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# Old English and Old Norse: An Inquiry into Intelligibility and Categorization Methodology

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OLD ENGLISH AND OLD NORSE: AN INQUIRY INTO INTELLIGIBILITY AND  
CATEGORIZATION METHODOLOGY

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## DEDICATION

To my wife, Celeste, who has forever been at my side through the long, frightening search for a place in this world.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would have never seen the light of day if it were not for several key members of the faculty and staff at the University of South Carolina. Of those I would like to especially thank my advisor, Dr. Kurt Goblirsch, who apparently has the patience of a saint to have put up with me over the past four years. This thesis, and my education, was molded under his watchful gaze, and I am deeply thankful for his guidance.

My wife, Celeste, must also be mentioned here, as, in addition to her heartfelt support over the years, she has nearly as much a hand in this paper as I do. My inability to master even the most basic grammar has been kept far away from the eyes of my many professors thanks to her unrivaled editing prowess.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, who have never told me "maybe you've been in school long enough" even once. In fact, they have been supportive beyond words, and I do not believe I would have made it this far without them.

## ABSTRACT

To say that the Old English and Old Norse languages have an interesting history with one another is a declaration of utter understatement. So intertwined were these languages and their people that we, some 1,000 years later, are still attempting to discern the extent of their relationship. As new evidence and the reevaluation of old evidence emerges, research in the historical Germanic languages continues to paint a clearer picture. However, the study of possible Old English and Old Norse mutual intelligibility is a subject that is comparatively new within the field, and as such is still exploring a state of uncertainty in the research.

Over the past century, certain aspects within the Germanic language tree have undergone drastic shifts. Specifically, there has been an alteration of the arrangement of individual languages within the accepted historical timeline in the past 50-60 years in light of a new understanding of linguistic evidence. This shift sent the comparative views of Old English and Old Norse into disarray, pushing research to reevaluate the possibility of mutual intelligibility between these two languages. Since then, it has become the general consensus that post-migration Old English and Old Norse had enjoyed a relatively long period in which they could understand one another, and linguistic evidence continues to strengthen this view. Though the body of evidence in favor of this theory continues to grow, yet another aspect of historical evidence, by and large untapped, could provide an even greater understanding of mutual intelligibility in this

respect. The use of literary evidence in the linguistic argument of mutual intelligibility is one that has been met with some skepticism, and understandably so. However, more and more researchers have begun introducing specific literary pieces as supplementary evidence for intelligibility studies. This work seeks to outline the history of Germanic language categorization, catalog the linguistic attributes in both Old English and Old Norse that have become the cornerstone of the mutual intelligibility argument, as well inquire into the set of evidence that has not received as much attention in the research.

## PREFACE

I am often told by successful writers like my mother and my advisor that it should be made a point to put yourself into your writing, to make your writing a reflection of you as a person, and it is something that I have strived to accomplish over my years as a professional learner. If the mark of a great writer is to put your own personal stain on every piece you scribe, then surely I could learn a great deal by immersing myself in the works of the great minds of my field. However, if the literature is to be believed, Historical Linguistics is home to some of the most dull, tedious humans that roam this good Earth. A little part of me died that day. You see, for a good deal of history, it seems as if the mark of humor has often been accompanied by only the most utter of dismay, as if one could not make a topic entertaining and still be taken seriously at the same time. My wife, being both my biggest critic and closest confidant, has exerted an enormous amount of energy on the effort of toning down my humor in order to save what little face could possibly be lost by turning in term papers littered with witty remarks and comments on absurdities in the field. To her, and to you, dear reader, I ask that you show pity on this poor soul in his endeavor to be both entertaining and educational in what can be, given too little effort, the most dreadfully boring aspect of furthering one's education: reading.

I sincerely hope you enjoy, and I insist that you learn something, even if it may be how to not write a thesis.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| DEDICATION .....  | iii |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....   | iv  |
| ABSTRACT .....  | v   |
| PREFACE .....   | vii |
| LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....  | ix  |
| CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....   | 1   |
| CHAPTER 2 HISTORY OF THE GERMANIC TRIBES .....                      | 4   |
| CHAPTER 3 SOCIOLINGUISTIC METHODOLOGY .....                         | 9   |
| CHAPTER 4 SOCIAL INTERACTION.....                                   | 12  |
| 4.1 HOW WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW .....                                  | 12  |
| 4.2 SOCIAL INTERACTION BETWEEN GERMANIC TRIBES IN ENGLAND .....     | 14  |
| CHAPTER 5 LINGUISTIC COMPARISON.....                                | 18  |
| 5.1 SHARED LINGUISTIC INNOVATIONS IN OLD ENGLISH AND OLD NORSE..... | 19  |
| 5.2 NORTH SEA GERMANIC.....   | 23  |
| CHAPTER 6 ASKING THE INFORMANT.....                                 | 32  |
| CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION .....  | 41  |
| REFERENCES .....  | 44  |

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|           |                        |
|-----------|------------------------|
| acc ..... | Accusative Case        |
| IE.....   | Indo-European          |
| MI.....   | Mutual Intelligibility |
| nom ..... | Nominative Case        |
| OE .....  | Old English            |
| OF .....  | Old Frisian            |
| OHG ..... | Old High German        |
| ON.....   | Old Norse              |
| OS .....  | Old Saxon              |
| pl .....  | Plural                 |
| sg.....   | Singular               |

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

One need only exert the most modest amount of effort to discover why researchers of Germanic languages find the relationship between Old English and Old Norse a topic of particular interest. Taken merely at face value, it is obvious that these two languages contain an abundance of overlap with one another at every possible angle, an aspect that could be almost entirely credited to their unique history of social interaction with one another. It is this wealth of shared features that has fueled the recent deluge of academic inquiry into the relationship between these languages, a query that has been mulled over the past century by several influential theoretical analyses concerning the ordering of the Germanic language group. Along with these reevaluations have emerged new means of approaching certain key questions, one of the more interesting being the idea of mutual intelligibility between Old English and Old Norse.

Nearly sixty years ago, one would have been hard pressed to find a researcher that put much value on the ability of an Englishman and Norseman living before 1000 AD to communicate with one another. At that time, there existed a very different way of classifying several of the Germanic languages, one that held Old English and Old Norse to be far too removed from each other to hold much intrigue in the area of intelligibility. No wonder, then, that the research of the early twentieth century and before contains very little mention of the two in a comparative sense, at least outside the grander picture of the

Germanic languages as a whole. However, thanks to a reevaluation of evidence undertaken in the 1950s and 60s, this trend shifted to one that holds Old English and Old Norse in such close proximity, linguistically speaking, that theories questioning their mutual communication abilities soon began flowing from the pens of historical linguists in excess. This metaphorical snowball has lately turned into an avalanche. Linguistic evidence at every level shows us that what differences Old English and Old Norse had at the time directly succeeding the Migration Period would not amount to so much as to become a problem with intelligibility. To further back this claim, some researchers have begun turning to the literature of this period to supplement these notions of mutual intelligibility.

Still, despite the general view of mutual intelligibility between Old English and Old Norse, this idea remains in a state of transition. Research into the comparison of these two languages, unless specifically inquiring into intelligibility, remains all but bereft of any serious claims. Often it is the case that entire articles are dedicated to this comparative study, while the topic of intelligibility is left to one or two lines consisting of nothing more than a passing "yay" or "nay" on the part of the author. While most claim that mutual intelligibility must have been possible, they are not up to putting much more consideration into the topic, a reluctance that may originate from the equivocal nature of arguments for intelligibility. However, the linguistic and supplementary evidence available to the modern scholar can be considered more than adequate to make the argument for mutual intelligibility between these two peoples. Therefore, the purpose of this work is to catalogue the available evidence for mutual intelligibility between Old English and Old Norse, assess the methodology which guides their classification, and

evaluate the position of these languages in both a mutual relationship as well as within the Germanic language group as a whole.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORY OF THE GERMANIC TRIBES

Before one can dive into the diversities that have emerged among the languages of the Germanic people, it is best to map out the geographical chronology that affected the various tribes beginning at the turn of the first millennium. As far back as we can be confident in our estimations, the Germanic tribes were a group of Indo-European people who spoke one of several dialects of a common Germanic language named, aptly, Common Germanic. This language, and those who spoke it, were spread out over a large portion of northern continental Europe in such areas as modern-day Denmark, northern Germany, as well as the southern tip of the Scandinavian peninsula. For reasons we are unsure of, these Germanic tribes participated in a mass exodus beginning around 100 AD, with individual tribes spreading across mainland Europe, eastern Asia, and northern Africa. This migration period lasted about five centuries and left a Germanic imprint on nearly all other European cultures of the time, including the Roman Empire and the Huns, both of which suffered massive losses at the hands of the Germanic hordes.

Unlike other tribes, such as the Goths and the Vandals, one group of Germanic peoples stayed relatively unmoved during this migration period. Those that chose to stay rather than expanding to the south or west remained and flourished in modern-day Denmark and Scandinavia, and continued to grow and fortify their own colonies in those areas. Eventually, these people did split from one another in enough of a manner as to

distinguish themselves, both culturally and linguistically, to form the Danes, the Norwegians, and the Swedes. Though the Scandinavian people of this time may have had a relatively uneventful migration in comparison to their cousins across Europe, their immobile nature has caused some stir in the field of historical Germanic research. Most notably, the means in which we categorize the Germanic language group has undergone a reevaluation around the 1950s involving the Scandinavian and Gothic language branches.

The simplest means of classifying the Germanic language group is one which consists of three branches: West, North, and East Germanic.<sup>1</sup> These names reflect, relatively speaking, how these individual language groups were located geographically in comparison to one another, as well as, to some extent, certain linguistic commonalities. The modern languages, as well as their historical manifestations, are arranged within three branches in the following way:

(1) **The Germanic Language Branches**

| <b>West</b> | <b>North</b> | <b>East</b>         |
|-------------|--------------|---------------------|
| English     | Swedish      | Gothic <sup>2</sup> |
| Frisian     | Norwegian    |                     |
| Low German  | Danish       |                     |
| High German | Icelandic    |                     |
|             | Faroese      |                     |

Since the first attestation of these three language branches, a great deal of research has sought to determine their relationship. Obviously these three branches could not have broken off at the same time and under the same circumstances, a history that has

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<sup>1</sup> This three-branched system originated from August Schleicher in his 1860 work *Die deutsche Sprache*. At the time, he used the terms "Gotisch," "Nordisch," and "Deutsch" for East, North, and West, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> The East Germanic languages have since gone extinct.

facilitated examinations of their social history, linguistic variation, and archeological information.

The Goths originally inhabited the area of southern Sweden, which included modern Götaland and island of Gotland, which would have been quite close to the location of the Norse in modern-day Denmark. It was a further point of agreement before the mid twentieth century that the Norse and Gothic languages were rather closely related to one another from a linguistic standpoint. The thought process behind this assumption was bolstered thanks to a particular linguistic feature exclusively shared by the Gothic and Norse languages: Gotho-Nordic Sharpening. This phonological process caused the sharpening of glides in the following environments: -Vww- and -Vjj- into -Vggw- and -Vggj-, respectfully<sup>3</sup> (ON *tryggvan* 'to secure' and Go *triggwana* compared to OS *triuwi*; ON *tveggja* gen. pl. of 'two', Go *twddje* compared to OHG *zweio*) (Maurer 1952: 67).

In and around the 1960s, the close grouping of Old Norse and Gothic based on a mere handful of shared linguistic elements underwent a reevaluation in the field of historical Germanic linguistics (Antonsen 1965; Kuhn 1955).<sup>4</sup> It was discovered that Old Norse showed a much stronger association with several other languages of the time, an association that proved much stronger than the one previously thought to exist between it and Gothic. This new evidence brought about a rethinking of the Germanic Migration process, which once involved the Goths and the Scandinavians living in close proximity far longer than would be asserted today. Today, it is supposed that the separation of the Gothic tribe occurred at the very beginning of the Migration period, and it may have been

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<sup>3</sup> The Gothic cluster -Vjj- sharpened to -Vddj-, rather than -Vggj- as in Old Norse.

<sup>4</sup> A number of additional features that furthered this notion emerged following this mid-20th century downfall of Gotho-Nordic. Of these include the lack of Gothic umlaut, as well as differences between the dual case system between Gothic and Old Norse.



one of the first Germanic tribes to initiate an exodus.<sup>5</sup> One of languages which has since become a close bed partner to Old Norse is the language of the Anglo-Saxons, now thought as one of the closest languages in relation to Old Norse.

While most of the Germanic peoples made their way further into mainland Europe, only at the end of this Migration did several Germanic tribes made the trek from the European mainland, across the English Channel, and to the English Isles, a land recently abandoned by the Roman Legion due to troubles in Italy. Though there is no way of pinpointing exactly which tribes participated in this journey, it is widely held that the majority consisted of Germanic people from the Angle and Saxon tribes, with the participation of Jutes still under some scrutiny. Upon arriving in England, these people would have found a land ripe for the picking, having recently been abandoned by the previous, Roman militias. What remained was most likely a passive, Romanized Celtic population unprepared to field a defense against the Germanic horde. These tribes settled in a period of relative social and linguistic isolation from their mainland cousins for around 200 years.

It is within these 200 years that many of the changes between Old English and Old Norse occur, before their reintegration with one another. Archeological and textual evidence seem to lend credence to a period of relative English isolation from other Germanic languages and cultures, and it is in this short window where many questions emerge. In the realm of unanswered questions concerning English-Norse historical studies lies the topic of mutual intelligibility. Could these two languages have changed

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<sup>5</sup> Walter W. Arndt's extensive 1959 work on Germanic Glottochronology offers a time of separation of 40 - 60 AD between Gothic and the remaining Germanic languages.

so much during these centuries as to impede mutual comprehension? This is a question that has been pondered with assuredness by nearly every researcher concerned with this comparative study, yet it remains shrouded in uncertainty. At every level, this topic is in a constant state of fluctuation, forcing a reevaluation of methodology, one that looks to present-day sociolinguistics to derive some insights.

## CHAPTER 3

### SOCIOLINGUISTIC METHODOLOGY

The topic of mutual intelligibility is not exclusive to the study of historical languages, and one could justifiably say that its most fruitful applications are those which fall under the purview of modern sociolinguistics. After all, how much can one possibly infer about the mutual intelligibility of people speaking over a millennium ago, and how concrete can these inferences ever hope to be? Lacking the capability to simply walk up to a speaker of the two languages in question, the researcher of historical languages is seemingly left with only the scribbling of ancient texts in which to ponder mutual intelligibility. However, what if there was something we could learn from the study of modern sociolinguistics? In addition to pure linguistic data, modern sociolinguistics uses many other aspects of a language and its people to inquire into mutual intelligibility, many of which are available to those who study historical languages as well. To begin, however, it would seem pertinent to discuss a major issue: the definition of mutual intelligibility itself.

Mutual intelligibility, loosely defined, is the ability for two speakers of different languages or dialects to readily understand one another, without any special effort. This concept, as simple as it seems, has nevertheless been subject to a significant amount of scrutiny among individual researchers. One of the major problems facing dialect and intelligibility studies, both modern and historical, comes in the form of drastic disagreement as to what can be considered mutual intelligibility. There is no shared

definition of mutual intelligibility, and distinctions between what can be labeled intelligibility and what should be considered merely bilingualism are in a state of flux. The definition of mutual intelligibility given above, and the one which will be used for this study, is presented by Matthew Townend in his book *Language and History in Viking Age England*, one which may appear understandably bare-bones to most readers when compared to other given definitions. This definition gives no room for the discussion of percentages, nor does it offer much in the way of geographical dialectal differentiation within languages and how those may affect intelligibility. This definition, which may be absurdly inappropriate for research into modern languages, is perhaps all one can hope to define in the study of Old English and Old Norse. It is the lack of resources and a general consensus as to the legitimacy of what resources we have that force such a loose definition, and there may never come a time that demands a more precise one.

In the past, it was the general agreement of historians that there existed little or no amount of mutual intelligibility between the English and Norse peoples of this time. These opinions were formed, by and large, by the systematically flawed linguistic comparisons of the two languages, and are often given in such brevity that an explanation of their reasoning is lacking altogether. In much of the research before the 1950s, an explanation of mutual intelligibility is often given no more than a footnote, while modern research that has yielded systematic comparisons of the two languages from a point of view favoring the topic of intelligibility. Additionally, the innovation of modern dialectology and intelligibility studies has given rise to a new set of tools which seem to be making their way into the historical study of language.

For researchers of modern-day dialects and comparative sociolinguistics, there exist innumerable tests and assessments used to determine mutual intelligibility and dialectal differences between two peoples. Though each specific research project would demand individual adjustments, most, if not all, tests concerning mutual intelligibility revolve around four main types of parameters: (1) Test the informant, in which a speaker of dialect A is given an audio recording of dialect B and asked several questions to determine comprehension; (2) Ask the informant, a straightforward inquiry as to the informant's personal opinion concerning a dialect; (3) Investigate social history between two dialects or language groups; and (4) Compare the two dialects or languages from a linguistic standpoint (Townend 2002: 13-6). While these four basic tests serve their individual purposes best when the languages being studied are living, there are several aspects of these tools of modern sociolinguistics that can prove extremely helpful in the study of historic languages.

The most obvious of these would be linguistic comparison, seemingly the only type of study that garners any kind of absolute certainty in historical linguistics. This conclusion is understandable, and somewhat unavoidable when making inquiries into mutual intelligibility. However, there are several other aspects that we can take from modern dialect studies and apply to a historical problem. Social interaction, for example, can be a critical criterion in the understanding of historical sociolinguistics, and can even give rise to certain information pertaining to intelligibility between two cultures. Shared experiences, political strife, or even war, are all variables that can cause two languages to parallel or drift apart, and several variables can be considered in the topic of Old English/Old Norse relations.

## CHAPTER 4

### SOCIAL INTERACTION

The intriguing social history between the English Isles and mainland Scandinavia has been the catalyst for comparative study of these two peoples for much of the last two centuries. In the case of language and mutual intelligibility, deriving a precise history of the social interaction of these two people plays a key role. One can imagine that a long and rich history of interaction between any two cultures would create a much more prosperous environment for paralleling languages. This proximity is especially true in the case of Old English and Old Norse. Determining how long these two peoples were separated from one another can provide clues as to how far the two languages had diverged once reintroduced to one another. Additionally, being able to calculate, within reason, the number of Scandinavian settlers in England can also give one insight into language parallels and to what extent a Scandinavian language would have influenced the formation of English at that time.

#### 4.1 HOW WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW

As stated above, we can surmise with relative confidence that the Germanic tribes who made the journey to Britain had, at the very least, 200 years of near-complete linguistic and social isolation from their mainland cousins.<sup>6</sup> We can infer this number

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<sup>6</sup> This count has a tendency to shift depending on the personal views of individual researchers. Townend, for example, supposes a 200 year separation based on evidence that Viking expeditions from Scandinavia began around 700 AD (2002). Therefore, this would be the time when linguistic isolation ended in his opinion. Many scholars, on the other hand, do not consider linguistic interaction to be noteworthy until the mass settlement of Scandinavians around 900 AD.

based on several pieces of evidence, the most telling of which is the general lack of textual support concerning Viking raids in England. Some of the first interactions between the Scandinavian and English peoples came in the form of sacking of numerous monasteries along the eastern English coast. Due to their material wealth and relatively low defensive capabilities, monasteries were prime targets for these raids and their inhabitants recorded such events. Beginning around 700 AD, we start to see scribal evidence recording raids in monastery histories, a trend that increases over the next 200 years. A general lack of this kind of textual evidence before this period points to the conclusion that there were no interactions of this type prior to the 700's.

A second form of evidence concerning interactions of the mainland and England comes from archeological finds. Trade between England and Scandinavia before their mass immigration revolved almost exclusively around low-level commodities. Though hopes of finding archeological evidence of such commodities is, understandably, low due to their inability to stand up to the elements, one would assume that, given the large amount of trade at later dates, we would find at least some form of evidence pertaining to trade with Scandinavia. In fact, some of the only artifacts that remain are expensive, luxury items that most likely would have made their way south from Scandinavia, coming over to England from Normandy or other mainland areas (Townend 2002: 30). A lack of archeological evidence from before the 700's, like the lack of textual evidence, continues to lead to a conclusion that there was little to no social interaction between the peoples during this time.

## 4.2 SOCIAL INTERACTION BETWEEN GERMANIC TRIBES IN ENGLAND

When the Scandinavian people did finally begin interacting and immigrating to the English isles, it heralded a period of almost constant military conflict and cultural interaction. However, exactly how many of these settlers actually did come to the English Isles is a topic that has a clear dichotomy of opinions in the modern research. The two schools of thought are that there were either a large number of immigrants that made their way to England after 700 AD or there were relatively few, with very few researchers choosing any kind of middle ground.

For those who hold the view that there were a great number of Scandinavians immigrating to England, there exist several key pieces of evidence. *The Domesday Book*, a political survey of England done for William the Conqueror in 1086, stands at the head of the list. *The Domesday Book* states that there existed a large number of *sokemen*, a social class of tenants, living in the eastern areas of England who bore Scandinavian names, a statistic that has been quoted by many researches as an indication of Danish settlers (Ekwall 1937: 22-3; Bugge 1921: 178-9). Understandably, this has come under a considerable amount of fire, both because names do not necessarily indicate the ethnicity of a person, but also due to the date of *the Domesday Book*. By 1086, the trend for names had shifted greatly in England, making Scandinavian names especially popular, a circumstance contradicting the legitimacy of deriving settler counts from the text. The eastern areas of England were especially prone to Scandinavianisms, as this was a zone of Danish immigrants during and around the Viking expansions into England. Regardless of the number of Danes that immigrated to England, this area would have



been particularly susceptible to Scandinavian influence, and it is no surprise that we see this reflected in social documents.

Similar to *The Domesday Book*, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a historical record of the Anglo-Saxon people from the late tenth century, also holds information as to the number of Scandinavian settlers, this time pertaining to their military actions. In this chronicle, it is stated that the Danes founded their major settlements in the late ninth century and records several specific instances of mass immigration. Within these accounts of mass immigration, the number of ships which carried the Danes to England are said to be simply great in number, a vague figure which opens it to possible conjecture. Many accounts of military action may drastically exaggerate the number of enemy participants, a style that *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* seems to maintain. Similar recordings of the same immigration events have been found in texts other than *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, all of which claim a wide variation in the number of attested ships (Sawyer 1958: 3-4). Regardless, even if we knew exactly how many ships there were crossing from the mainland to England, there remain several pieces of crucial information that do not exist in any text, such as how large the ships were or how many men were carried on each. This discrepancy could essentially mean the difference between an army of thousands and one of mere hundreds.

The names of both people and places in England also play a large role in the consideration of the extent of Scandinavian interaction with the English people. As stated above, texts such as *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Domesday Book* recorded not only information such as the extent of tenants, but also records of those tenants' names as well as the names of individual settlements. In areas consisting of a higher

percentage of Scandinavian settlers, the use of Scandinavian names or a mixture of English and Scandinavian elements were quite common. For example, we see a large number of towns in the Danelaw regions that form their names by combining a traditional English name with the addition of the Scandinavian suffix *-by*. This evidence implies a large Scandinavian population; however, supplementary evidence may give some insight as to why the naming trend might indicate otherwise. Scholars on both sides of the Scandinavian population argument have noted that records in *The Domesday Book* show a general trend for people of English descent to begin adopting Scandinavian names for their children (Sawyer 1958: 13; Ekwall 1937:22-3). This trend is not at all unusual, and can be seen at other stages of English history. For instance, after the Norman invasion, a parallel shift in the popularity of names also occurs, as the high political status of Normans influenced the naming conventions of the English people. When taking into account that the Danish settlers also held a comparative position of high esteem in the eyes of the Anglo-Saxon population after their immigration to England<sup>7</sup>, it is not out of the ordinary to say that a similar shift in naming patterns could have also occurred. Simply examining the names in historical records thus becomes a far less accurate indication of Scandinavian settlement numbers, and a more hypothetical view of linguistic interaction.

In the end, the study of interaction, while critical, lends very little to the argument of mutual intelligibility. Supposition based on historical evidence teeters far too much on the line of uncertainty for many to take note of it in the study of intelligibility, though

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<sup>7</sup> Roberta Frank's inquiry into the status of Scandinavians in the eyes of the Anglo-Saxons mentions, among other things, the popularity of heathen music and Scandinavian dress in and around the eighth century (2013).

there are some aspects that we can take into account, if only at a glance. Assuming the approximate number of 200 years separation between the English and Norse, one can imagine how very little could have occurred in that time to make these two languages so different as to no longer be understood by one another. A rather bold statement has been offered by several researchers concerning this very notion, the most interesting being made by Barbara Strang in her work *A History of English*. Strang compares the time period of linguistic isolation between Old English and Old Norse to that of British and American English, as they both have had comparable periods of social isolation from one another (1970: 282). In this sense, she lends credibility to mutual intelligibility, citing that the two present-day English varieties have lost no amount of mutual intelligibility. Similar comparisons have also been made by those who infer a much longer period, for example 400-500 years, which would mirror intelligibility between modern-day Dutch and German (Kastovsky 1992: 329). Understandably, comparisons such as these contain logical fallacies that inhibit their use in any serious manner; however, this makes them no less interesting to ponder.

## CHAPTER 5

### LINGUISTIC COMPARISON

The comparison of two linguistic systems is perhaps the most powerful method that historical sociolinguistics has at its disposal, a fact reflected in attention given to it in the comparative research of Old English and Old Norse. The cataloging and analysis of these two languages has reached a point where very little can be brought to light in the area of comparative study, a substantial feat considering the hurdles inherent in the study of languages spoken over 1000 years ago. Regardless, researchers continue to derive new evidence from the extensive linguistic records, a frontier in the question of mutual intelligibility.

As one would expect, deriving theories concerning mutual intelligibility from the linguistic comparison of snippets of millennium-old texts might prove quite the challenge. The natural tendency is to compare the linguistic differences between these two languages and decide whether or not the separating qualities of the two would foster a lack of ability to communicate. This is, understandably, a difficult process to mull through, as specific linguistic traits do not hold nearly as much value as others in the case of intelligibility. A slight variation in vowel use, for example, would amount to no small trouble between people of different languages or dialects in comparison to a drastic shift in verb conjugation, which would, in turn, not be nearly as damning as a vast lexical variation. To attain any form of success in this venture, one must be weary of over or underestimating these values, a task that lends itself to a considerable amount of scrutiny.

## 5.1 SHARED LINGUISTIC INNOVATIONS IN OLD ENGLISH AND OLD NORSE

The most extensive comparative study of Old Norse and Old English was undertaken by Hans Nielsen in his work *Old English and the Continental Germanic Languages*. Nielsen provided a comprehensive phonological analysis of the parallels between these two languages. In his findings, Old English and Old Norse seem to share around 45 common phonological innovations, of which six are found only in these two languages. Even discounting what Nielsen considers coincidental variations, the amount of common innovations between these two languages outnumbers all other comparisons between the Germanic languages made in his study (1981: 213). Though obviously not irrefutable evidence of mutual intelligibility, these shared features are a strong sign that, out of all the Germanic languages at this time, Old English and Old Norse share the most commonalities and have the highest chance of being understood by speakers of both languages.

However persuasive the linguistic evidence of common features is, it is in fact what the two languages do not have in common that could show the most convincing evidence for mutual intelligibility. In comparison, the phonological differences between Old English and Old Norse do not come nearly as close to the number of similarities, and what differences they do have do not seem to indicate a large enough range of separation as to discount mutual intelligibility. It is worth pointing out the relative similarities between the unconditioned phonological inventories of Old English and Old Norse. Only a few vocalic variations seem to separate the two systems, which are given in the list (2) below, and no differences exist in their consonant inventories, which have remained all but parallel since the time of Common Germanic.

|     |   |   |
|-----|---|---|
| (2) | <u>Old English</u>                      | <u>Old Norse</u>                              |
|     | <i>æ</i> - <i>dæg</i> ‘day’             | <i>a</i> - <i>dagr</i> ‘day’                  |
|     | <i>ǣ</i> - <i>rǣd</i> ‘advice, counsel’ | <i>á</i> - <i>ráð</i> ‘advice, counsel’       |
|     | <i>ā</i> - <i>bān</i> ‘bone’            | <i>ei</i> - <i>bein</i> ‘bone’                |
|     | <i>ēa</i> - <i>hlēapan</i> ‘to leap’    | <i>au</i> - <i>hlaupa</i> ‘to leap’           |
|     | <i>ēo</i> - <i>fēower</i> ‘four’        | <i>jó</i> - <i>fjórir</i> ‘four’ <sup>8</sup> |

Several examples exist of comparative phonological processes between Old English and Old Norse. For vowels, many of the conditioned phonological changes occur under the purview of the process called vowel umlaut, or mutation, the influence of a non-stressed vowel on the previous, stressed vowel in a word. *I*-umlaut, or Front Mutation, is perhaps the most prevalent example of this type of process and is shared by both Old English and Old Norse. *I*-umlaut involves the fronting and raising of vowels in the stressed position when followed by a syllable containing either an /i/ or /j/ at the syllable boundary. The Germanic languages had a particular affinity for this type of vowel mutation due to the prevalence of both /i/ and /j/ in several archaic plural noun forms as well as other inflectional suffixes. In many cases, the vowels which caused the mutation are lost historically, leaving only the umlauted vowel in plural noun forms (OE *bōc* ‘book’ > *bēc* ‘books’), specific verb tenses (ON *segja* ‘to say’ > *sagði* ‘said’) or across entire paradigms (PG \**weniz* > ON *vinr* ‘wine’). In many respects, this process performs a near identical function in both languages, affecting back vowels only. However, Old Norse does show a relatively conservative attitude towards *i*-mutation in that fewer vowels demonstrate the ability to be affected by the process in comparison to Old English. This conservatism is relatively constant in Old Norse across all of its phonological processes.

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<sup>8</sup> Note that the different diacritical marks between Old English and Old Norse both indicate length.

Both languages also share the feature of Breaking, also referred to as Fracturing in many Old Norse grammars and research. In Old English, this process created diphthongs from the front vowels /i/, /e/, and /æ/ (diphthongized into /io/, /eo/, and /ea/ respectively) when they appeared before /h/ and /r/ plus another consonant, or /l/ plus another consonant (PG \**fallan* > OE *feallan* ‘fall’; OS *erða* > OE *eorðe* ‘earth’). Old Norse, in keeping with its conservative tendencies, only shows breaking of the vowel /e/ into /ea/ (realized as /ja/ in literary tradition) when followed by a non-nasalized /a/ (PG *efnar* > ON *jafn* ‘even, equal’).<sup>9</sup> Additionally, if the following non-nasalized vowel was a /u/, the /e/ broke into /jʊ/ (OS \**erthu* > ON *jorð*). However, if the Old Norse stressed /e/ was preceded by /v/, /l/, or /r/, the process would be halted altogether (ON *verða* ‘to happen’).

Processes which affected consonants are not as numerous as those affecting vowels; however, the number that affected both Old Norse and Old English consonants outnumber their shared vocalic processes. Among the processes shared by both languages, those which cause a major difference in the formation of words include the loss of nasal consonants before voiceless fricatives<sup>10</sup> (Goth *fimf* > OE *fif* ‘five’; OHG *gans* > ON *gás* ‘goose’), rhotacism of old Germanic /z/ to /r/ (Goth *laizjan* > OE *læran* ‘teach’; Goth *maiza* > ON *meira* ‘more’), and the trend of dropping a final, unaccented nasal. Those of lesser consequence include the gemination of consonants between a short vowel and following /j/, /r/, and /l/ (Goth *saljan* > OE *sellan* ‘give’; Goth *lagjan* > ON *leggja* ‘lay’), as well as the occlusion of Germanic /ð/ to /d/.

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<sup>9</sup> While West Norse contained only breaking of /e/, East Norse also showed breaking of /i/ under the same conditions.

<sup>10</sup> Old Norse shows nasal deletion only before /s/.

A cursory overview seems to indicate that there were, in fact, very few changes within the phonologies of Old English and Old Norse which would impair mutual intelligibility. In addition to sharing many of the critical conditioned phonological processes, the ones that these two languages did not share do not seem to be so drastic as to weaken any theory for mutual intelligibility. These similar processes may provide some sort of small hurdle that must be overcome, though do not indicate any drastic change in large groups of words that may prove a constant challenge to communication.

At the basic morphological level, there is a large amount of overlap between Old English and Old Norse. In elements such as pronouns and articles the two languages overlap very nicely, if not completely in some cases. In fact, one of the largest inconsistencies between the two languages' morphology is the use of definite articles. The definite article system in Old Norse employed the use of a suffix on the definite noun, rather than the typical separate definite article (for example ON *inn hestr* 'a horse', *hestinn* 'the horse'), which one can imagine would only cause a momentary lapse in comprehension on the part of an English speaker.

Lexically, we can find even more interesting evidence pointing toward mutual intelligibility. At the time of the Norman Conquest, the English language had picked up a surprisingly low number of Scandinavian loanwords considering the amount of interaction between the two peoples (Peters 1981). These loan words, numbering near 150, belong to specific groups including legal terminology (ON *útlagr* > OE *utlah* 'outlaw') and trade (ON *silfr* > OE *seolfor* 'silver'). It would seem likely, were there significant communication problems between the two cultures, that there would be a far greater number of loanwords gained at this time. Even more disconcerting is the fact



that, at the time of Old English, many innovations from Old Norse come only in the form of morphological assimilation, rather than the loaning of completely new words into English. Compared to the number of loanwords which made their way into the English language from French after the Norman Conquest, these 150 barely seem to register.

As with all linguistic studies, modern and historical, the question of whether textual evidence accurately reflects the way the people spoke becomes a major issue. What remaining textual evidence we have that addresses communication between the English and Norse people manifests itself from a viewpoint several hundred years past the actual events described. The Germanic tradition of orally transmitting history and stories is maintained by the Scandinavian people for a relatively longer period in comparison to the English, and becomes a major issue in that there are very few written texts from this particular time period. It is not until well after the Norman Conquest that the Scandinavian languages began to form a literary tradition, and what we do have of pre-conquest Scandinavian comes only in the form of short runic inscriptions that do not add much to comparative study. This linguistic argument, therefore, opens itself up to several points of questioning, the first concerned with how pertinent a comparison of texts from 13<sup>th</sup> century Iceland and 10<sup>th</sup> century England can be. Additionally, because these texts would have been penned by a single author, to what degree can one surmise as to the relation between the written word and the speech of the common folk?

## 5.2 NORTH SEA GERMANIC

The practice of grouping related languages is a tradition littered with fervent internal conflict, regular reanalysis of new data, and the adoption of appropriate

adjustments to whatever the preferred grouping mechanism of the time may be. One of the more popular means of discussing and displaying language variation and history is through the use of tree diagrams, a process which gained popularity following Germanic linguist August Schleicher's work in the 19th century. When using a tree diagram, the older attestations of languages are represented as the root or base of a tree while the descendents of said languages are shown branching off from the trunk. The idea behind this type of presentation is to allow the ability to show relations between languages and their earlier forms as well as the relationship between sister languages by indicating exactly when two specific languages broke off from one another.

While this type of display has been the preferred one of teacher and textbook alike for the better part of a century, there are several inherent problems that arise when classifying languages in this way. By utilizing the form of a tree and its branches, a tree diagram often misinterprets the process of language, since some may infer that one particular language simply becomes two different languages instantaneously, rather than over several generations. While this interpretation is geared towards those unfamiliar with language change, it has nevertheless forced a not-insignificant amount of disdain for tree diagrams in the field of linguistics, which may account for the incredible amount of alternate classifications and means of showing language change that have arisen in relevant research.

A supplementary method of classifying languages by synchronic means is the act of grouping languages, which has become a popular pastime in the field of historical linguistics. This approach has opened up the floodgates for researchers to compare and contrast similar languages in hopes of further defining the relationship between related

languages and pinpoint, in as much as we can, more precise timeframes for aspects such as dialects and language drift. The Germanic language family has had its own slew of postulated language groupings over the years, one of which, the so-called Ingvaemonic language group, has gained a significant following.

The Ingvaemonic languages, also called the North Sea Germanic languages, is a grouping of Germanic languages proposed by the German linguist Friedrich Maurer in his 1942 work, *Nordgermanen und Alemannen*. Maurer sought to categorize the West Germanic languages and did so by segmenting them into three distinct groups based on certain shared linguistic innovations. Named after Ing, the mythological father of this particular group of Germanic people, the North Sea Germanic languages consist of Old English, Old Frisian, and Old Saxon. The remaining two groups comprise the residual West Germanic languages and are named Istvaeonic, consisting of Dutch and Afrikaans, and Irminonic, which includes High German.<sup>11</sup> The factors which bound these languages together in the eyes of Friedrich Maurer consist of several shared linguistic innovations which he found to be distinct enough from other West Germanic languages to demand the formation of a distinct group. Being traits deemed explicitly West Germanic, the binding characteristics of the North Sea Germanic languages are not found in the North Germanic Old Norse. However, even though they do not share these qualities, an investigation into the North Sea Germanic languages leads one to realize that these traits are not as separating as one would suppose. Before discussing Old English and Old Norse in detail, a fuller understanding of the North Sea Germanic features should be addressed.

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<sup>11</sup> Other names for the Istvaeonic and Irminonic language groups are Weser-Rhine and Elbe Germanic, respectively.

### 5.2.1 COMMON INNOVATIONS IN NORTH SEA GERMANIC

The first of these common innovations affected the verb morphology of these North Sea Germanic languages in such a way that all plural forms were reduced to a singular form ending (OE *lufiap* 'we/you/they loved', OF *makiat(h)* 'we/you/they made', OS *farad* 'we/you/they traveled'). A second innovation which affected the verb systems of these languages was the development of the Class 3 weak verb into an archaic class consisting of only four verbs. While other Germanic languages retained the full use of Class 3, the North Sea Germanic Languages featured a reduced Class 3 weak verb system, consisting only of OE *habban* 'to have', *libban* 'to live', *secgan* 'to say', and *hycgan* 'to think'.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, North Sea Germanic Class 2 weak verbs could contain a split in the endings from the traditional -ō- to either -ō- or -ōja- (OS *lathōd* / *lathōjad* 'invited' compared to ON *lǫðum* 'invited').

One of the most transparent innovations which occurred within the North Sea Germanic languages is the Ingvaemonic Nasal Spirant Law, in which nasal consonants were deleted in certain phonological situations. The environment in which this change could occur involves a nasal consonant following any vowel and preceding a voiceless fricative, which would cause the deletion of the nasal element as well as compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel. The simplest way to compare this change with the other Germanic languages is to contrast the various attestations of the 1st person accusative plural pronoun 'us', which contains the precise environment needed for the deletion of a nasal. Old High German and Gothic, both non-North Sea Germanic languages, retain the /n/ in their 1st person plural pronoun *uns*, while Old English, Old

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<sup>12</sup> All of the North Sea Germanic languages retained the same four verbs in Class 3.

Frisian, and Old Saxon all delete the nasal and lengthen the preceding vowel to form *ūs*. This nasal deletion can be found in wide use across the North Sea Germanic Group ( OE *tōþ* and OHG *zand* 'tooth'; OE *fīf* and OHG *fimf* 'five' ).

Much like the verb paradigms, specific groups of nouns in the North Sea Germanic languages also underwent a process of simplification, though not nearly as severe as to have been totally leveled to one form. Within the A-declension nouns, the largest group of strong nouns in all Germanic languages of the time, there developed an *-ōs* ending shared by the plural nominative and accusative forms that differed from the vowel-ending declensions of Old High German or the *-ar* nominative, *-a* accusative forms in Old Norse ( OE *earmas* nom. and acc. pl. of 'arms' compared to ON *armar* nom. pl. of 'arms' and ON *arma* acc. pl. of 'arms' ).<sup>13</sup> One oddity with a specific tie to this North Sea Germanic innovation is found in the Gothic language, which also contains an *-ōs* ending in the nominative and accusative plural forms of A-declension nouns. However, it is likely that these two instances are not related, as the *-ōs* ending in Gothic is present in far more declension types than simple the A-declension nouns. This fact suggests that this innovation is shared with North Sea Germanic only through coincidence rather than common descent.

Finally, we come to the syntactic variation shared by the three North Sea Germanic languages, a shift that affected the use and availability of the Germanic reflexive pronouns. Though not all of the reflexive pronouns were deleted entirely from the lexicon of these languages, their use was drastically diminished within the North Sea

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<sup>13</sup> Old English used *-as*, rather than the *-os* mentioned earlier. Though the vowels are different, the process and innovation stemmed from the same point.

Germanic languages to a point where it could be and has been postulated that they no longer actively used these pronouns in common speech, or at least not in the same way as languages with prolific reflexive such as Old Norse. In Old Norse, one can find a rich abundance of ways to use the reflexive, from common reflexive pronouns such as *sik* to reciprocal suffixes *-k* or *-sk*, which gave verbs a reflexive meaning, or "middle voice", as it is called. Though there are arguments that the reflexive remained in some of the North Sea Germanic languages, it is nevertheless clear that the system was radically weakened and the remnants slowly erased from the lexicon.

### 5.2.2 THE PLACE OF OLD NORSE IN NORTH SEA GERMANIC

The place of North Sea Germanic within the argument of Old English and Old Norse intelligibility does not seem to be one of much consequence. The grouping described above was intended to subcategorize the languages of the West Germanic branch, and therefore it is obvious that Old Norse, a North Germanic language, was excluded altogether. Still, the question of Old Norse's place in comparison to the North Sea Germanic languages is an interesting one, considering that several North Sea Germanic innovations manage to manifest themselves in the Old Norse language. If the features mentioned in the section above show the separating qualities of the North Sea Germanic languages from the other West Germanic languages, then what can one assume by comparing these features with Old Norse? When discussing and comparing these little inconsistencies, it becomes apparent that any separation of Old English and Old Norse which might be insisted by this grouping does not necessarily infer a less likely possibility of mutual intelligibility.

Recall the Ingvaemonic Nasal Spirant Law, the phonological innovation that deletes nasals in certain circumstances when they appear between a vowel and a fricative. Old Norse, as opposed to mainland Germanic languages such as Old High German and Gothic, seems to share this nasal deletion with the North Sea Germanic languages. Take, for example, the personal pronoun 'us' given above, which manifests itself as *ūs* in Old English, but *uns* in Old High German. Old Norse partakes in the same nasal deletion and compensatory lengthening mechanics as Old English, and shares the *ūs* pronoun. Examples of this go much further than simply pronouns, and can be seen across the lexical board ( ON *muðr* and OE *mūþ*, but OHG *mund* 'mouth'; ON *gās* and OE *gōs*, but OHG *gans* 'goose' ).

The loss of the reflexive pronouns was a serious syntactic shift on the part of the North Sea Germanic languages, and one that seems as if it might have caused some trouble on the part of intelligibility. However, while it is true that the Norse Sea Germanic languages did delete many of their reflexive pronouns and do not contain nearly the amount of reflexive potential as, say, Old Norse, these languages do retain the use of the reflexive voice in much the same way that Old Norse had, though through different means. The difference between these two languages becomes a factor of which pronouns the Norse Sea Germanic languages used in lieu of reflexive pronouns, a question that has two answers. Old English, for example, had two ways to indicate the reflexive, the first of which was to use the dative pronoun in place of the now lost reflexive pronoun. The following verse comes from a piece of Old English poetry known as *The Seafarer*, composed by an unknown author.

(3) *Hwilum ylfete song // dyde ic mē tō gomene*<sup>14</sup>

‘I made for myself for amusement the swan's song’

In addition to the simple use of the dative pronoun, Old English also employed the word *sylf* ‘self’ to indicate the reflexive, and was often accompanied by the dative pronoun as an intensive addition. We can see the use of Old English reflexive quite often in the available literature, such as the following passage taken from Alfred the Great's translation of the Latin Pastoral Care:

(4) *Ac ic ðā sōna eft mē selfum andwyrde*

‘But I then immediately answered myself’

The English reflexive was indeed attested, the pronouns and means for creating it having not been completely destroyed and forgotten, but rather had been merged into the dative, a not uncommon innovation even for modern Germanic languages. Old Frisian mirrors Old English's use of the reflexive, however using the accusative pronoun in place of the lost reflexive pronoun. Old Saxon is usually not referred to in the topic of North Sea Germanic reflexive, as there is a dichotomy between the two texts that remain in this language as to its use. Likely, any retention of the reflexive was due, in part, to contact with Low German, though there are some scholars who question Old Saxon's use of the reflexive compared to Old English and Old Frisian.<sup>15</sup>

What one can determine from the so-called North Sea Germanic languages is that they are all bound by several common innovations that show a great deal of importance

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<sup>14</sup> All translations done by Eric Gay.

<sup>15</sup> For more insight on Old Saxon reflexive controversies, see Hans Nielsen's spirited commentary on the subject in his article *Ingerid Dal's views on Old Saxon in the light of new evidence*.



to those studying the nuances of the Germanic language family and seek to establish the most detailed map of their origin and evolution. However, from the point of view of a speaker of these languages at the age of the Viking expansion, or even as far as the Christianization of Scandinavia, one can imagine that these slight linguistic variations would not amount to much in the way of hindering intelligibility with one another. Taking into consideration these changes strictly within a West Germanic mindset, there does not seem to be many aspects of the North Sea shared innovations that would have hindered intelligibility with, say, the High German language of the time. With this in mind, the idea of speakers of Old English communicating with a language that shares several North Sea Germanic aspects no longer becomes hard to imagine.

Large portions of the lexicon remain near-identical between Old Norse and Old English at this time. What slight variations we see in the syntactic and morphological paradigms show a great deal of simplification on the part of the North Sea Germanic languages, the same type of simplification that the Scandinavian languages would eventually go through in the following centuries, and perhaps was already seeing the first stages at this time. For example, the reduction of verbal forms as seen above in the North Germanic languages would envelope several of the Scandinavian languages by the Late Middle Ages. Such simplification, or even more drastic changes, still stemmed from shared original forms, and it is ludicrous to assume that so much had changed in a few centuries that communication became impossible. Stacking what we can see from the above onto the previous linguistic evidence, there seems to be no reason why one would deny intelligibility as a feasible option between speakers of Old English and Old Norse, even from a purely linguistic viewpoint.

## CHAPTER 6

### ASKING THE INFORMANT

Here, then, ends what is the extent of comparative evidence of Old English and Old Norse in a large portion of the available research. Linguistic evidence, historical record, and the analysis of social behavior have long been the scope of comparative research. There exists, however, information that has been largely untapped, or at the very least not given its due credit as valuable insight into this comparative study. For modern sociolinguistic research methods, asking an informant plays a large role in determining mutual intelligibility for speakers of two modern languages or dialects. Though we cannot, in the literal sense, ask an informant for clarification on this particular case, researchers maintain that we can gain insight into mutual intelligibility through historical informants in the form of literary evidence.

Textual evidence at the time and during the early Middle Ages suggests that the Germanic people had a particular understanding of variation among languages, and wrote about it readily when the topic came up in their literature. Sagas, epics, and poems often involve the main character travelling over great distances and meeting with people from countries far from their own. Authors commonly note the protagonist's affinity for languages or his schooling in languages, rather than simply leaving the reader to suspend their disbelief in the case of communication. Icelandic sagas, in particular, have a habit of explaining language intelligibility and show a reverent respect for education and

language not shared with nearly as much fervor in continental literature of the time, which tended to ignore language issues altogether (Kalinke 1983: 850). The thirteenth century Icelandic *Völsungasaga*, a retelling of the story of the Germanic Völsung clan, makes special note of the language proficiency of one of the main characters, Sigurd, who has been taught the tongues of many people by his foster father and mentor, Regin.<sup>16</sup>

(5) *Hann kenndi honum íþróttir, tafl  
ok rúnar ok tungur margar at mæla*

“He [Regin] taught him [Sigurd] sports, chess  
and runes and to speak many tongues.”

This proves a valuable tool as Sigurd travels over vast distances in his travels and must converse with, among others, Icelanders and Huns.

In addition to explaining linguistic abilities of its characters, sagas of this time often made it a point to indicate when people were unable to understand languages. One particular example comes from the *Laxdæla saga*, in which the character Ólafr, a son of an Irish princess living in Norway during the tenth century, journeys to Ireland. It is made clear in several instances that the Irish language is completely different than the Scandinavian language at the time, and the saga mentions that communication without a translator is impossible. Ólafr, however, has been trained by his mother to speak Irish, and has no problem communicating with the people once there. The following example from the *Laxdæla saga* illustrates this trend of specifically mentioning slight variations in linguistic communication when necessary. Ólafr, travelling with a group of Norwegians, begins speaking to the Irish natives in their own tongue:

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<sup>16</sup> The version used for this work is Jesse Byock's translation of the *Völsungasaga*, however the episode concerning education exists in all translation as well as the original Icelandic.

(6) *Ólafur mælti og svarar svo á írsku sem þeir mæltu til.*

“Ólafur spoke and answered in Irish, as they spoke.”

The Irish soon realize that Olafur’s party is Norwegian, something they could not recognize until spoken to in their own language.

With these ideas in mind, we can begin to investigate the place of Old English and its place among the other Germanic languages of this time. The first, and most interesting, example can be found in the thirteenth century Icelandic *Gunnlaugs saga orms tungu*, in which the author makes a passing reference to the spoken English language in the time of King Ethelred (986 – 1016 AD).

(7) *Ein var þá tungu á Englandi sem í Nóregi ok í Danmörku.*

“One was the tongue in England as in Norway and in Denmark”

While this is doubtless the most direct reference pertaining to mutual intelligibility in existing sources, it is not exhaustive of English and Norse relations in pre-conquest times. In the widely popular *Egils saga*, the title character, Egil Skallagrimsson, a farmer and skald living from around 910-990 AD, makes several trips to England and reports no issue in communicating with the natives. It is also interesting to point out that Egil has no special learning or aptitude for language other than a love for poetry. As a son of a chieftain, he would not have received any particular language education.

We can observe that the two languages were, at one point, considered similar, though no longer “one tongue.” In the quote from *Gunnlaugs saga* above, one should note the way in which the statement is phrased, namely that the English language and the Danish language were *at that time* considered to be the same language. It can, therefore,

be inferred that the author no longer considers this to be the case, as the two languages have now drifted apart enough to no longer be intelligible. Similar inferences are made concerning the divergence of the two languages in other Icelandic pieces.

*The First Grammatical Treatise*, one of the earliest written works in the Old Icelandic language, lays out a 12<sup>th</sup> century phonological examination of the Old Norse language. In addition to language families and language divergence, the unknown author of this work also shows an understanding that the English and Norse languages at the time once had the same origins, having deviated from one another over a period of time.

(8) ...*alls vér erum einnar tungu, þó at gǫrzk hafi mjök...*

“We (English and Norse) are all one language, although much has changed...”

This example shows comparison of the English and Norse languages of this time through a linguistic view, one which, even after a few hundred years, still makes the statement that English and Norse are one language. Even though the author claims that much has changed, the realization of a close relationship, close enough to mention with such blatancy, is extremely uplifting evidence on the part of mutual intelligibility, especially coming from a source of linguistic inquiry.

Snorri Sturluson, a thirteenth century Icelandic historian and writer, also illustrates the divergence of English and Norse by providing examples of terms in several languages, indicating that those reading his works in their native Icelandic may not know certain words in English. His *Prose Edda*, a prose compilation of Norse mythological poems and stories, contains the *Skaldskaparmál*, which introduces the reader to the term

“justicar,” the head of a political district, and provides the individual names of this position in several languages.

- (9) *...heita þeir hersar eða lendir menn í danskri tungu, en greifar í Saxlandi, en barúnar í Englandi.*  
‘...they are named chiefs or landed men in Danish, reeves in Saxony, and barons in England.’

These examples show, if nothing else, that authors writing in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are completely knowledgeable of the differences between Old English and Old Norse, and treat them as separate languages in their works when needed. Keeping this in mind, it is not at all farfetched to take this assumption further: that literary authors would provide explanation of linguistic inequalities (even in a historical sense) if the situation demanded them.

In Old English far fewer examples of literary interaction between speakers of Old English and Old Norse provide such obvious evidence as the Old Norse sources mentioned above. Yet, English authors did convey linguistic deviations through use tone and diction when discussing Old Norse speech.

One of the finest examples can be found *The Battle of Maldon*, a piece of Old English poetry depicting a battle between Anglo-Saxons and an invading Viking force in 991 AD. The poem opens with the ealdorman Byrhtnoth addressing his men before battle, ensuring that they know the correct ways to hold their shields and where to stand. A Viking messenger informs Byrhtnoth that the invading force would be willing to spare them for a ransom. Aside from being yet another example of a Norseman communicating effortlessly with an Englishman, the peculiarity of this particular

interaction is twofold. First, it is odd that Byrhtnoth is never mentioned by his title of ealdorman, which would be proper custom considering his English heritage. Instead he is addressed in all instances as *eorl*, the English equivalent to the Norse title *jár*l. Byrhtnoth even uses this word himself, which is especially unusual, as mislabeling yourself in this way was not common. Likely, he used it to assert power to his Norse foes, or perhaps was not very well versed in positions of power in the Norse tongue.

Second, there is a shift in tone that accompanies Byrhtnoth's response to the messenger in that he begins to use stereotypical Scandinavian speech techniques, including the application of turnabout wordplay, the use of humor, undermining of a situation to belittle one's opponent, and even kennings. When speaking to the Viking messenger, Byrhtnoth utters the following after hearing of the Viking desire for gold in exchange for their lives:

- (10) 45. *Gehyrst þu, sælida, || hwæt þis folc segeð?*  
46. *Hi willað eow to gafole || garas syllan,*

'Do you hear, pirate, what this (these) people say?  
They desire to pay you a tribute of spears,'

The use of the kenning "tribute of spears" within his speech absolutely reeks of Scandinavian influence, and it would not be out of the realm of possibility to believe that Byrhtnoth would have done so purposefully. Another passage from the same poem shows the sudden appearance of humor into Byrhtnoth's rhetoric.

- (11) 55. *To heanlic me þinceð*  
56. *þæt ge mid urum sceattum // to scype gangon*  
57. *unbefohtene, // nu ge þus feor hider*  
58. *on urne eard // in becomon.*

... It would seem shameful  
that you go to your ships with our coin  
without a battle, now that you have come so far  
into our homeland.

An additional interesting note concerning this particular text has to do with the date of authorship. While no one knows the exact date of publication of the Battle of Maldon poem, it is suspected to be no more than a generation older than the actual battle. This gives the Battle of Maldon a leg up compared to the other examples given, which suffer from the crutch of having been penned several centuries after the events taking place.

These types of examples do not necessarily show a mastery of the Norse language on part of the English, though it does shed light on the fact that the English people were obviously aware of Norse tendencies and linguistic habits, a skill that likely came about from constant interaction. Further, because we can find these types of code switches within literature involving the Norse, one can assume that this was obviously something that was not lost on the average reader and may have even been a favorable element to include into one's poetry. Specifically relevant to the Battle of Maldon, it seems that the use of these Nordicisms may have been employed as a means of intimidation, perhaps to the point of getting a message across in the way a Viking would understand, appreciate, or even become more enraged upon hearing.

These examples are, however, not without their downfalls. The most obvious issue with many of the texts mentioned above is that they are all written around two centuries after the Norman Conquest of England, in a time where whatever previous



mutual intelligibility may have been lost. It is then accuracy that becomes the main question, and this forces literary evidence as the target of heavy scrutiny. How much could the authors of later sources know about their ancestors 300 years in the past? I am not as dismissive as some may be. It is my opinion that some may not realize how little time 300 years is. Consider how much more we know about our own ancestors 300 years ago in comparison to the Old English and Norse people. Centuries of library fires, wars, and general misuse have erased much of the literary evidence from our grasp, but how much did the authors of medieval Scandinavia have concerning Anglo-Norse relations. It is impossible to say that these pieces of literary evidence are without merit. Despite all this, it is true that their publication dates obviously remain a potential source of concern for any that might take issue with literary evidence in historical sociolinguistics, and perhaps for good reason. Still, it is interesting to view the apparent hypocrisy that emerges when research decides to cherry pick what evidence is more suitable than others.

Many researchers tend to steer clear from the use of literary texts in historical research altogether, only bothering to mention them in passing as a sort of whimsical side note. It seems the very definition of double standard then, when one discredits literary evidence in one paragraph while citing such works as *The Domesday Book*, a source that could just as easily be discredited, as critical evidence to their point. Comparatively, both types of sources seem to be equal, especially considering that the argument of publication date can be no more than a contest of opinions. We have seen above the nature of historical documents such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and the amount of bias they are subject to, it is interesting that it continues to be the center of historical research of this time, while literary sources take the back seat. The Scandinavian tradition is one of oral

storytelling. These 13<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic sagas, though written at a later period, were more than likely orally transmitted for hundreds of years, giving them even more temporal relevance than texts such as *The Domesday Book* and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

What, then, of mutual intelligibility? In the realm of offering irrefutable evidence to the argument, this study, as it is with so many others, seems to offer no clear-cut confirmation. It may be, in fact, that there is no concrete answer to be given, and never will be. However, what we can take away from the little evidence we have is this: these two languages, for however long they happened to be separated, are not only the most likely candidates for mutual intelligibility between the Germanic languages of this time from a linguistic standpoint, but also share the social history and interactions necessary for continued intelligibility to flourish. Despite the label of "anecdotal evidence" by much of the research, the wide range of literary evidence concerning this topic also seems to point to mutual intelligibility, at the very least up to the end of the 10th century. Still, for many researchers, much of the evidence which leans towards mutual intelligibility remains less than satisfactory, an unusual opinion given the fickle nature of nearly every piece of evidence we have from this time.

This is the reason behind the inquiry into literary evidence presented in this work. In the study of mutual intelligibility between Old English and Old Norse, it is often said that taking literary evidence as an indication of shared communication is nothing but anecdote, a secondary source of information that can exist for nothing but supplement. In this, I am willing to concede. Literary evidence, as well as historical records from this time period, dwell far beyond the comfort of certainty to have a place next to textual

linguistic evidence. However, it seems as if there is too much to be gained to simply allow the examples of contact within the literature of this time period to go to waste. The study of mutual intelligibility of these two languages, at this time period, is an exercise in anecdote in and of itself. It is a question that we cannot ever hope to have a clear answer on, and one that has a foundation far too engulfed in uncertainty to even begin to form a palpable hypothesis. Even the very act of detailing a precise definition for mutual intelligibility at this time is littered with too much conjecture to be given much serious value. Due to this, all attempts to postulate exactly how intelligible these two languages were with one another seems to be polemic, with one side unwilling to even put a theory on the table and the other diving to depths unfitting of available evidence.

Even the study of modern mutual intelligibility cannot be done from a mere linguistic mindset. Factors such as dialect differences, speaker language proficiency, and others are components that historical linguistics can never hope to inquire upon in this situation. Additionally, there is simply no way to tell what features would have been more or less crucial in a native's attempt to understand a foreigner, especially when pulling only from textual evidence. Differences between the spoken and written word might also be considered, but often exists within a realm that is utterly dubious in the argument of historical languages. There are far too many elements that are not set in stone, and not enough luxuries to ease the situation.

What we do know is that the differences between Old English and Old Norse do not seem as if they would be a source of much confusion to these two peoples, a statement that appears to be supported by secondary, non-linguistic evidence as well. This fact may or may not have been influenced by dialectal differences and speaking

situation, though these factors do not seem to add much to the discussion. As for the case of literary evidence, I beg that those with vested interest in the topic to reconsider its place in this argument, if only so much as to accept it as a point of interest. A fledgling Germanic literary tradition allows us to see through the eyes of those who lived at this time. Though we cannot hope to take this evidence at face value, it is nevertheless crucial if we wish to paint the clearest picture we can. A topic with so many open ends and sources of speculation can do nothing but prosper given more evidence. Treating the mutual intelligibility question as an argument to be won has limited the focal point of our vision so much as to ignore available evidence, no matter how superfluous some would call it. In the end, this is an argument that can never have the certainty of other areas of historical linguistics, and it seems as if researchers could benefit by treating historical mutual intelligibility between Old English and Old Norse as it is: a subject of mere conjecture.

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