The Stories of English

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Interlude 3
Understanding Danes

To understand the great influence of Old Norse on English, we have had to leave our original focus of inquiry into Old English, and move forward into Middle English. There was a time when philologists and literary historians felt that there was a major break between the Old and Middle English periods, with the language having to 'begin again' in the Middle Ages. The Scandinavian effect is a clear argument against this, as we shall note again in Chapter 5 – a demonstration of linguistic continuity in the early history of the language. It is a continuity which can be seen even in the south of England, where Scandinavian influence was weakest. Several Norse words appear in the earliest Middle English texts, and steadily increase in frequency, especially in the fourteenth century. (Chaucer, writing in the London area towards the end of that century, uses over sixty Scandinavian words.) Indeed, by following the Scandinavian theme to its conclusion – the spread of Norse usage from the north of England throughout the rest of the country – the thrust of the argument takes us right through the Middle English period, as far forward as the beginning of the fifteenth century. It is a time-scale of some 250 years.

None the less, when we note the starting-point of the written evidence, around 1175, we cannot ignore the fact that there was a notable gap between the final occasion Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians were in routine contact (roughly 1050) and the time when the linguistic repercussions of that contact started to appear in significant numbers in the language. That is 125 years. Why did it take so long? Some delay is natural, when languages come into sudden contact with each other (as we shall see again with the arrival of French loanwords in Middle English, p. 120); but in the present connection the delay was probably greater because West Saxon, not Mercian or Northumbrian, was becoming the standard literary language. The 200 years following the reign of King Alfred saw the political dominance of Wessex, centred on Winchester, and the vast majority of the literary canon of Old English is written in the West Saxon dialect (p. 55). It is unlikely that the few texts written in the Danelaw would have had literary influence outside the region; nor would Norse words, resonating with associations of invasion, have been likely to appeal to southern

authors and scribes. A considerable body of vernacular usage would have had to be in place before authors would have begun to use such words unselfconsciously, and for scribes to have introduced them without a second thought. A delay of a century or more is not unlikely, for this to happen.

But this still leaves unanswered three other questions. Why was there such extensive borrowing from Old Norse? Why was this borrowing so intimate, eventually affecting the expression of all areas of everyday life? And why did Norse linguistic features become so pervasive in the country as a whole, given that the area of Danish settlement was originally so restricted? The answers largely lie in the nature of the cultural assimilation which took place – an issue which has attracted a great deal of debate and speculation.

Much of this debate has addressed the question of intelligibility. When the Danes first arrived, would the Anglo-Saxons have been able to understand what they were saying? Or would they have needed interpreters? Some scholars have argued that there was a great deal of mutual intelligibility, because the time when the Danelaw was being settled, around 900, was only some 500 years since the time when the Anglo-Saxons and Danes would have been neighbours in Continental Europe, speaking similar north Germanic dialects (p. 21) – and 500 years is no time at all, in terms of linguistic history. If this was the case, then there would have been a great deal of linguistic interaction as the people began to live side by side, and this would have eventually involved a huge amount of accommodation (p. 25) in everyday speech. But the primary direction of influence for some time would have been from Scandinavian into English. After all, the Danes were the conquerors, and conquerors do not usually have the sort of benevolent mindset which makes them look kindly on the vocabulary of the conquered. The Anglo-Saxons living in the Danelaw, on the other hand, would have been under considerable linguistic pressure to acquire the vocabulary which accompanied the invaders. Large numbers of everyday words would have quickly come into use, few of which would ever be likely to appear in official documents. Things would have been different if there had been a Danelaw Chaucer to use them in literary narration.

Did this scenario apply? It all depends on how much linguistic change would have taken place in that 500 years. What can happen, linguistically, in half a millennium? We can compare the period between 1500 and 2000, which roughly coincides with the growth of American English as distinct from British English. How different are these two varieties today? If we examine the written standards of Britain and the USA, the answer has to be 'not very much'; educated Britons and Americans do, on the whole, understand each other. But these standards are not the relevant points of comparison for an age when such varieties were absent or (in the case of tenth-century English) at the earliest stage of evolution. We need to compare *nonstandard* varieties – the everyday

forms of regional speech, such as those heard in working-class rural areas or city suburbs in Britain and the USA – and here we find many examples of dialects that would be to a large extent mutually unintelligible today (p. 21), notwithstanding the cultural and media contact which has linked the two nations for so long. Some movies and documentary films have even had to resort to subtitles for regional dialects, to ensure that the dialogue is intelligible when it crosses the Atlantic. How much less would mutual intelligibility have been, one imagines, in an age when communications were so much more sporadic, and the North Sea a greater barrier than the present-day Atlantic. At best, people might have been able to grasp the gist of each other's speech, but only if the subject-matter was domestic and utterances not too long or complicated.

If Danish and Old English were mutually unintelligible in the Danelaw, then an alternative scenario has to be envisaged – one of emergent bilingualism. Here, we can imagine the Anglo-Saxons being at first unable to understand the speech of the new settlers other than through an interpreter, and vice versa. But, as with the first scenario, the pressure would have been on them to learn Danish. In such cases, we know from sociolinguistic studies that it takes three generations for such pressure to have its full effect. In the first generation, adults gradually pick up bits of the incoming language – younger members learning it quite well, at least for everyday purposes, with older members perhaps knowing only a few words and phrases relating to common objects and activities, such as greeting. The children of this generation are in a different situation, growing up in a bilingual environment, and, as with such children the world over, taking to the two languages quite naturally. But the two languages are not usually of equal status – especially not, in a situation of invasion. Here, the incoming language becomes prestigious at the expense of the other – as has happened in the case of colonial languages all over the world (p. 121) – because it offers greater economic and political opportunities. When the second-generation children grow up, therefore, they opt to use the new language and allow their parental language to go to seed. And when that generation has its own children, the ancestral language is dropped completely: the third-generation children hear only the incoming language from their parents. In this way we see arising the situation – all too familiar these days, with so many of the world's languages endangered – of grandchildren and grandparents being unable to understand each other.

If Danish power had lasted longer, all this might have happened in the Danelaw, and again in Cnut's time. But in neither period did Danish political power last long enough. Even allowing for shorter life-spans than today, the fifty years of Danelaw rule was hardly enough for two generations of language shift; the twenty-six years of Cnut's was hardly enough for one. And even before

the first generation of Danelaw rule was over, as we have seen, the West Saxon retaking of the area had begun (p. 70). Accordingly, as the political balance of power shifted, so the reasons for learning Danish would diminish. In such circumstances, the eventual linguistic outcome reflects the numbers of people involved. With Anglo-Saxons far outnumbering Danes, and English political power in the ascendant, second-generation Danish children would find it much more useful to maintain their English language skills. Their sense of ethnic identity would probably result in a kind of English liberally sprinkled with Norsisms, and many of these would eventually assimilate into the speech of the community. Being everyday words and having no particular prestige, they would be unlikely to be written down, at least not until an age emerged where the conflict which had given rise to them was so far in the past that the words had lost all their cultural associations. The arrival of the Cnut regime would have reversed this process to some extent, but it did not last long enough to alter the underlying trend.

We are left with the question of how long it would take, in these circumstances, for Norse usage to move out of the Danelaw region into the country as a whole. After 1066, the impediment caused by the standard language being the dialect of Wessex was becoming less serious. Its literary heyday was over, and by the end of the Middle Ages a quite different part of the country was to produce the dialect which would become the standard language (p. 243). The centre of political power was moving from Winchester to London, and communications between London and the north were improving and increasing. There would of course be a certain linguistic inertia for Scandinavian words to overcome. The south was probably much more conservative, linguistically, than the north, being less used to the kind of innovation that turns up routinely in bilingual communities, so doubtless there would be a certain antipathy to 'foreign' words, just as there is today.

Our question is therefore a speculative one. After the Norman Conquest, how long would it take for Scandinavian culture to be so lost sight of in England that its loanwords and grammatical constructions would shed all their foreign associations, and become part of the common stock of English literary usage? Linguistic intuitions acquired through direct cultural transmission would soon diminish once the grandchildren of the children of Cnut's era had died. It is difficult to believe that a strong sense of cultural connection would last much beyond a century. If this is the case, we would expect Nordic resonances to have disappeared by the late twelfth century, and for Norse words to begin appearing regularly from then on in texts which have a provenance and subject-matter completely unrelated to anything Scandinavian. The conclusion is tempting, for this is indeed the period, as we have seen, when such words do begin to be common in a wide range of English texts from all over the country.