

# THE (DIS)CONTINUITY BETWEEN OLD NORTHUMBRIAN AND NORTHERN MIDDLE ENGLISH

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## ABSTRACT

The morphological simplification of Northern Middle English cannot be attributed solely to contact with Scandinavian settlers in the Danelaw, since various processes of analogical extension and a certain confusion of the unstressed vowels of the inflections is already attested in 10th-century Old Northumbrian glosses, which show little trace of Nordic influence. This work tries to demonstrate that there is greater continuity between the Northern Old and Middle English varieties than S.G. Thomason and T. Kaufman are willing to admit, especially when the features considered are phonological and morphological rather than lexical. It also attempts to show a number of flaws in their study and argues for a more thorough investigation into the topic.

KEY WORDS: English historical dialectology, Old English, Middle English, Northern English varieties, creolization theories.

## RESUMEN

La simplificación morfológica característica de los dialectos del inglés medio no puede atribuirse exclusivamente a la influencia escandinava en el inglés, puesto que los procesos de extensión analógica y confusión de las vocales de las flexiones se observan ya en estas variedades en textos norteños del siglo X, los cuales no presentan todavía influencia nórdica. Este estudio se propone demostrar que, en contra de la hipótesis de S.G. Thomason y T. Kaufman, existe una clara continuidad entre las variedades norteñas del inglés antiguo y medio, especialmente en los niveles fonológico y morfológico. Así mismo, se muestra la inexactitud de algunas de las premisas de las que parten los autores, y se pone de manifiesto la necesidad de una investigación más profunda sobre este tema.

PALABRAS CLAVE: dialectología histórica del inglés, inglés antiguo, inglés medio, variedades del norte del inglés, teorías de criollización.

## INTRODUCCIÓN

The last decades have seen an intense debate on the continuity (or lack of it) between Old and Middle English. Within the framework of language contact and Creole studies, different voices have argued for and against the creolization of

Middle English (Bailey and Maroldt; Görlach; Thomason and Kaufman; Danchev; Dalton-Puffer; among others). One of the most radical works supporting the creolization theory is Bailey and Maroldt's controversial article, claiming that Middle English was a French Creole. On the side of those who defend the continuity between Old and Middle English are Thomason and Kaufman, who in *Language Contact, Creolization and Genetic Linguistics*, effectively argue against the hypothesis that Middle English developed from the creolization of Old English and Old Norse or (even less likely) of Old English and French. No radical versions of the Middle English creolization theory have since been proposed. According to Thomason and Kaufman, the changes that English underwent in the Middle Ages were not contact-induced but, rather, of an "internal" nature. Nor were they, in fact, as drastic as a comparison of the Old and Middle English textual evidence might suggest. The records are mainly dated to the 10th century in the case of Old English and to the 14th century in the case of Middle English, with a three-century gap in between. For Thomason and Kaufman Middle English is, therefore, the result of normal linguistic transmission (contrary to what Bailey and Maroldt had stated).

The debate about the status of Middle English as a Creole or "normally transmitted" language is still very much alive in the contemporary literature, although recent work on the development of Creoles has made the discussion today run along different lines. Some creolists claim that the difference between the development of "natural" and Creole languages is one of quantity or pace, rather than of kind. Mufwene (196), for example, refers ironically to Creole languages as "the illegitimate offspring of English." He points out that there seems to be a greater continuity between English and some Creole languages (Gullah, Guyanese Creole, etc.) than between Old English and Modern English:

It does not seem to have bothered linguists much that dialects of the same language need not be mutually intelligible. Nor do they seem to have been concerned by the fact that most speakers of such disfranchised varieties say they speak English. Certainly, if mutual intelligibility were such a critical criterion over sharing an identifiable ancestor, there would be more reason for treating Modern English varieties and English Creoles as dialects of the same language than for lumping the former together with Old English while excluding Creoles... It is often easier to make sense of the Creole and indigenized English than to interpret Old English ones. (190)

Although the current mainstream opinion in modern creolistics seems to be that Creoles should not be set apart as different languages, there are still those who maintain the necessity of such a distinction. In a recent article, Thomason (2002) reaffirms the distinction between Creoles and non Creoles in the context of the Comparative method, and supports the genetic affiliation of Middle English to the Germanic language family. She states that the concept "genetic relationship of languages" has nothing to do with legitimacy or abnormality in the sense of wrongness, or with mutual intelligibility, but rather with the fact that a certain language can be shown to be descended from a single parent language:



The crucial point, in the present context, is that it only makes sense to talk about genetic relationship in the context of the Comparative method. A claim of genetic relationship is not a generalized statement of historical connectedness, but rather a quite specific technical claim that a genetic hypothesis meets the rigorous criteria of the Comparative method. These criteria include the establishment of recurring phonological correspondences in morphemes of identical or similar meanings, including much basic vocabulary, in sufficient numbers and complexity that chance is ruled out as the source of correspondences; the establishment of systematic morphosyntactic correspondences; and a demonstration that reconstruction of a significant proportion of morphemes and morphosyntactic features is possible. (103)

In the same way, McWhorter and Parkvall still believe that Creoles should be regarded as a special class of languages on typological grounds.

This paper will concentrate on the developments that took place in Northern English between the 10th and the 14th centuries. I believe that these changes are central to the creolization hypothesis and the question of the continuity between Old and Middle English. Those who attribute Middle English morphological simplification to Scandinavian (or French) influence tend to forget that the morphological system of the Northern varieties of Old English was already much simpler than that of the other dialects (West Saxon, for example), and that the changes that make Northern varieties of Middle English appear more “progressive” or “advanced” in the direction of linguistic change started long before the Scandinavian influence could be felt in the north. The morphological simplification of Old Northumbrian (mainly records from the 10th century) has not been explained so far and although contact with other languages such as Celtic should be perhaps considered, it can certainly not be attributed to the influence of the Nordic languages.<sup>1</sup> It should be also remembered (García García, “Tendencias,” “Different”; Fernández Cuesta, “Distinto”) that the fact that Old English is morphologically more simple than its continental relatives has not been accounted for either; the morphological simplification of English did not start in Middle English but much earlier, as can be seen in the first written testimonies of the language that have been preserved.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the language of the extant Northern Middle English texts seems very different from the Old Northumbrian material may have to do with the lack of textual evidence from the 11th to the 14th centuries. On the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. German 347-375.

<sup>2</sup> Despite the indisputable proof that the Old English testimonies display of an early morphological simplification and a tendency towards a more analytic system, there are still authors, like Morrissey (348), who refer to Middle English as the period when the language changed from synthetic to analytic. The same idea is unfortunately very frequently found in textbooks on History of English (Baugh; Nielsen). In his review of Nielsen’s textbook, Benskin (108) convincingly explains the “inherited logical error” in considering Old English a highly synthetic language: “the logical error is to suppose that because (by definition) a synthetic language has grammatical inflexions, and Old English also has grammatical inflexions, Old English is therefore a synthetic language.”



basis of the above evidence it seems, therefore, reasonable to conclude with Thomason and Kaufman that the creolization hypothesis is not required to account for the changes that took place in Middle English.<sup>3</sup>

## I

Once the continuity between Old and Middle English is accepted, the problem remains to determine what features of Northern Middle English can be traced back to Old Northumbrian and what traits are innovations, possibly due to influence from other varieties. Contrary to what might be expected from the first part of their work, the discontinuity between Old Northumbrian and Northern Middle English is at the core of Thomason and Kaufman's hypothesis: in the second part of their book they claim that the northern varieties of Middle English do not come from Old Northumbrian but, rather, from the Norsified dialects of the Midlands. Although the authors promise a more thorough and detailed study on the origins of Old Northumbrian (301), the fact is that they have so far left the question unanswered.

One of the main problems when studying the Old Northumbrian textual evidence is the linguistic diversity of the different records that have come down to us. In fact, after a careful study of the northern texts, one would feel inclined to regard almost every text as representative of a different variety (compare, for example, the language of *Ruthwell* with that of the *Lindisfarne* glosses). Moreover, it is important to bear in mind the basic distinction between Early and Late Northumbrian.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it seems more relevant to talk about Northern dialects (in the plural) rather than the Northern dialect, given the obvious differences in the language of the extant manuscripts. An additional problem is that it is difficult to locate with any certainty the language of the texts within the northern region, given the fact that the exact provenance of the scribes cannot be determined with accuracy: the fact that the glossators Aldred and Owun were at Chester-le-Street and Harewood respectively does not necessarily mean that they came from those places.<sup>5</sup>

Northern Middle English is, on the contrary, more homogeneous, especially if compared to the Midland and Southern varieties of that period. Texts from late Middle English (1350-1450) are abundant and well-located thanks to the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English*. However, the material for Northern Early

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<sup>3</sup> For these authors Middle English is as an example of normal borrowing (borderline of types 2 and 3 of their borrowing scale).

<sup>4</sup> Early Northumbrian makes reference to 8th-/9th-century texts such as the runic inscriptions on the Ruthwell Cross, the Franks Casket, the runestone memorials and the three Northumbrian poems. Late Northumbrian comprises mainly the 10th-century glosses to the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and the *Durham Ritual*.

<sup>5</sup> This is also valid for the Ruthwell cross inscription. Although it is not likely that a stone of such a large size came from elsewhere, the runemaster could very well have been from a different area.

Middle English (1150-1300) is very scant and, judging from the information given so far by the authors of the forthcoming *Linguistic Atlas of Early Medieval English*, the situation for Northern English is not likely to improve much with the publication of the work (Laing). Therefore, both the scarcity of the earlier material and the difficulty in locating it should be taken into consideration when comparing the northern material from Old and Middle English.

## II

Despite these shortcomings, it is clear from the analysis of the texts that have been preserved that some phonetic and morphological features of Northern Middle English can be definitely traced back to Old Northumbrian. It has already been stated that the morphological simplification observable in Northern Middle English started in the Old English period. In the same way, the majority of the inflectional affixes of the Northern dialects can be also traced to Old Northumbrian. The following morphological features show clear continuity between Old Northumbrian and Northern Middle English:

1. Analogical processes in the paradigms of the adjective and the determiners observable in Old Northumbrian texts are completely implemented in Northern Middle English. In the case of the determiners, the Old English Northern varieties are the first to show analogical extension of  $\delta$ - to all cases:  $\delta e$  (nominative masculine singular),  $\delta+o$ ,  $\delta+u$ ,  $\delta y$  (nominative feminine singular). In the other varieties, the extension of  $\delta$ - to the nominative singular takes place in Middle English. Northern Middle English texts present one invariable form, *the*, for the definite article, regardless of gender, number and case.
2. The northern varieties are the first to present forms that seem to indicate that grammatical gender was being replaced by natural gender in this period. In this way, in the glosses to the *Lindisfarne Gospels* etymologically masculine and feminine forms of the determiners modify animate nouns while etymologically neuter forms are exclusively used for inanimate nouns (Samuels 157). This process does not take place in any other varieties until Middle English.<sup>6</sup>
3. The Northern Middle English verb endings for the second and third person singular present indicative ( $-(e)s$ /,  $-(i)s$ ) are already found in the Old Northumbrian varieties. One of the most important characteristics of the Northern dialects of both Old and Middle English is the wide functionality of the  $-s$  ending. In Old Northumbrian it begins to be generalized for the genitive singular and

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<sup>6</sup> The substitution of grammatical gender by arbitrary gender is one of the aspects that would require a more detailed study (cf. Guzmán and Benskin 114).



for the plural of nouns<sup>7</sup>. As stated above, it is also frequently found for the third person singular present indicative (side by side with the *-ð* forms), for the plural present indicative (frequently *-as/ -es*) and for the imperative plural. In Northern Middle English it continues to be used in these contexts and is occasionally extended to the first person singular present indicative by analogy with the other forms. In this way, the process of analogical extension, which started in the Old English period, is completed in Middle English, giving as a result one single ending for the singular present indicative.<sup>8</sup>

4. The plural indicative of the verb *to be* in Northern Middle English (*ar(ē)*) can be traced to Old Northumbrian *aron*.<sup>9</sup>
5. Certain processes of analogical extension in the verb (in strong verbs and in the first and second classes of weak verbs), which are characteristic of Middle English, already appear in the Old Northumbrian texts.
6. The loss of the past participle prefix, which is characteristic of Northern Middle English, is already found in Old Northumbrian (also typical of Old Norse).

As regards phonology, there are also a number of traits that are characteristic of the Northern varieties of both periods:

1. In Old Northumbrian the result of breaking is subject to a later diphthongization process. Northern Middle English varieties keep the monophthong (*eght*, *thoght*) in contrast with the Southern and Midland dialects, which present breaking: OE *ehta*, ME *eight*; OE *þohte*, ME *thoughte*).
2. Already in 10th-century texts different spellings are used to represent the same grammatical ending. This indicates that there was a certain degree of confusion between the unstressed vowels of the endings, which eventually led to the merger of [a], [u] and [o] in one unstressed vowel (represented by <e>) in Northern Middle English.
3. Northern Middle English varieties are characterized by the loss of *-n* in final position. This feature is well documented from the 8th century in the Old Northumbrian varieties.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For the genitive singular the *-es* ending, which was characteristic of masculine and neuter *-a-* stems, is extended to most noun classes (feminine *-j-* stems, *-n-* stems, *-r-* stems, etc). For the plural of nouns it is found in feminine *-M-* stems (*Lind. ebolsungas*), in the *-n-* stems (*Lind. witgas*) and, sporadically, also in nouns belonging to other classes (cf. Fernández Cuesta y Rodríguez Ledesma 480-481).

<sup>8</sup> The extension of the third person singular *-s* to other persons (in many cases to all persons) of the present tense is still a feature of Contemporary Northern English varieties.

<sup>9</sup> Other Old Northumbrian forms are *sint*, *sindon* and *bi(o)ðon*.

<sup>10</sup> However, loss of *-n* in these varieties is far from general. It seems to have been grammatically (rather than phonologically) conditioned: it is preserved in the past participle, for example, in contrast to the Southern varieties, which keep the *y-* prefix and drop the *-en* suffix.

The above morphological and phonological features show a clear continuity between Old Northumbrian and Northern Middle English. Only three traits have been found to be different:

1. West Germanic \*/a/ tends to be rounded to /o/ in Old Northumbrian when followed by a nasal consonant: *mon, noma, hond, ond, lond, long*. This process is not completely implemented in the earlier texts, which show variation between <a> and <o>. The tendency to find <o> spellings continues in late Northumbrian (10th-century glosses), in which <o> is almost universal. Northern Middle English, on the contrary, generally presents <a> in this context: *man, nama, hand, and, land, long*.
2. The Scandinavian pronouns do not obviously appear in the Old Northumbrian texts, since they are loan words taken from Old Norse in order to resolve the ambiguity resulting from linguistic change (monophthongization of Old English diphthongs). The adoption of *she* as the third person singular feminine pronoun might be due to the same cause, although the origin of this form is still debated.<sup>11</sup>
3. The present participle is also different. In Old Northumbrian the form found is *-ende*, as in the rest of the Old English varieties, while in Northern Middle English we find the Scandinavian form *-ande* (ON *-andi*).

The evidence presented above indicates that, at least at the phonological and morphological levels, there is a clear continuity between Old Northumbrian and Northern Middle English, despite the strong Norsification that took place in Northern Middle English as a consequence of the Scandinavian invasions of England.

### III

While admitting that the morphological component of Northern Middle English comes from Old Northumbrian, Thomason and Kaufmann clearly state that Northern Middle English owes more to the Midland varieties than it does to the Old Northumbrian ones:

The results were somewhat of a surprise, because the English component of NME owes more to the Midlands than it does to Northumbrian (Nhb) OE. Among

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<sup>11</sup> Some scholars maintain that PDE *she* comes from the Old English personal pronoun *h-ø* while others believe that the origin should be sought in the determiner *s-ø* (which could also function as a personal pronoun in Old English). There are also grounds to think that the form can derive from a Norse pronunciation of Old English *h-ø*: according to this theory, the falling diphthong would have become rising *hjM*, due to Norse influence in the North and North Midlands dialects. Since the phonetic sequence [hj-] is marginal in the English phonetic system, it would have then become the more common [S] (cf. Horobin and Smith 130-31).





grammatical (closed-class) words, affixes and inflectional processes, whereas NME has 5 elements of distinctively Nhb origin it has 33 elements of distinctively Midland origin. (283)

In order to explain this unexpected finding, the authors hypothesize that what they call “Norsified English” arose in the Midlands and was already in existence well before 1150.<sup>12</sup> From there, it was allegedly spread to Deira after 1000, and it is only after 1200 that the Northern Midland dialects begin to receive some grammatical traits from the North (influence “runs” southwards).<sup>13</sup> The authors state that since there are no Northumbrian traits involved in the formation of Norsified Middle English, the simplest way to account for these facts is to hypothesize that Norsified English arose in the Midlands, more specifically in the Midland dialect known to be most heavily marked by Norse elements, namely that of Lindsey, as represented by *Havelok* (45 norsified features).<sup>14</sup> The texts which represent the neighbouring region of the Fourboroughs (*Ormulum* (ca. 1200) and *Robert of Manning’s Chronicle* (ca. 1350)) lack only two of the 45 Norse-origin grammatical traits found in *Havelok* (284).

There are several problems with this hypothesis: first of all, there are no extant texts from 13th-century Northumbria to be compared with North-East Midland texts, such as *Havelok* (1250) or *Ormulum* (1200). The earliest Middle English texts from Deira (included in Thomason and Kaufman’s bibliography as the basis for their study) are dated to the 14th century.<sup>15</sup> The Old Northumbrian texts (*Lindisfarne* and *Durham Ritual* glosses) are too early (10th century) to show norsification features and the later Middle English texts from this variety (14th century) already present all the features that the authors refer to as the “Norsification package.” Since there is a three-century textual gap in the Northumbrian region, it is risky to assume that Norsified English arose in the Midlands on the evidence that 13th-century texts from such varieties show the highest concentration of Norse features. For all we know the Northern Middle English varieties could have shown a high concentration of norsified elements too. We simply lack evidence from that period.

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<sup>12</sup> The authors compare data for the remaining Norse-influenced dialects of Northern English, namely Lindsey, Fourboroughs, Norfolk, Elmet, Lancaster, and Chester. They call these dialects ‘Norsified’ because of the heavy lexical influence from Norse and because they have adopted between 24 and 57 of the Norse inflectional and derivational affixes, inflectional processes and closed-class grammatical words (283).

<sup>13</sup> However, the grounds for such a statement are not given anywhere. What is more, in p. 275 they admit that Danish Vikings ruled Deira more or less at the same time that they ruled Norfolk, Fourboroughs, Lindsey and Leicester.

<sup>14</sup> Written in 1250, copied ca. 1300 in Leicester or Northampton.

<sup>15</sup> *The Prose Rule of St Benet* (1400), *Cursor Mundi* (1330), writings of the School of Richard Rolle (1350-1400), etc. Thomason and Kaufman also include texts in the Scots dialect, which, at that time, was very similar to Northern English: John Barbour’s *Bruce* (1467) and *Saints’ Legends* (1400).



An additional problem is that the Midland features that Thomason and Kaufman propose as evidence of influence of the Midland dialects on Northern Middle English are precisely the more periphrastic ones so far as language contact goes, since they are mainly lexical. Moreover, some of them are not especially characteristic of Northern Middle English. We have examined forms 2, 3, 4 and 5 in Thomason and Kaufman's list of Northern features of allegedly Midland origin: the prepositions *before*, *beneath*, *without* and *above*. (pp. 300-01). The authors claim that the *-n* forms of these prepositions (which are, according to them, characteristic of the Midland varieties) are more frequently found than the endingless forms in the northern texts, which would clearly indicate Midland influence on Northern Middle English.

There are several problems with this hypothesis. First of all, as it has already been stated before, one should be careful about considering loss of *-n* a general feature of Northumbrian, as Thomason and Kaufman seem to imply. In the few Old Northumbrian that have survived, it can be clearly seen that loss of unstressed final *-n* is not universal: it is sometimes lost in the *-n*-stem inflexions, infinitives and plural present indicative of verbs, but it is also found in all the same cases. In Northern Middle English loss of *-n* seems to be selective, grammatically rather than phonologically conditioned: it is lost in the infinitive but kept in the past participle of strong verbs. But allowing that, generally speaking, *-n* forms may be regarded as typically Midland in contrast with Northern forms without *-n*, the fact is that the distribution of Thomason and Kaufman's *-n* forms of ABOVE, BEFORE, WITHOUT and BENEATH (*a-bu(v)e*, *be-forn*, *widh-uuten* and *be-neadhen*) reveals that they are not as clearly "northern" as they are claimed to be.

With regard to the distribution of the different forms of BEFORE, maps 364 and 365 in *LALME*<sup>16</sup> show that the *-n* forms of this preposition concentrate in the South, East and West Midlands but not in the North. *Beffoorn* also appears in the North, but the instances found are scarce. However, *beforn* seems to be very frequent in *The York and Townely Plays*. In the case of BENEATH map 702 in *LALME* shows that the *-n* forms are not very frequent in the Northern dialects either. For WITHOUT the distribution of forms with and without *-n* ending is very similar in the Northern dialects (cf. maps 587 and 588 in *LALME*). Forms with *-n* are again found in the *York and Townely Plays*. Finally, ABOVE is the only case in which forms with *-n* seem to appear more frequently in the Northern varieties, especially in The North-East, as shown on maps 673 and 674 in *LALME*. Forms with *-n* are frequently found in *The York Plays*. Therefore, it could be concluded that, at least from the features examined in this paper, there is no clear evidence that the *-n* forms of the above mentioned prepositions outnumber the endingless forms in Northern Middle English, and therefore the claim of the alleged Midland influence on Northern Middle

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<sup>16</sup> The maps referred to are all from *The Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*. The number given is the one that appears in *LALME* for every one of them.

English cannot be sustained on these grounds. Moreover, there seems to be a basic flaw in Thomason and Kaufman's theory, since there is no sufficient evidence that Northern *-n* forms are of Midland origin; they may have been retained from Old Northumbrian, where loss of final unstressed *-n* was never complete.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The most salient conclusion of this article is that, contrary to Thomason and Kaufman's theory, the evidence so far examined seems to indicate that there is continuity between Old Northumbrian and Northern Middle English at both the phonological and morphological levels (and not only at the latter one, as the stated by the authors in their work). From the twelve features examined in this article, only three show lack of continuity between the dialects of both periods and two of them (the 3pl. pronouns *they*, *their*, *them*, the 3sg. feminine pronoun *she* and the present participle ending *—and(e)*) are attributable to Scandinavian influence on Middle English. The other phonological and morphological features are characteristic of both Northern Old and Middle English.

With regard to the alleged influence of the Midland varieties on Northern Middle English, sustained by Thomason and Kaufman, this article has tried to show some of the main flaws of their theory. First of all, it is not possible to compare the degree of Norsification of the Northern varieties of Early Middle English to those of the Midlands (as the authors try to do) because of the lack of survival of texts in the North for the Early Middle English period. Second, this paper has examined one of the features proposed by the authors as an example of Midland influence on Northern Middle English, namely the *n* forms of the prepositions ABOVE, BEFORE, WITHOUT and BENEATH. Allowing that these *n* forms could be of Midland origin (which is largely taken for granted by the authors), the results of the present work show that there is no evidence that the *n* forms outnumber the endingless forms in Northern Middle English, and therefore contradict Thomason and Kaufman's claim.

Finally, when considering the continuity between Northern Old and Middle English dialects, it should be remembered that the origin of some of the features of Old Northumbrian, such as the *-s* ending for the present indicative, have not been satisfactorily explained yet. On the other hand, the radical loss of grammatical gender, which makes English stand apart from the other Germanic languages, could have also started in Old Northumbrian. These are some of the main questions to which scholars should therefore direct their attention in future works.



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