A short introduction to Old East Norse

Sune Gregersen
University of Copenhagen

Online master class
6th Naxos Summer School on Diachronic Linguistics
22 July 2021

Outline

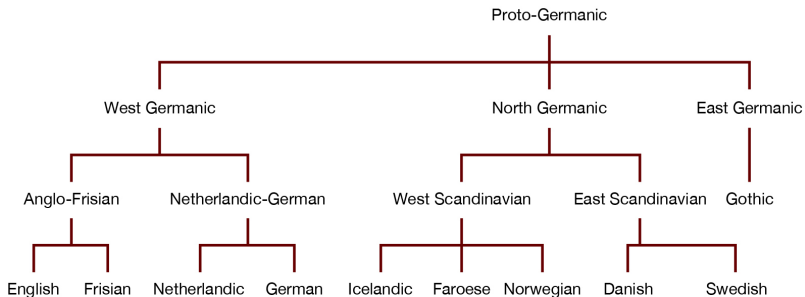# Section 1

The Scandinavian languages

What is Scandinavian?

- Northern branch of Germanic ('North Germanic')
- 5 modern standard languages (plus some highly divergent dialects)
    - Western group: Icelandic, Faroese, Norwegian[1]
    - Eastern group: Swedish, Danish
- Two types of early written sources
    - Runic inscriptions from *c.* 200 until late medieval period
    - Manuscripts from *c.* 1150 (very few until *c.* 1300)

---

[1]Historically at least – modern Norwegian shows significant East Scandinavian influence

Figure 1: Germanic language family

Source: Encyclopædia Britannica

Figure 2: Germanic languages in Europe

Source: Encyclopædia Britannica

Old (West) Norse

- 'Classic' Old Norse period *c.* 1100–1350
- Many textbooks, grammars, dictionaries, etc.
- But: 'Old Norse' usually stands for 'Old **West** Norse'
    - E.g. sagas, eddas, skaldic poetry, *þættir* (short tales) – all of these are Old West Norse
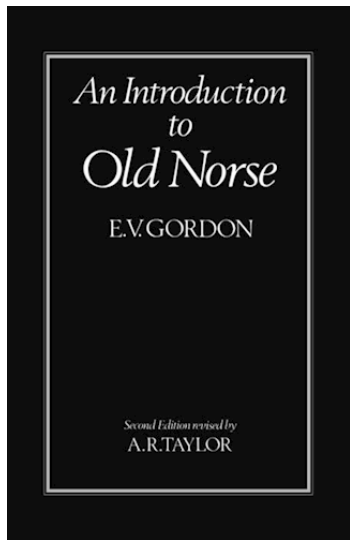
Figure 3: Gordon (1957)

What about Old East Norse?

- Eastern branch less well-known – some possible reasons:
  - Linguistically less conservative
  - Texts less exciting for literary historians (no sagas, eddas, etc.)
  - Usually treated as early stage of the modern national languages ('Old Swedish', 'Old/Middle Danish')
- ... but no less interesting for a linguist!
  - Dynamic period with many linguistic changes
  - Profound Low German influence – interesting from a language contact perspective
  - Also relevant for the history of English (Danelaw 9th–10th c.; House of Denmark early 11th c.)
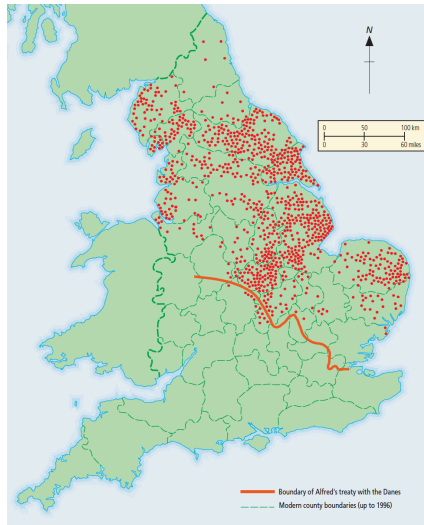   - See Crisma & Pintzuk (2019) for a recent example

Figure 4: Scandinavian place names in England

Source: Crystal (2019: 25)

Section 2

Old East Norse 101

Old East Norse – definition

- Used here as a cover term for East Scandinavian dialects *c.* 1100–1350
    - In Sweden usually called 'Early Old Swedish' (*äldre fornsvenska*), in Denmark 'Early Middle Danish' (*ældre middeldansk*)
    - But cf. 'Old East Scandinavian' (Haugen 1976) and 'Old Nordic' (Ottosson 2002)
- Ancestor of modern Swedish and Danish (including their dialects)
- Dialectal differences already present at the beginning of the period, but reasonable to consider it one language

Figure 5: Old East Norse dialects, 13th c.

Note 1: Old Scanian traditionally considered a subdialect of Old Danish

Note 2: Old Gutnish sometimes considered a separate branch (cf. Ottosson 2002: 792)

Main types of sources

- Laws
- Medical and botanical handbooks
- Religious texts, e.g. prayers and saint's lives (many fragmentary)
- A few literary and historical texts (Old Swedish)
- Runic inscriptions (early in the period)

Figure 6: Runestone Sö 333, Ärja, Central Sweden (11th c.)
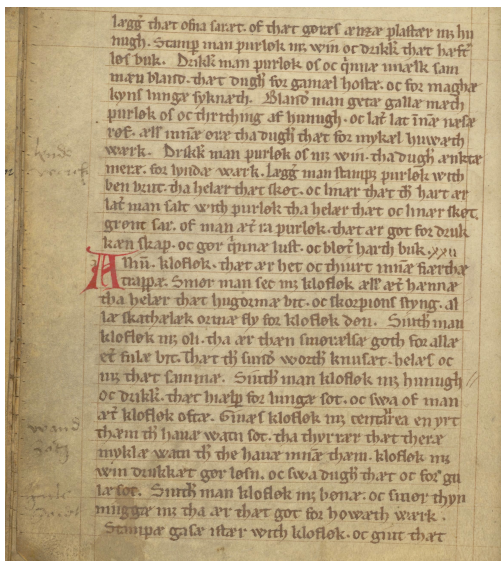
Foto: Magnus Källström, 2006 (CC BY)

Figure 7: Medical handbook – Kungliga biblioteket, K 48, f. 10ᵛ (*c.* 1300)

Figure 8: Scanian Law – AM 28, 8° ('Codex Runicus'), f. 17ᵛ (*c.* 1300)

Some distinguishing features – phonology

- Monophthongization of /ei/, /øy/, /au/
    - OWN *steinn* 'stone', *auga* 'eye' = OEN *stēn*, *ø̄gha*
- Preservation of clusters /mp/, /nt/, /nk/
    - OWN *svǫppr* 'mushroom', *ekkja* 'widow' = OEN *svamper*, *ænkia*
- Reduction of unstressed vowels in Old Danish → /ə/ (written <æ>)
    - OWN and OSw *kona* 'woman' = Old Danish <kunæ>
    - In westernmost dialects this in turn develops to ∅ (*ku:n*, *kuən*)

See Ottosson (2002) for further examples.

Some distinguishing features – grammar and lexicon

- 'Cohesive' case system (at least in Old Scanian)
- Development of passive from old reflexive/middle form ('*s*-passive')
- 'Germanic-style' three-way gender system (MASC/FEM/NEUT) generally kept in this period
    - Modern standard Swedish and Danish have reduced this to a two-way system (COMM/NEUT)
- Middle Low German influence and many loanwords, esp. from *c.* 1300:
    - *bliffua/-æ* 'become', replacing earlier *vardha/-æ*
    - *kloflöker/klofløk* 'garlic'
    - *twifl/twiuæl* 'doubt'
    - *krank(er)* 'sick'

Text example: the benefits of garlic

(1)   *Smør*   *man*   *sec*   *m*æth *klofløk*   æll*ær* æt*ær*   *hænnæ*
smear.PRS person REFL with garlic(FEM) or   eat.PRS PRON.FEM.OBL
tha helær thæt hugormæ bit. oc skorpions styng. allæ
then heal.PRS DEM.NEUT adder   bite and scorpion.GEN sting all.PL
skathælæk ormæ fly for klofløk døn.
harmful   snake.PL flee.PRS.PL for garlic smell

'If one smears oneself with garlic or eats it, that will heal adder bites or scorpion stings. All harmful (venomous) snakes are repelled by the smell of garlic' (*Harpestreng*, Kungliga biblioteket, K 48, f. 10ᵛ; *c.* 1300)

Section 3

Two case studies

Case in early Scandinavian

- Four-way contrast (NOM/ACC/GEN/DAT) in 'runic' (pre-1100) Scandinavian, similar to other old Germanic languages
- Case expresses grammatical roles (subject, direct/indirect object, etc.)
- This system is kept in Old West Norse, but gradually disappears in nouns in Old East Norse
- Jensen (2003; 2011; 2016): 'split' nominal case system in Old Scanian (c. 1300) – GEN/DAT distributed along traditional lines, NOM/ACC partly according to information structure (cohesion)
    - Subject and subject complement are NOM when they express foregrounded (e.g. new or focussed) information – otherwise ACC
- A similar system may also have been in use in Old Swedish (Jensen 2011: 271–280)

Text examples: nom and acc in Old West Norse

(2) *hest-r   hans h*eitir   *Gvlltopp-r*
    horse-nom his   is.called G.-nom

    'His (i.e. Heimdall's) horse is called Golden Mane' (*Prose Edda*, GKS 2367 4°; *c.* 1300–1350)

(3) *þann   hest-∅   gaf   Skarpheðin-n Hǫskuld-i*
    that.acc horse-acc give.pst S.-nom   H.-dat

    'Skarphéðinn gave that horse to Höskuldr' (*Njáls saga*, AM 468 4°; *c.* 1300–1325)

Text example: NOM and ACC in Old Scanian

(4) ***Kuna*** *manzs* *ma æi mæth logum mera sælia af*
    wife.NOM man.GEN may not with law.DAT more sell.INF of
    bondans *bo* *æn fæm pænninga* *mun* [...] *um hun*
    husband.DEF.GEN property than five penny.PL.GEN worth   if she
    ær *usnial **kuna** *tha scal bonden* *fara* [til] *things*
    COP.PRS foolish wife.NOM then shall husband.DEF go.INF to thing.GEN
    oc sigia *til ath **kunu*** *hans gør* *swa*
    and say.INF to that wife.ACC his do.PRS so

    'A man's wife (NOM) may not legally sell more of her husbands
    property than five pennies' worth [...] If she is a foolish wife (NOM),
    the husband must go to the thing and declare that his wife (ACC) is
    doing this' (Scanian Law, Kungliga biblioteket, B 69; Jensen 2003:
    226–227)

Passives in Germanic languages

- Generally periphrastic: 'be' or 'become' + participle
  - Faroese *Eg varð sædd(ur)*
  - Dutch *Ik werd gezien*
  - English *I was seen*
- Modern East Scandinavian: inflected '*s*-passive' (old reflexive/middle; cf. Haspelmath 1990)
  - Preferred in Swedish: *Jag sågs* 'I was seen'
  - Mixed system in Danish: inflected *Jeg sås* and periphrastic *Jeg blev set*, but with different meaning (see e.g. Heltoft 2006; Laanemets 2013)
  - How did these systems (and the differences between them) develop?

Text example: *s*-passive/middle

(5) *ÄRofulla iomfru maria **sikx** hafwa*
glorious.DEF.FEM virgin mary say.PRS.PASS have.INF
***rädhz** j ängilsens tiltalan*
frighten.PTCP.PASS in angel.DEF.GEN speak_to.NOMZ

'The glorious Virgin Mary is said to have been frightened when the angel spoke to her' (*Sermo Angelicus*, Kungliga biblioteket, A 110 ('Codex Oxenstiernianus'), f. 30ᵛ; *c.* 1385)
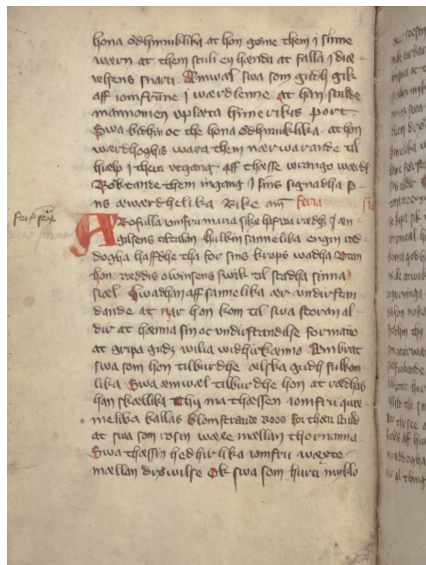
Figure 9: Kungliga biblioteket, A 110 ('Codex Oxenstiernianus'), f. 30ᵛ (*c.* 1385)

Text example: two passive constructions

(6) *vm man* **dræps** *i kirkiæ* [...] *Kyrkiæ scal hwar cristæn*
     if person kill.PASS in church   church shall every Christian
     manz   heem hus   wæræ. oc hwilkæn man   sum thær
     person.GEN home house be.INF and which   person who there
     warthær   *i* **dræpæn** [...]
     become.PRS in kill.PTCP

     'If someone is killed in a church: A church should be every Christian
     person's home, and whoever is killed there [...]' (King Eric's Zealandic
     Law, AM 455 12°, f. 126ᵛ; *c.* 1275–1325)

Section 4

Summary and further reading

Summary

- Old East Norse less well-known than Old West Norse, but no less interesting linguistically
- Of value both to scholars of Germanic languages and historical linguists in general
- Many changes in the period *c.* 1100–1350 still need to be investigated in more detail
    - Was the 'cohesive' case system in use outside of the Old Scanian area, and how did it develop over time?
    - What was the functional 'division of labour' between the periphrastic and the *s*-passive? Can the historical data shed light on the situation in the modern languages?

Some further reading

- On Scandinavian in general e.g. Haugen (1976) or contributions to Bandle et al. (2002–2005)
- Texts in Gordon (1957) – mainly Old West Norse – or Haugen et al. (2018)
- On the sociolinguistic history (including the position of Norwegian), see Berg (2016) and references there
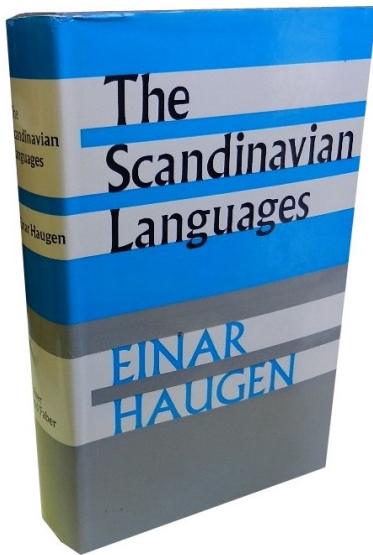
Figure 10: Haugen (1976)

Figure 11: Haugen et al. (2018)

References I

Bandle, Oscar, Kurt Braunmüller, Ernst Hakon Jahr, Allan Karker, Hans-Peter Naumann, Ulf Telemann, Lennart Elmevik & Gun Widmark (eds.). 2002–2005. *The Nordic languages: An international handbook of the history of the North Germanic languages.* 2 vols. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Berg, Ivar. 2016. The making of the Scandinavian languages. In Gijsbert Rutten & Kristine Horner (eds.), *Metalinguistic perspectives on Germanic languages: European case studies from past to present*, 35–55. Oxford: Peter Lang.

Crisma, Paola & Susan Pintzuk. 2019. The noun phrase and the 'Viking Hypothesis'. *Language Variation and Change* 31. 219–246.

Crystal, David. 2019. *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language.* 3rd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gordon, E. V. 1957. *An introduction to Old Norse.* 2nd edn. Oxford: Clarendon.

Haspelmath, Martin. 1990. The grammaticization of passive morphology. *Studies in Language* 14(1). 25–72.

References II

Haugen, Einar. 1976. *The Scandinavian languages*. London: Faber & Faber.

Haugen, Odd Einar, Massimiliano Bampi, Marina Buzzoni, Andrea Meregalli & Luca Panieri (eds.). 2018. *Le lingue nordiche nel medioevo*. Vol. 1. Oslo: Novus. http://omp.novus.no/index.php/novus/catalog/view/2/4/117.

Heltoft, Lars. 2006. Grammaticalisation as content reanalysis: The modal character of the danish *s*-passive. In Ole Nedergaard Thomsen (ed.), *Competing models of linguistic change: Evolution and beyond* (Current Issues in Linguistic Theory 279), 269–288. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Jensen, Eva Skafte. 2003. Case in Middle Danish: A double content system. In Barry J. Blake & Kate Burridge (eds.), *Historical linguistics 2001: Selected papers from the 15th International Conference on Historical Linguistics, Melbourne, 13–17 August 2001* (Current Issues in Linguistic Theory 237), 221–236. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Jensen, Eva Skafte. 2011. *Nominativ i gammelskånsk: Afvikling og udviklinger med udgangspunkt i Skånske Lov i Stockholm B 69*. Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag.

References III

Jensen, Eva Skafte. 2016. The history of nominative *-er* in Danish and Swedish: A case of exaptation? In Muriel Norde & Freek Van de Velde (eds.), *Exaptation and language change* (Current Issues in Linguistic Theory 336), 287–316. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Laanemets, Anu. 2013. The passive voice in spoken and written Danish, Norwegian and Swedish: A comparative corpus-based study. *Languages in Contrast* 13(1). 67–89.

Ottosson, Kjartan. 2002. Old Nordic: A definition and delimitation of the period. In Oscar Bandle, Kurt Braunmüller, Ernst Hakon Jahr, Allan Karker, Hans-Peter Naumann, Ulf Telemann, Lennart Elmevik & Gun Widmark (eds.), *The Nordic languages: An international handbook of the history of the North Germanic languages*, vol. 1, 787–793. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Thank you / ευχαριστώ / tusind tak!

Questions and comments are always welcome at s.gregersen@hum.ku.dk