1. Introduction

Some time back I gave a lecture on certain similarities and differences between Old Danish and Modern Danish at a seminar on grammar. My examples were selected from a collection of empirical data, and they included a sentence from the Scanic Law as it can be read in the manuscript known as Stockholm B 69 (henceforth 'the B 69'). It reads as follows (1):

(1) Far thæn man kunu ær børn hafwær. oc førær hana i garth mæth sæ oc mæth børnum sinum. (B 69, 204: 15-16)

- If a man who has children gets a wife, and makes her a member of his household with the children
- If a man gets a wife who has children, and makes her a member of his household with the children

Intuitively, I had arranged my translation into Modern Danish in such a manner that the relative clause unambiguously served as a specification to man 'man' (cf. (1.a)), not to kunu 'woman' (cf. (1.b)). Someone in the audience asked how I could be certain that this was in fact the right translation, and at that moment I realized that I couldn’t point to any simple rule in explaining why I insisted on (1.a) being preferable to (1.b). The relative marker ær is an indeclinable particle.

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1 This manuscript is estimated to be from the mid-14th century (cf. Kroman 1944: 58-59).
2 My translation into Modern Danish was as follows: 'Får sådan en mand som har børn, en kone, og indlemmer hende i sin husholdning med sine børn'.
3 Danish has a long history of indeclinable relative particles. In Old Danish in addition to ær we find the forms ænsæ, sum (/sæm/som) (cf. Wellejus 1972). In Modern Danish we have som. Relative particles are far more common than relative pronouns. In Old Danish as well as Modern Danish, a relative clause may even occur without any relative marker at all.
- it might equally well be attached to man ‘man’ as to kunu ‘woman’, and the possessive pronoun sinum ‘his/hers/its’ doesn’t reveal whose children, as it is neutral as regards gender. I suspected the use of the demonstrative thæn ‘that’ to be decisive, but exactly how, I could not explain.

This led me to investigate the use of nouns and demonstrative pronouns in this particular manuscript of the Scanic Law, the present article is a report of my findings.

It has proved illuminating to look at how the different entities are presented in discourse. Whether an entity is presented with a noun, with a demonstrative pronoun or both, boils down to two sets of distinctions. The one set is the distinction of introducing a new discourse referent vs. continuing an already established discourse referent. The second set is the distinction between presenting an entity as identifiable to the listener or not.

As it often happens, the main line of investigation inspired a number of additional questions. In the present case the most urgent one was: Why are there so few articles in the B 69? This question is highly relevant because the system of definite and indefinite articles in Modern Danish is an integral part of the way we present entities as identifiable or not, and as new discourse referents or not. Thus the discrepancy between Old Danish as written in the B 69 and Modern Danish is remarkable in this respect. The question is also relevant because the very kind of discourse in the B 69 (legislative text) favours non-specific entities and therefore might have an impact on how the entities are presented (with or without articles).

As concerns the composition of the present article, this line of questioning will be addressed first (section 2.). In section 2.1 I show the paradigm of definite and indefinite articles in Modern Danish, and I summarize what is known concerning the age of the different articles in Danish. In section 2.2 I show how specific and non-specific entities are presented with or without articles, this is illustrated by examples in Modern Danish. The most important conclusion of this section is the fact that lack of articles (definite as well as indefinite) results in non-specific entities. In section 2.3 I discuss the two possible answers to the question: Why are there so few articles in the B 69? These two possible answers are: 1) because the kind of discourse favours non-specific entities, and 2) because there were no or very little articles in the chronolect of Danish reflected in the B 69. I conclude that both of these answers play a part.