates in the Swadesh list for English shows that almost all can be as easily related to North Germanic, as expected in our approach.

2 The Change from West Saxon to Anglicized Norse

Despite our different presuppositions about human grammars, we agree with Trudgill's idea, seconded by McWhorter, that some unwritten predecessor of ME, different from written OE, became prevalent throughout England. But contrary to them, we require some concrete evidence for this other language. In our view, the massive evidence for this language is called Early ME. The reason runes disappeared after 1150 (cf. Thomason) is that ME started to be written exactly at that time.

While we argue that the spoken alternative to OE was Anglicized Norse, we do not insist that all its North Germanic syntactic properties derived directly from post-Viking settlement. The 'Anglo-Saxon migration' itself included Jutes from today's Denmark, Angles from today's northernmost tip of Germany, and Saxons from the adjacent North Sea coast. Since continental Anglo-Saxons were on the periphery of 'West Germanic,' it is not so surprising if OE had "substantial VO word order," as van Kemenade and Los observe; cf. Pintzuk (2002). Different word order patterns may have been a dialectal variation of OE from the start, which then converged with and strengthened the word order of Anglicized Norse.⁵

The argument for (2) based on word order still stands. Whatever the variation in OE verb phrases, the literature has reported it as predominantly head-final. But, in both ON and quite soon in ME, it was increasingly and strongly head-initial.

A likely time of the greatest diffusion of the unwritten alternative to OE was 1013–1043, when *all England was a Scandinavian kingdom*. Even though

generations of native speakers (e.g., of ME) may tolerate internalized 'grammar competition,' giving rise to grammatical productions not allowed by any single formal grammar.

5 Phrasal word order and optional placements of verbs may be "grounded in cognition," as Los suggests, but different obligatory verbal positions in different languages are independent of discourse factors.

the cradle of Anglicized Norse, i.e. Middle English, was the Danelaw, it was probably at least a second language in all areas after the Conquest. Thus, van Gelderen is mistaken in concluding that our hypothesis (1) expects that characteristically Norse constructions in ME, such as split infinitives, should appear first in the Danelaw. If by 1200 the whole country was familiar with Anglicized Norse, there is no reason to link its individual ME texts to particular areas of ME.⁶

Finally, there is nothing sociolinguistically special about West Saxons and other OE speakers switching to Anglicized Norse in the 11th century. As McWhorter comments (probably with different intent), “Germanic-speaking tribespeople elsewhere regularly adopted the language of their conquerors.” Indeed, this is what happened after the conquest of the West Saxons in the early 11th century by the Danes.

2.1 *Syntactic Change through Language Contact*

With the exception of Holmberg, the commentators (specialists in the history of English) seem unable to imagine that ME (and Modern English) *might not* descend from the language of Alfred and *Beowulf*. But then the many differences between ME and OE seem to call for some plausible label for the many ME innovations that all point in the same direction (i.e., whereby English became ‘norsified’). Such is the role of ‘language contact’; currently a non-predictive label for essentially any syntactic change. For Thomason, “[...] syntax is readily transferred in contact situations.” According to her description, the speakers of English throughout the whole country incorporated the regional grammatical errors and daily life vocabulary of the Norse speakers, who were abandoning their own language (see also the commentaries by McWhorter and Trudgill).

These advocates of syntactic change under contact, however, gloss over a major empirical discrepancy between the development of ME and the changes in the many languages that have been attributed to contact. Syntactic changes due to contact (outside the history of English) tend to involve pairs of languages in a quite asymmetric sociolinguistic relation, between what we can call a ‘dominant language’ and a ‘contracting language’ spoken in the same area. Some

6 Regional attributions are important when they reflect regional dialects rather than national languages. Thus Southern examples of ME may, but need not, reflect a regional continuation of West Saxon. Van Gelderen focuses on areal sources of ME because she presupposes that Anglicized Norse only continued to ‘influence’ ME, rather than becoming the language of the whole country.

pairs discussed in the literature are English : Irish, English : Amerindian languages, Spanish : Amerindian languages, French : Breton, Norwegian : Saami, etc. In these situations, most young adult speakers of the contracting languages are bilingual, and the contracting language is 'losing ground' to the dominant one. What then often happens is that younger speakers of the contracting languages start producing syntactic patterns of the dominant language. But, in contrast, language contact *only rarely changes the dominant language*: French is not acquiring Breton syntax, nor Spanish Nahuatl syntax, nor Norwegian Saami syntax. In this we agree with Kroch, Taylor, and Ringe (2000), cited in *ELOV* (60):

Now almost universally, even when massive lexical borrowing is under way, *native speakers maintain their grammars*. Though speakers changing their language "often impose not only content words but also grammatical features of their native languages on the language they are learning [...] [*t*] *hese effects ordinarily disappear in subsequent generations*, but not always" (our emphases).⁷

In the traditional view of 12th-century English, the dominant/contracting pair was English : Old Norse. Judging by what usually happens in these situations, pre-contact OE should not have been significantly influenced by Norse as the latter died out, but in fact commentators such as Thomason insist on massive change in the dominant language *in the direction of the contracting language Norse*. This is a most implausible scenario, but one that deriving today's English from OE cannot do without.

According to *ELOV*, the 12th-century contact pair was Anglicized Norse : West Saxon (OE), and what should have happened did happen. Late OE shows the typical syntactic changes of a contracting language, the 'early signs' of changes in the direction of ME, e.g., in word order, post-verbal particles, etc. (*ELOV*: Section 1.1). Doubtless, early OE speakers helped denude Norse of its inflection and spoke it imperfectly, but eventually their children acquired the unchanged syntax of the Norse speakers around them.

⁷ This view was also held by recognized authorities such as A. Meillet and E. Sapir. We do not claim that second-language communities never manage to impose an aspect of their grammar onto a language. Anglo-Normans adopting English in the 14th century began to introduce *wh*-pronouns as relative clause markers, alongside invariant *that*. This change in the dominant language, effected by the literate elite, fully took hold only after centuries.

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