

## The noun phrase and the ‘Viking Hypothesis’

Paola Crisma - Università di Trieste and University of York

Susan Pintzuk - University of York

In recent years, attempts have been made to use syntax to demonstrate genealogical relations between languages (see a.o. Longobardi *et al.* 2013, and, for the history of English, Emonds and Faarlund 2014, henceforth E&F). These studies crucially rely on large datasets, since finding just a few common syntactic properties is justly regarded as insufficient proof of common origin. We show, however, that sometimes detailed analyses of one or two syntactic changes may prove more revealing than larger datasets in discriminating between proposals.

E&F make the bold claim (henceforth the ‘Viking Hypothesis’) that Middle English (ME) is not a descendent of Old English (OE), as is generally assumed, but rather a descendant of the variety of Old Norse (ON) spoken by the Vikings who settled in England during the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Though E&F also discuss lexical evidence (not addressed here), much of their argument is grounded on a large amount of syntactic evidence (about twenty syntactic characteristics): according to E&F, the many syntactic innovations of ME are not innovations at all if ME is descended from ON rather than OE.

In his review of E&F, Lightfoot (2016:476) states that “[the Viking Hypothesis] is intrinsically interesting and is certainly an empirical claim. Consequently, it will stimulate productive research as scholars seek to build on what E&F have done or to refute the basic claim.” Indeed, new productive empirical research has already begun: the replies in *Language Dynamics and Change* 6.1 (Font-Santiago & Salmons, van Gelderen, Holmberg, van Kemenade, Kortmann, Los, McWhorter, Thomason, Trudgill), Bech & Walkden (2016) and Stenbrenden (2016) discuss among other things the various syntactic characteristics presented in E&F. These works collectively demonstrate that the evidence presented by E&F fails to support the claim that ME descends from ON. However, this same evidence cannot be used to support the opposite hypothesis either, i.e. that ME is a continuation of OE: some of the relevant syntactic properties are in fact present in both ON and OE and thus do not indicate which language is the ancestor of ME. For other syntactic properties, there is not enough evidence to establish that they were characteristics of ON.

We do not share the fundamental scepticism on the relevance of syntactic data for genealogical reconstruction voiced in some of the works above. In this talk we show that decisive evidence can come from syntax, even if the number of changes examined is small. Following the diachronic path of change, we find in ME *exactly* the constructions one would expect given previous OE stages. We argue that this can be used as evidence that ME is descended from OE, and shows that syntactic data can be used for reconstruction.

The first change we discuss is the establishment of the indefinite article in ME. OE allows bare singular count arguments with indefinite interpretation, but singular indefinites may also be introduced by *an*, the ancestor of the modern indefinite article. Crisma (2015) argues that OE witnesses two recognizable stages in the development of the indefinite article, with two distinct grammars attested in different texts: Stage One, in which *an* is only used as the number ‘one’; and Stage Two, where *an* is essentially an obligatory mark of specificity, with non-specific nominals still occurring bare. In neither grammar is *an* attested with singular generics. As usual, there are texts where the two grammars coexist, giving the impression of optional use of *an*, but two generalizations hold: 1) there is a perceptible change from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Stage One -> Stage Two); 2) the incompatibility of *an* with the generic reading is categorical throughout OE. Crisma and Pintzuk (2016) extend the investigation to ME and show that the earliest ME texts (from the M1 period in PPCME2, 1150-1250) are essentially analogous to the latest OE ones, i.e. they attest Stage Two, though a few sporadic cases of *an* with generics appear at this time. The paucity of data does not enable them to reach any conclusion for the M2 period (1250-1350); but in period M3 (1350-1420) the situation is essentially that of Modern English: bare singulars have virtually disappeared and

*an* becomes obligatory with generic singular count nominals. These data show a smooth transition from OE to ME, the data in M1 being exactly what one expects to find given the OE development *if ME is a continuation of OE*. The Viking Hypothesis can be saved only by postulating that, for the relevant syntactic characteristic, the variety of Norse spoken in the Danelaw in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (for which there is no substantial direct source) happens to be identical to OE Stage Two. This conjecture is made implausible by what one observes in the history of both Icelandic and Swedish. According to Faarlund (2005), the indefinite article is missing in ON — not surprisingly, given its absence in Modern Icelandic. As for Swedish, the detailed study by Skrzypek (2012) shows that *en* is used only as a numeral till the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. One possible rescue for the Viking Hypothesis is to assume that the Anglicized Norse of the Danelaw had borrowed Stage Two grammar from OE; but this goes against E&F's core assumption that even in a situation of language contact "native speakers maintain their grammar" [p.60], and vacates their general claim.

The second change that forms a similar argument contra the Viking Hypothesis is the development of the definite article. We set aside here its different morphological realizations — definiteness suffix in Scandinavian, free morpheme in English, a question E&F briefly address — and focus on its distribution. Crisma (2011) shows that, while at older stages of the language (only attested in poetry) determinerless nominals can be interpreted as definite, in the OE prose texts from the 10<sup>th</sup> century on, *se* is an obligatory mark of definiteness for definite argument nominals not otherwise marked. In ME *þe/the* is obligatory with definite nominals, as one would expect if ME is the direct descendant of OE, but *not* if it is a continuation of ON: definite nominals without an article or definiteness marking are in fact the norm both in ON (Faarlund 2005: 58) and in Old Swedish (Skrzypek 2012).

A similar type of argument is presented by Bech & Walkden (2016), although it is not fully developed. When they discuss the reanalysis of the genitive inflection into a phrasal marker, they cite Allen's (2008) survey of genitive constructions in the history of English. Allen's data show a steady decrease of post-N genitives throughout the OE period (53% in Early West Saxon, 17% in Late West Saxon), culminating with its disappearance in 12<sup>th</sup> century ME. Bech & Walkden note that this change follows straightforwardly from the assumption that ME derives from OE. They show that genitives were mostly post-N in Old Icelandic, and therefore a Norse origin is hard to defend. We should note that Old Icelandic is not the best language to look at, since genitives are post-N in Modern Icelandic; therefore the point would be strengthened comparing data from other old Scandinavian languages.

The arguments above deal with noun phrase syntax, and it is in principle possible to imagine that clausal syntax follows a different development path. Among the several parameters of clausal syntax that E&F examine, one provides evidence for OE as the ancestor of ME, namely Subject-Verb order. English throughout its history permits XP-S-V orders with both pronominal and full nominal subjects. This is in sharp contrast with ON (and in fact all North Germanic languages), which exhibits strict V2 word order. It is difficult to track the use of XP-S-V structures quantitatively, since many OE and ME root clauses are structurally ambiguous (see e.g. Pintzuk and Haerberli 2008). Nevertheless, it is a fact that one sees a continuous presence of XP-S-V structures, which are absent from strict V2 languages. As Bech & Walkden (p.23) state, "this type of word order is continuous in the history of English, and it bears no relation to Norse or Scandinavian. Thus, from a word order perspective, there is no evidence that English could ever have been Norse."

In sum, we provide evidence that specific syntactic changes can be used to demonstrate genealogical relations; in particular we show that the ME noun phrase can only be derived from OE and not from ON, as shown by the diachronic development of three characteristics: the indefinite article, the definite article, and (probably) genitive placement. Independent evidence in this direction may be provided at the clausal level by Subject-Verb order, even if the phenomenon can not be tracked quantitatively through time.