1 What really happened to Old English?

We begin these studies at the beginning, with an investigation into Old English. This study deals with the first five hundred years or so of the history of the language in which the present book is written; and it exemplifies the concerns with immigration and colonisation, and with language and dialect contact, which run throughout all the chapters of this work.

We start this chapter with the observation that it is generally agreed that Old English, as it first developed on the island of Britain, was typologically very different from the Middle English that it later became. Old English was of the morphological type known as *fusional* and *inflecting*; Lass (1992: 94) says: "Old English is a highly synthetic inflecting language." It had three grammatical genders; three numbers; five cases; inflectional case-marking on nouns, adjectives, demonstratives and pronouns; strong versus weak nominal declensions; inflectional person-marking on verbs; and large numbers of irregular 'strong' verbs, which also made a distinction between the root vowels of singular and plural preterite forms, as in the verb *findan* 'to find':

	singular	plural
1st	*fand*	*fundon*
2nd	*funde*	*fundon*
3rd	*fand*	*fundon*

There were also large numbers of conjugations and declensions; and it had relatively free word order.

Middle English, on the other hand, was much less fusional, showing a clear move towards a much more *isolating* type of morphology: "the Middle English evolution consists primarily in a shift

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towards a more analytic structure" (Lass 1992: 94). Middle English had no grammatical gender;[1] two numbers rather than three; three cases rather than five; and many fewer inflections, conjugations and declensions. There was also a reduction in case-marking and in subjunctive verb forms; and the distinction between the root vowels of the singular and plural preterite forms of strong verbs also disappeared, as did the strong/weak nominal declensions. Middle English also showed a much greater trend towards fixed SVO word order.

As just one numerical indication of the degree of the typological change, Hawkins (2004: 76–7) computes the amount of morphological complexity to be found in different Germanic languages in terms of the number of distinctive inflections found for third-person nominals (determiners, nouns, adjectives, pronouns). Hawkins looks at three genders (masculine, feminine, neuter), two numbers (singular and plural) and three cases (nominative, accusative, dative), so the maximum number of distinct forms mathematically possible in his calculations would be eighteen. Old English had in fact an eleven-item system, while by Middle English this had reduced to seven, although this arithmetical difference conceals to a very considerable extent the degree to which there was a "reduction in morphological expressiveness: both in the number of categories per word, and the number coded at all" (Lass 1992: 95).

LaPolla (2005: 481) gives an extended example of this kind of development in English. He lists Old English examples from the words corresponding to Modern English *stone*, *gift* and *hunter*. These items came in many different forms:

	singular			plural		
nom.	*stan*	*giefu*	*hunta*	*stanas*	*giefa*	*huntan*
acc.	*stan*	*giefe*	*huntan*	*stanas*	*giefa*	*huntan*
gen.	*stanes*	*giefe*	*huntan*	*stana*	*giefa*	*huntena*
dat.	*stane*	*giefe*	*huntan*	*stanum*	*giefum*	*huntum*

[1]   Kastovsky (1999) indicates that the loss of grammatical gender was a long and complex process that was not fully complete until the 1300s.

The adjective corresponding to *good* had the following weak forms:

	masc.	fem.	neut.	pl.
nom.	goda	gode	gode	godan
acc.	godan	godan	gode	godan
gen.	godan	godan	godan	godena
dat.	godan	godan	godan	godum

The modern system consists of two forms each for the nouns and one form for the adjective. And LaPolla does not even mention (because it was not necessary for the point he was making) that the above declension for *good* only represents the 'weak' forms of the adjective. There is also a set of 'strong' forms which are used in conjunction with definite forms of the noun phrase:

| | singular | | | plural | | |
	masc.	fem.	neut.	masc.	fem.	neut.
nom.	god	god	god	gode	goda	god
acc.	godne	gode	god	gode	goda	god
gen.	godes	godre	godes	godra	godra	godra
dat.	godum	godre	godum	godum	godum	godum
inst.	gode	godre	gode	godum	godum	godum

The nature of the overall trend of the linguistic changes which took place between Old English and Middle English is, then, clear. What is not clear – and this is the mystery which this chapter confronts – is: why did these changes take place? Linguistic change as between Old English and Middle English is in itself not a mystery, since change is a feature of all human languages; but the question is: why did the changes that occurred in English during this period take this particular form?

SIMPLIFICATION

In attempting to answer this question, we can note that one way of describing the typological transformation that English underwent between Old English and Middle English is to say, with Milroy (1992: 177), that what happened represented "a trend towards simplification in Middle English": the changes outlined above can all indeed be referred to by the typological cover-term that Milroy uses – *simplification*.

In Trudgill (1996a), and following Mühlhäusler's pioneering work (1977) as well as important earlier work such as that of Ferguson (1959, 1971), I suggest that there are three crucial, linked, components to the simplification process. These are:

(1)   the *regularisation* of irregularities. In regularisation, obviously, irregularity diminishes, so that, for example, irregular verbs and irregular plurals become regular, as in the development in English of *helped* rather than *holp* as the preterite of *help*; and the replacement of *kine* by *cows* as the plural of *cow*.

(2)   an increase in lexical and morphological *transparency*: for example, forms such as *thrice* and *seldom* are less transparent than *three times* and *not often*, and any (partial or complete) replacement of the former by the latter would represent simplification.

(The above two components are often linked. Obviously, forms such as *cows* are also more transparent, analytic and iconic than forms like *kine*.)

(3)   the loss of *redundancy*. All languages contain redundancy, which seems to be necessary for successful communication, especially in less than perfect, i.e. normal, circumstances. But the fact that redundancy can be lost suggests that some languages must have more redundancy than others. Redundancy, and therefore the loss of redundancy, takes two major forms. The first occurs in the form of *repetition of information*, or syntagmatic redundancy

(Trudgill 1978), as for example in grammatical agreement, where there is more than one signal that, say, a noun phrase is feminine. Here reduction in redundancy will take the form of a reduction in the number of repetitions, as in the loss of agreement, such as happened in Middle English. The second type of redundancy loss involves the *loss of morphological categories*. Sometimes loss of the morphological expression of grammatical categories is compensated for by the use of more analytical structures, as in usage in Modern English of prepositions instead of the dative case of Old English:

godan huntan → to the good hunter

Analytical structures are also obviously more transparent than synthetic ones.

Sometimes, however, no compensation occurs. A good example of this latter type is the loss of grammatical gender. Grammatical gender disappeared in Middle English, as we have just noted, without, apparently, this loss having had any structural consequences.

DIALECT CONTACT

Different explanations have been advanced for this dramatic typo-logical difference between Old English and Middle English, with Middle English, as we have noted, demonstrating considerable sim-plification. Many of these explanations have focussed on *contact*.

In the Prologue to this work, I said that this book would be concerned with both language contact and dialect contact. Let us therefore consider, first, the possibility that dialect contact might have been involved in this case, because the earliest example of colo-nial dialect mixture involving English surely concerned the actual development of English itself. It is well known, and we have evidence of various non-linguistic sorts, that southern and eastern England, and southeast Scotland, were initially settled by Germanic-language speakers coming from all along the North Sea littoral, from Jutland

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in the north to the mouth of the Rhine: these were Jutes, Angles, Saxons, Frisians, all speaking different dialects. But is it possible that contact between these different Germanic dialects led to dialect mixture, and therefore perhaps eventually to simplification?

Nielsen (1998: 78, 79) certainly argues that Old English was in origin a mixed dialect resulting from contact; and he supplies linguistic evidence. He suggests that Old English was the result of a mixture of West Germanic dialects from continental Europe; and argues that it is because of dialect mixture that Old English initially had a greater degree of variability than the other Germanic languages of the time where no colonial dialect mixture had been involved. He gives examples as follows:

(1)   Old English had a surprising number of different, alternating forms corresponding to the Modern English word *first*. And this variability, Nielsen indicates, could be linked to origins in different dialects from the European mainland: *ærest*, *forma*, *formesta* and *fyrst*. He also points out that it is interesting that these forms resemble, respectively, Old High German *eristo*, Old Frisian *forma*, Gothic *frumists* and Old Norse *fyrstr*. There is, however, no claim of a direct link to these languages, even though we do suppose (see above) that Frisians at least were directly involved in the settlement (Morgan 2001: 62).

(2)   Similarly, Old English had two different paradigms for the present tense of the verb *to be*, one apparently resembling Old Norse and Gothic, and the other Old Saxon and Old High German (see more on this below):

	Gothic	O.Norse	O.English I	O.English II	O.Saxon	OHG
1sg.	*im*	*em*	***eom***	***beom***	*bium*	*bim*
2sg.	*is*	*est*	***eart***	***bist***	*bist*	*bist*

(3)   Old English was also variable in terms of the form of the interrogative pronoun meaning 'which of two'. The form *hwæðer*

relates to Gothic *hvaðar* and West Norse *hvaðarr*, while the alternative form *hweder* corresponds to Old Saxon *hweðar* and Old High German *hwedar*.

So the implication of Nielsen's suggestion is that even if we did not know from other non-linguistic evidence that southern and eastern Britain were initially settled from many different locations on the continent, there would have been some linguistic evidence that would have led us in the direction of that conclusion. And in any case there is evidence (Morgan 2001) that many of the bands of raiders and settlers were of mixed ethnic origins. In addition, we know that in modern colonisation episodes whose consequences we have been able to observe more closely, such as the anglophone settlement of New Zealand, dialect mixture is a more or less inevitable result of dialect contact (Trudgill 2008).

A good case can be made, then, for dialect contact and dialect mixture in early Anglo-Saxon Britain. But can we ascribe the simplification that we outlined above to this contact? On reflection, this actually seems unlikely. The cases of dialect-contact-induced simplification described, for example, in Trudgill (1986) are generally of the type in which regularisation occurs, and unmarked forms are selected or developed. But they do not extend to wholesale loss of morphology such as occurred in the transition from Old English to Middle English. That is, a case could be made for suggesting that the reduction of, say, Old English declension types in Middle English was due to dialect contact; but it would be very hard to do the same thing for the loss of, say, grammatical gender.

LANGUAGE CONTACT

It therefore seems, although we cannot rule out dialect contact altogether, that it would be more fruitful to continue this investigation by looking at the involvement of language contact. And indeed many authors have plumped for just this solution. James Milroy, for example, says of the simplification which occurred that "it seems

clear that such a sweeping change is at least to some extent associated with *language contact*" (1992: 203).

His case is a strong one, because simplification is very well known to be associated with language contact, and his thesis would therefore seem to be relatively uncontroversial. And the fact that he regards the change as 'sweeping' again makes the case for language contact being involved, as opposed to dialect contact.

There is very considerable agreement in the sociolinguistics literature that language contact does indeed lead to simplification: pidgins and creoles are widely and uncontroversially agreed to owe their relative structural simplicity to language contact; and agreement about the role of contact in producing simplification in languages other than pidgins and creoles is also widespread in sociolinguistics.

What is not uncontroversial, however, is the precise nature of the particular contact involved in this transition between Old English and Middle English. The puzzle we have to address is, if simplification in English did occur as a result of contact between Old English and some other language, then which language (or languages) was it? There is certainly more than one language to choose from: as is well known, in the first several centuries of its existence Old English experienced major contact in Britain with three other languages.

First, there was contact with the language of the indigenous population of Britain at the time of the West Germanic invasions of the island – the Brittonic Celtic language which was the ancestor of Cornish, Modern Welsh and, probably, Breton. This contact began in the fourth century and became widespread in the fifth century with the first permanent settlements of the Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians from the continent and their colonisation of eastern England and southeastern Scotland, spreading out over the course of the next centuries until they occupied most of what is now England.

Secondly, as a consequence of the Viking invasions of Britain, there was contact between the West Germanic language Old English

and the North Germanic language of the Scandinavian (mainly Danish and Norwegian) invaders and settlers, which we can refer to as Old Norse. The Viking settlements took place mainly during the ninth and tenth centuries, and led to many areas of eastern and, especially, northern England containing a heavily Scandinavian or Scandinavianised population, as famously witnessed by hundreds of Norse place names. The numbers of Scandinavians who actually arrived and settled in Britain is, however, unknown and the subject of much controversy (Härke 2002; Holman 2007).

Finally, from the eleventh century onward, there was contact with the Romance language of the Norman conquerors, Norman French, beginning after 1066. The number of French speakers who actually settled in England is again not known, but it is agreed that they can never have formed a very large proportion of the population (Härke 2002; and see below).

NORMAN FRENCH

To consider the probability of the involvement of these candidates in the production of simplification in reverse chronological order, it is totally clear that contact with French did indeed have a very considerable impact on English. As is mentioned in all histories of the English language, this was especially true of English lexis, with 40 per cent often being cited as the proportion of French-based lexis in the modern language.

More important for the present discussion, it is also true that Bailey and Maroldt (1977) have argued that Middle English was a creole that developed as a result of contact and interaction between English and French. And of course creoles are characterised, as we have already noted, by contact-induced simplification. However, the case for accepting French as the language responsible turns out to be a weak one. Bailey and Maroldt's theory, and indeed their usage of the term *creole*, have not been widely accepted; and Görlach's (1986) careful rejection of their claims is particularly powerful.

The chronology and demography of the contact of Old English with French also argue against this language being the key to the simplification that occurred. The number of native Norman French speakers in Britain was never very high – Carpenter (2004) gives a figure of 8,000 for the year 1086; and in any case evidence of the beginnings of simplification in English comes from well before the Conquest: Strang (1970), for example, cites numerous examples of morphological regularisation as having occurred in the period 770–970.

OLD NORSE

The argument in favour for Old Norse is much stronger, and has been argued for more often and by many more writers, starting with Bradley (1904). In particular, the chronological and demographic case for Old Norse is much more powerful than that for French. Contact began in the appropriate period, with settlements dating from the ninth century, as we have noted. And the Scandinavian element in the population was much higher, although, as we have also noted, not known with any certainty. The Old Norse-speaking population, moreover, was geographically concentrated in the north of England, where the grammatical simplifications which occurred in Old English are generally said to have begun, before spreading southwards.

In fact, in historical linguistics, something almost like a consensus about the importance of the role of Old Norse seems to have been achieved. For example, Poussa has it that contact with Old Scandinavian was responsible for "the fundamental changes which took place between standard literary Old English and Chancery Standard English, such as the loss of grammatical gender and the extreme simplification of inflexions" (Poussa 1982: 84). Kroch *et al.* (2000) make precisely the same point; and so does McWhorter (2007: 90ff), who argues particularly powerfully for the role of Old Norse in producing morphological simplification on the basis of a detailed examination of the extent and nature of "the striking losses which English suffered in the centuries during and in the wake of the