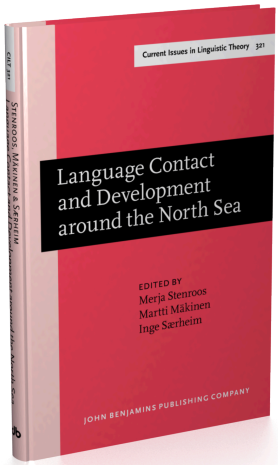
Current Issues in Linguistic Theory
321

Editors' introduction

https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.321.002int



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Language Contact and Development around the North Sea
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[**Current Issues in Linguistic Theory**, 321]
2012. xvi, 235 pp.

John Benjamins Publishing Company

Editors' introduction

The present volume deals with the history of language and writing in the North Sea area. Over the last two millennia, the languages spoken in this area have represented three main branches of Indo-European: Germanic, Celtic and Italic. Finno-Ugric languages are present in the north and east, while other non-Indo-European languages may survive in place-names and, possibly, in Pictish inscriptions. The history of the North Sea languages has been shaped by migrations, conquests and trade contacts that have given rise to multilingual and multicultural communities. Writing has from the beginning been a multilingual activity, involving choices between codes of different status and function: to begin with, between Latin and the vernaculars, later between more or less institutionalised varieties of the vernaculars. The study of language history in the North Sea area is therefore necessarily a study of coexistence and contact.

Most of the chapters were presented at a conference on the development of languages and literacy in the North Sea area, held in August 2009 at the University of Stavanger. The volume reflects one of the major themes of the conference: the need to reassess the available evidence for this development, taking into account the linguistic complexity of the historical communities. As the histories of languages do not take place in isolation, discussions of them should not be confined to a single language discipline. The volume contains contributions from scholars working within English, Nordic and German linguistics, and the language contact issues discussed involve most of the Germanic and Celtic languages spoken in the North Sea area, even if the main focus is on English, Scots and Norwegian.

The central role of geography in the study of linguistic variation is well established. However, while much of traditional dialectology was concerned with static categories such as dialect boundaries, the emphasis has in recent years shifted to dynamic processes, such as the dissemination of linguistic features across space. It is now recognized that the dissemination does not necessarily stop at language boundaries: the relatively new branch of areal linguistics is concerned with the study of linguistic areas or "Sprachbünde": groups of (usually at least three) geographically adjacent languages sharing structural features that are not inherited from a common ancestor (Thomason 2001: 99; Muysken 2008: 3–5; cf. also Heine & Kuteva 2006: 4 for different categorizations).

Linguistic similarity, just like any cultural similarity, is not brought about by geographical vicinity in itself but by contact. This insight has led to a reconsideration of geographical space as a context for linguistic and cultural change:

> [I]n geography, and consequently in fields like dialect geography there has been an evolution from space to spatiality (Britain 2002: 604) [...] before 1960, space was viewed as region (with the key words: place, difference, distinctiveness), but due to the quantitative revolution in the social sciences in the 1960s, the notion of space exploded. Euclidean space gave way to social space (defined in terms of network links), and social space in turn was redefined as perceived space (social distance). For the study of linguistic areas this view of space has the implication that geographical contiguity is not the crucial notion, but rather communicative networks, affinities and social ties. (Muysken 2008: 4)

Muysken illustrates the idea of non-contiguous linguistic areas with the Atlantic area, an extreme example of the well-known point that waterways may unite as well as separate, forming routes of communication rather than boundaries. Less dramatic examples of areas united by sea include the Baltic area, as well as the focus of the present volume, the North Sea area.

The North Sea area may here be defined as including those geographical areas for which the North Sea has been a focus of communication: the main route of trade, migration and conquest. As with any geographical area that forms part of a continuum, the North Sea area has fuzzy boundaries. It shades into the Atlantic area to the West, the Arctic area to the North and the Baltic area and Central Europe to the East and South. Cultural and linguistic exchanges link the core area to more distant lands: the Vikings were present from Greenland to Constantinople, and later trade connections link the North Sea area both to the Baltic countries and to areas further south. From the sixteenth century onwards, finally, colonial rule and settlement have linked the area to far-off places all over the world.

The North Sea area has been the subject of numerous earlier linguistic studies; excellent collections of papers include Poussa (2002) and van Leuvensteijn & Berns (1992). The title of the former collection defines the geographical scope as "the North Sea littoral", while the latter deals with the "English, Dutch, German and Norwegian Language Areas". Both collections limit their linguistic scope to the Germanic languages and deal with specific aspects of language: relativisation and standardisation issues respectively.

The present volume traces language contact and code selection in the North Sea area over a two-thousand-year period; with this time scale, it is natural that the Celtic languages also play an important role in the discussion. The selection of papers follows the principle of Thomason & Kaufman (1988) that language contact needs to be studied at several levels of language and in various

social contexts; it is intended to show the complexity of approaches required for a balanced view.

While language contact has grown to be a major research area, it remains a challenging field, not least because contact effects have turned out to be highly variable and unpredictable in detail. Thomason & Kaufman (1988) showed that the search for universal constraints on such effects is largely misplaced: while there may be discernible trends, what happens in any individual contact situation depends on the sociolinguistic context. Thus, the borrowing of vocabulary belongs to a very different contact scenario from substrate phenomena that typically involve grammatical reorganisation (cf. Muysken 2008: 9–11; Winford 2003). At the same time, the distinction between "borrowing" and "substrate" situations is in itself a simplification: empirical findings show exceptions to all rules, depending on the specific characteristics of the contact situation. This reflects the crucial point formulated by McIntosh (1994: 137): "what we mean by 'languages in contact' is 'users of language in contact': language contact does not happen in the abstract". Accordingly, a study of the social context of speakers in contact is crucial for an understanding of the effects of language contact.

For historical periods, this is problematic. Very little direct evidence is available for contact situations in the medieval period, and prehistoric language contact situations evade us altogether: while genetic and archaeological evidence may suggest contacts between groups of people, we do not know what languages they spoke. Even for relatively recent periods, it may be difficult to evaluate the kinds of contact that might have taken place between speakers, the extent of individual bilingualism and of mutual intelligibility between related languages. As Townend (2002) shows in his important study of the Vikings and Anglo-Saxons in the Danelaw area, the most promising approach is by critical comparison of different types of evidence, including place-names, linguistic forms and code selection in written documents, as well as contemporary and later comments and descriptions of encounters between the two groups of speakers.

The papers in this volume flag the importance of combining different kinds of evidence in order to build up a nuanced picture of the linguistic developments. The first two parts of the book deal especially with the study of two major types of evidence for historical languages: place-name materials and written documents. Other types of evidence are dealt with in the individual chapters, especially in the third part of the book: these include archaeological and genetic evidence (Killie) as well as evidence from present-day spoken dialects (Melchers). The third part of the book focusses on specific linguistic developments, in particular within the areas of lexis and syntax, as well as on the effects of particular contact situations, such as the North Sea timber trade in the Early Modern period (Lorvik) and the mingling of Scandinavian and Scots in Shetland (Melchers).

The last decade or so has seen an accumulation of empirical studies reassessing the evidence for historical languages from the point of view of language contact. As regards the North Sea area, many of the traditional answers to contact-related questions have been coloured by political and nationalistic viewpoints, whether current or surviving from previous generations; language history has a strong connection with collective identities, both national and regional.

Nationalistic viewpoints often downplay the effects of contact, stressing the 'purity' of a particular language. Thus the traditional "Anglicist" view of the Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain assumed a minimum of contact between the incomers and the Romano-British population; this view seemed to gain support both from the reported lack of Celtic loanwords in English and the paucity of Celtic place-names in the areas settled by the Anglo-Saxons. Such explanations have increasingly been thrown into doubt in recent years (see e.g. Coates 2007 and the references there cited). It has also become widely accepted that the Celtic element in English may in fact be much more substantial than previously assumed; the work of scholars such as Filppula, Klemola and Tristram has been central in this regard (see e.g. Filppula 2008; Filppula, Klemola & Paulasto 2008; Tristram 2002, 2004, 2007). On the other hand, the Scandinavian linguistic heritage in the North of Britain, especially Shetland and Orkney, has had an important identity-reinforcing function and may have been overemphasized in past scholarship (cf. the chapter by Melchers). Most of the chapters in this volume challenge the established viewpoints, either by drawing in new types of empirical material or by reassessing well-known materials.

The opening chapter by Carole **Hough** addresses the paucity of Celtic place-names in southern England, placing them in relation to the virtually complete lack of pre-Norse names in the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland. She accounts for this seeming lack of continuity in both areas by challenging another traditional assumption: the dictum that place-names have no semantic significance. She argues that, during the Anglo-Saxon and Viking Ages, place-names served functional purposes, and that semantic content was important; this, rather than massacre or segregation, would account for the loss of place-names that were semantically opaque to incoming settlers.

The following chapter, by Jürgen **Udolph,** presents place-name evidence that challenges the traditional view of the Anglo-Saxon homelands, which has been based on Bede's account in his *Ecclesiastical History*. Udolph takes as his starting point the simple assumption that the naming habits of an immigrant population will reflect those which were in use in the area from which they emigrated. On the basis of the geographical patterning of cognate place-name elements, Udolph shows that the Anglo-Saxons may have emigrated from an area considerably

further south than the Schleswig-Holstein and Jutland areas that are usually held to be the Anglo-Saxon homelands.

Inge **Særheim** discusses the origins and formation of the oldest stratum of island, water and settlement names in Southwestern Norway, as well as their European parallels. He suggests that the survival of several very old and unique names reflects the continuous farming in the area since the younger Stone Age and the Bronze Age; however, as they can generally be explained with plausible Germanic or Indo-European etymologies, there seems to be no need to postulate a pre-Indo-European element, as suggested by scholars such as Vennemann (1998, 1999) and Kuhn (1971).

The second part of the volume focusses on the written text as evidence. As written texts constitute the only direct empirical evidence for historical languages, their interpretation is a central task for the historical linguist: this involves not only a general understanding of how written language works and how it relates to the spoken mode, but a specific understanding of the circumstances of text production, the functions and users of the texts in a particular community. Literacy in one language does not presuppose literacy in another, and thus code selection in the written mode has to be studied on its own terms, rather than as direct evidence for speech (cf. Jackson 1953: 100).

The three papers in this section all deal with texts that represent what Parkes (1973: 555) termed pragmatic literacy: "the literacy of one who has to read or write in the course of transacting any kind of business". Jan Ragnar **Hagland** considers the emergence of vernacular legal documents in Norway in the late medieval period as part of the process of developing pragmatic literacy among the population. He argues for a distinct process of "literarization", or the growth of a literate mentality, in the Norwegian society, rather than the complete lack of literacy traditionally reported in Norwegian historiography. Hagland points out that the history of literacy has often been equated with the history of a standard language, while variable, regional varieties have often been ignored by Scandinavian historians. His chapter continues the seminal work of Clanchy (1993) in the description of medieval literacy practices.

As vernacular writings grew common, text production involved questions of code selection in most North Sea communities. In some highly multilingual contexts, texts could contain considerable amounts of code switching and code mixing, while in others, codes retained separate functions and were kept strictly apart. The chapters by Agnete **Nesse** and Laura **Wright** both deal with texts belonging to such multilingual settings, and trace their development over time.

Nesse's study of the logs of merchant housing communities in Bergen continues chronologically from Hagland's chapter and brings to light remarkable materials for

the study of language contact. Her study charts the development of a multilingual text community from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, during which time it underwent several processes of language shift. Nesse shows that the extent to which the shifts involve code mixing and shifting depends both on the similarity of the languages involved and on the sociolinguistic context of the shift.

Wright's paper deals with business documents from late medieval London, another highly multilingual setting. She shows how Medieval Latin, Anglo-Norman French and Middle English were routinely mixed in such documents from the eleventh to the late fifteenth centuries, producing texts that have traditionally been assumed to reflect the poor language skills of foreign scribes. Her contention is that the code switching and code mixing found in these texts does not reflect a lack of competence but rather a context of text production where such a mixture was the expected norm.

The last section opens with two papers that contribute to the debate on the Celtic element in English. Kristin **Killie** adopts a multidisciplinary approach in her study of the possible influence of English-Celtic language contact on the development of the English progressive: her evidence ranges from archaeology and genetics to contact linguistics. The discussion sheds much wanted light on the multiple facets of the "Celtic hypothesis", even though the hypothesis remains necessarily unverified due to the lack of direct evidence.

Marcelle **Cole** studies the early development of the well-known "Northern Subject Rule", explained by earlier scholars both in terms of Scandinavian and Celtic influence. She carries out a thorough study of the Lindisfarne Gospels, based on a reading of the manuscript and providing a corrective to interpretations based on editorial readings. While the Gospels do not show the Subject Rule as such, the patterns of verbal inflection suggest a much earlier development of the Rule than is usually assumed, removing one of the main arguments against a Celtic contact-based explanation.

The chapter by Claudia **DiSciacca** deals with lexical development and borrowing, with focus on English and Scandinavian. She discusses the histories of the words "sky" and "loft" and suggests a diachronic development of them from the Scandinavian and other Germanic antecedents and cognates to Present-day English. She pays particular attention to the contexts of first appearances of the borrowed lexemes and uses the information to draw conclusions about the patterns and strategies of lexical borrowing involved.

The last two chapters deal with specific historical contact situations and their linguistic consequences. Marjorie **Lorvik** considers mutual intelligibility and trade jargons in the North Sea area in the Early Modern period, taking as her starting point a seventeenth-century ship's cargo inventory in Scots. She argues that a fairly high degree of mutual intelligibility, at least at the level of Language for Special Purposes (LSP) among traders from different linguistic

backgrounds explains the absence of a trade pidgin in the North Sea area; the argument is based on a study of cognates for key terms used in the timber trade, as well as on a general discussion of the sociolinguistic context of the North Sea trading communities.

Finally, Gunnel **Melchers** deals with the problematic question of separating the Scandinavian from the Scots in the historical dialects of Shetland and Orkney, and provides a partly personal but theoretically stringent critical discussion of the romantic Viking bias, or "Nornomania" in the research on these dialects. Melchers discusses several examples of disputed issues, and suggests that identifications of Scandinavian elements in the past may have reflected a lack of sufficient knowledge of Scots. She suggests that, while the commitment to rescue the Scandinavian element in Shetland and Orkney dialect has resulted in massive and valuable data collections, it has also flawed the analysis and presentation of the material. The conclusion is that the multilingual context of the material calls for a multilingual framework of research.

The eleven chapters bring together different lines of research, as well as different source materials: some of the latter are well-known, while others have received little attention before. At the same time, all the papers flag the importance of going back to the evidence and reconsidering previous assumptions, often by looking to other languages and research traditions. The discussions at Stavanger brought to light many interesting differences between the methodological traditions and assumptions within Nordic, English, Dutch and German studies, as well as similarities between the challenges posed by historical materials in different languages and periods. The present volume can only present a small selection of the voices in the discussion, but it will surely act as a spur to further contact and debate between scholars, in the North Sea area and beyond.

The Editors
Stavanger and Helsinki, November 2011

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