

Joseph Embley Emonds and Jan Terje Faarlund: *English: The Language of the Vikings*. Olomouc Modern Language Monographs 3. Olomouc: Palacký University, 2014. 180 pp. ISBN 978-80-244-4382-9.

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Publications in the humanities take many forms. A major distinction is between on the one hand the dispassionate, evidence-driven investigation, and on the other the kind of study in which the desired outcome forms the starting-point and data are marshalled and analysed with the aim of supporting a conviction already held. In the dispassionate investigation, counter-evidence will be welcomed as a corrective, leading ultimately to a better understanding of the problems; where the conclusion is already foregone such evidence may be considered an irritation, to be ignored or dismissed. *English: The Language of the Vikings* belongs firmly in the latter camp. The two authors, Joseph Embley Emonds and Jan Terje Faarlund, advance the hypothesis that modern English is descended not from Old English, as widely held, but from the language of Scandinavians who settled in the British Isles during the Viking Age. And they muster as many arguments as they can find in favour of this view, while tending to ignore or explain away counter-evidence. Possibly Emonds and Faarlund were influenced by the strident tone of Ludmila Veselovská, series editor, who contributed a preface to the book. She writes of “seeming counter-examples, which [...] just have to be put to the side”, and of “the fetish for counter-examples” (p. 14). I am unfamiliar with Veselovská’s own work, but in a world where inconvenient pieces of evidence are brushed aside with a contemptuous wave of the hand, I would expect some rather perverse results.

English: The language of the Vikings contains an introduction, followed by eight chapters, a conclusion, a brief appendix, and an assortment of references and indices. The introduction attempts to define English, and then goes on to ask whether Old and Middle English are “simply different diachronic stages of a single language, or [...] two closely related languages that in fact have separate historical sources” (p. 17). Chapter 1 “The Germanic language(s) of England” sketches the history of Scandinavian settlement in England and its linguistic consequences. Chapter 2 “The Middle English lexicon: cultural integration creates

anglicized Norse” deals with the large number of everyday Scandinavian words found in Middle and Modern English, and the reasons for their presence. Chapters 3–6 consider syntactic structures in the developing English that the authors believe point to a Scandinavian rather than an Old English origin. These chapters, which form the central part of the book, have the broad headings: “Norse properties of Middle English syntax lacking in Old English” (3), “Split infinitives and the category of *to*” (4), “Morpho-syntactic properties of Old English lacking in Old Scandinavian and Middle English” (5), “Innovations shared between English and Mainland Scandinavian” (6). Chapter 7 is entitled “The hybrid grammatical lexicon of Middle English”, and chapter 8 “The sparse inflection of Middle and Modern English”. The conclusion is: “The immigrants’ language lives on”.

Emonds and Faarlund’s book presents a wealth of detail, especially in the area of syntactic analysis – analysis rooted firmly in the generative tradition. Their position seems to be that although features such as basic vocabulary and sound correspondences have a role in determining genealogical relatedness between languages, it is syntactic structures that are decisive because these are almost never transferred from one language to another (p. 60). If, therefore, we find a raft of Scandinavian syntactic features appearing in English, it indicates that we are dealing not with a continuation of Old English but, instead, of some type of Scandinavian.

There are many uncertainties here. Having spent some years of my life studying Faroese, it is not clear to me that syntactic structures rarely, if ever, pass from one language to another. In many respects the syntax of modern Faroese resembles that of Mainland rather than Island Scandinavian, and it is not stretching credulity to assume that the reason is the long ascendancy of Danish in the islands. There is, for example, a street in Tórshavn that purists insist should be called *Djóna í Geil gøta* ‘the street of Djóni í Geil’, with genitive marking on *Djóna*, notwithstanding the thoroughfare is almost universally known as *Djóna í Geils gøta* with a group genitive ending tacked on to *Geil* in the manner of Mainland Scandinavian or Modern English. Going much further back in time: western European languages all developed a definite article, while in Romance and Germanic a periphrastic perfect tense arose based on the verb ‘have’ + past participle; conceivably these are to be regarded as independent innovations, but it has also been persuasively argued that they spread from area to area.

Even should it be true that syntactic structures are rarely if ever borrowed, it remains to be demonstrated that the many such structures shared by Mainland Scandinavian and English are to be explained as resulting from a common ancestry. Much is made in the book under review of the split infinitive (pp. 97–107), by which a free morpheme can appear between infinitive marker and verb, as English *to quickly go*, Norwegian *å alltid komme* ‘to always come’. However, although the two authors work to show that there existed in Old Norse underlying structures which, according to them, help promote the occurrence of split infinitives, they are hard put to find concrete Old Norse examples of the phenomenon. Nor does there seem to be much relevant material in Middle English before the fourteenth century, which is a bit late in the day for the appearance of a construction ostensibly inherited from the language of ninth- and tenth-century Scandinavian settlers in England. Chronological problems of this kind afflict much of the evidence adduced by Emonds and Faarlund, but they are far from consistently addressed.

At times, the Emonds-Faarlund scenario seems to require the borrowing of a syntactic structure – in contradiction of their basic premise. They argue (pp. 108–10) that although Old English was not, like Old Norse, a strictly V2 language, the dialects of Middle English from which Modern English is derived did conform to the V2 pattern. This they put down to the fact that the dialects in question were what they term “Anglicized Norse”. But whence comes the V3 order that characterises Modern English, if not from the borrowing of “Verb Third patterns [which] persist [...] in the continuations of Old English in the South and West Midlands” (p. 110)?

Although syntax is given pride of place in *English: The Language of the Vikings*, other factors are considered. The well-known point that the Middle English 3rd person plural pronouns come from Scandinavian is rehearsed, but this is ascribed not to borrowing but to “retention of some Anglicized Norse pronouns” (p. 141). Aware that their point of view of necessity focuses attention on all the other personal pronouns in Middle English, the authors introduce a “cooperative rule”, which involves “dropping a final stop”. This means, if I have understood the matter correctly, that while the 3rd singular personal pronouns are definitely English in origin and the 3rd plural Scandinavian, all the others could derive from either source (Middle English *me*, for example, could be the reflex of Old English *me(c)* or Old Norse *mik*). At the very least, this

“rule” needs explanation and justification. For starters, we might wonder how Middle English *we* could possibly be the reflex of Scandinavian *vér*, *viR* which involves the dropping of final *-r/R*, not of a stop. The same section of the book goes on to list quantifiers which “have both Norse and Old English cognates” (p. 142). But the fact that a word exists in both Old Scandinavian and Old English does not mean its later incarnations can be derived from either. Account must patently be taken of the phonological make-up. One of the quantifiers mentioned is *few*, but it is hard to see how in that form it is as likely to come from Old Norse *fár* as Old English *fea(w)*-. The same applies to “one, and the other basic numerals”: *one*, *two*, *four*, *five*, *seven*, *eight*, *nine*, at least, must for phonological reasons have Old English rather than Old Norse etymons. The rather cavalier attitude taken here to the question of sound correspondences as evidence of genealogical relationship can unfortunately be found in several other parts of the book; it seems to be part of the general tendency noted at the outset to press the case for the Scandinavian origin of English at all costs.

The role played by Scandinavian in the development of English is not just a linguistic question. The historical background needs to be given due consideration. The extent of the Scandinavian settlement in England and the interaction between speakers of Scandinavian and English have been subjects of extensive, sometimes acrimonious, debate and disagreement. Little of this is apparent in *English: The Language of the Vikings*. We are told that in the Danelaw “Scandinavians settled extensively” (p. 35), that there was “*complete social integration* [authors’ emphasis] of the two linguistic communities in the East Midlands and North (understood as extending northward from London)” (p. 52), and that “the two cultures fused under the Conquest” (p. 53). None of these assertions are unproblematic, yet they are presented as though they were undisputed fact. Originally it was believed by historians relying on figures in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* that the Scandinavian settlement involved great numbers of people, but in a reaction against that view it was argued that the *Chronicle* was an unreliable source for the size of Viking armies, that huge numbers were unlikely – and definitely unnecessary to explain the pervasiveness of Scandinavian influence, which could equally well stem from the imposition of a Norse aristocracy over the local population. Subsequent research, not least into place-names (cf., e.g., the work of Gillian Fellows Jensen, ignored by the authors), has refined the argu-

ments a good deal, and to the extent a consensus has been reached it is that settler numbers were probably substantial, but not massive. As regards social integration and cultural fusion, the evidence is contradictory; certainly it is far from clear that there was full mutual intelligibility between speakers of Scandinavian and English, or that people increasingly began to communicate through the medium of Scandinavian, so one wonders on what basis this melting together of the two cultures took place. An excellent survey of “The Scandinavian settlement in Britain and its linguistic effects” is given by Hans Frede Nielsen in his book *The Continental Backgrounds of English and its Insular Development until 1154*, pp. 165–88, but this is not mentioned by Emonds and Faarlund. Nor is Matthew Townend’s *Language and History in Viking Age England*, in which he concludes (pp. 201–10) that a great number of Scandinavian lexical items entered English as Scandinavian speakers ultimately gave up their native tongue and adopted English: in doing so, he argues, they brought much of their vocabulary with them, which, as a result, retained its Scandinavian phonology.

British-Isles Scandinavian, according to the book under review, is not documented until it appears in the guise of Middle English (p. 29). But that is not strictly true. There exist a number of Scandinavian runic inscriptions from Britain, some of them from England, that record varieties of Scandinavian language (cf. Michael P. Barnes and R.I. Page, *The Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions of Britain*). They can often be hard to date, but appear to span the period between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. Some of the English contingent come from the north-west, some from the south-east. The latter appear to be connected with the reign of Cnut the Great and probably reflect a tradition brought over direct from the Scandinavian homelands. The north-west group, on the other hand, seem to be native in inspiration, and exhibit a demotic form of Scandinavian, far removed from the Old Norse of our text-books. The Carlisle I A graffito, for example, records (reproduced here in semi-normalised form) *Dólfinn wreit þessa rúnir á þessa stein* ‘Dólfinn scratched these runes on this stone’. This short sentence reveals a fundamental break-down in the Old Norse inflectional system, with *Dólfinn* for expected nominative *Dólfinnr*, *þessa* first for accusative feminine plural *þessar* (to agree with *rúnir*, itself an aberrant form) and second for accusative masculine singular *þenna* (to agree with *stein*). In addition, the verb form *wreit* appears to owe its presence to English influence. Initial

vr- is highly unlikely in West Scandinavian (which this inscription seems to represent judging by the runic graph-types employed), and out of the question as late as the twelfth century, the approximate date to be ascribed to the text. In East Scandinavian the verb does not occur in Viking-Age or medieval texts, and even in the West the reflex *ríta* is rare in referring to runic writing. Old English *writan*, Middle English *writen*, on the other hand, retain the initial bilabial, and *writan* is sometimes used about the making of inscriptions. On the face of it, the Carlisle A I graffito bears testimony to the decline of Scandinavian in England, and to the influence of English – the opposite of the scenario proposed by Emonds and Faarlund. Of course, too much should not be made of a single text, but other runic inscriptions from the north-west tell substantially the same story. The twelfth-century Pennington tympanum text appears to be in a form of Scandinavian heavily influenced by English, although some have argued it is hard to tell which of the two languages is being employed. The (likewise twelfth-century) Bridekirk font inscription is a rather different case: it uses Scandinavian runes to record a Middle English text. However, neither Pennington nor Bridekirk suggests the existence of a dominant Scandinavian tongue in the north-western corner of the Danelaw; rather, together with Carlisle A I, they imply the incipient replacement of Scandinavian by English.

A further puzzling aspect of the hypothesis that Middle and Modern English descend from the language of Scandinavian settlers is the total absence – at any stage of the development – of a number of core Scandinavian features. There is no postpositional definite article anywhere in English, no *-s(k)* verb form, no uniquely Scandinavian pronouns such as *han(n)* ‘he’, *hun/hon* ‘she’, *nokon/nogen* ‘someone’ ‘anyone’, *enginn/ingen* ‘no one’, while Germanic initial *j-* is retained, as in *year, yoke, young*, and initial *w-* before rounded vowel in, for example, *wolf, wool, word, worm*. Rather than tackling this problem head-on, Emonds and Faarlund explain it away (p. 153). They suggest that if their basic hypothesis be accepted, “an enterprising new scholar might claim that here indeed are instances of Old English syntactically influencing Anglicized Norse, during the development of Middle English”, to which challenge they would reply that “loss of inflection in northwest Europe in the early second millennium is not clearly indicative of *any* [authors’ emphasis] specific genealogical relationships”. Rather they would regard it as part of “a more general trend, as yet not clarified, involving extensive

language contact and/or phonological reductions”. All of which sounds like a roundabout way of saying: “We are at a loss to account for the fact that the Scandinavian underlying Middle and Modern English fails utterly to exhibit core Scandinavian features.”

The renowned Norwegian historian, Peter Andreas Munch, making one of several contributions to a long-running polemic in the Scandinavian press, writes of those “som sandsynligviis efter engelske Dilettanter Viis snarere føle sig tiltrukne af hvad der gjør Sprell og synes ‘striking’, end af det grundigere, der optræder i en beskednere Form” ‘who most likely in the fashion of English dilettantes feel themselves drawn rather to what causes a stir and seems “striking” than to more painstaking endeavour that appears in a humbler guise’ (*Illustreret Nyhedsblad* 9 ii 1862: 28). Had he been alive today, Munch would doubtless have acknowledged that the malaise has spread far from the class of the English dilettante and taken firm root in the modern university system.

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