Essay

Is Middle English a Koiné Language? A Move Towards a Hypothesis

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Abstract

This essay reviews the oft-understudied Early Middle English Koiné Hypothesis and reviews the historical context and criteria to judge whether it could qualify as a koiné language. Koiné Greek, Taiwanese Hokkien, Middle Mandarin, and Modern Hebrew are used as historical examples. Linguistic evidence from the Yorkshire dialect, similarities in alliterative verse in *Beowulf* and *Hervararkviða*, and commentary from the First Grammatical Treatise and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, are referenced, leading to the assessment that Early Middle English could very well be a stabilised regional koiné language under Siegel's (1985) criteria.

Keywords: Koinéisation, English, Early Middle English, Old Norse, Peterborough Chronicle, Yorkshire dialect, linguistics, historical linguistics, koiné language, sociolinguistics

Date of Submission: 10.06.2024 **Date of Acceptance:** 11.11.2024

Introduction

In the 1970s, Bailey and Maroldt (1977) proposed that Middle English could be a creole between Old English, Old Norse, and Norman French, using a definition of a creole language that then, and since, has been largely discredited by the academic community. While others, such as Domingue (1977), had also independently come to this conclusion, the "Middle English Creole Hypothesis" has been largely debunked, and is seen as a fringe, almost memetic theory in academia (O'Neil, 2019). However, others have argued that Early Middle English (c. 1150 - 1350) could instead be a koiné language à la Modern Hebrew, Amoy and Taiwanese Hokkien, and, the namesake of this category, Koiné Greek (Allen, 1997; Tydings, 2021). This paper reviews the koinéisation criteria set out by Siegel (1985) and concludes that this categorisation's appropriateness is highly probable.

What is a koiné?

A koiné is defined by Siegel (1985) as a common language or dialect formed through the coalescence of multiple intelligible languages or dialects. Koinés differ from pidgins in that they result from mutually intelligible language contact and are not strictly created for limited, practical purposes such as trade or basic communication. Additionally, their grammatical structures do not

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5526/esj.373

collapse, and their vocabulary can sometimes increase, rather than simplify (Thomason and Kaufman, 2023).

The name "koiné" is derived from Koiné Greek, dubbed *"hē koinè diálektos,"* translating to "The Common Dialect" (Andriotis, 1969). Koiné Greek formed through the merging of multiple Ancient Greek dialects, the four most notable being Attic, Ionic, Doric, and Aeolic (Adrados, 2005). This occurred under the army of Alexander the Great; during this time, the language and its grammar simplified, thus the definition (Andriotis, 1969; Adrados, 2005; Bubenik, 2007).

Siegel's (1985) criteria are as follows:

1. The languages or dialects must be either closely related or mutually intelligible.
2. The languages or dialects must be of equal prestige.
3. No outside language exists to serve as a link.

Should all be in place, the language will become a lingua franca amongst commonfolk but simplified through the mixing of grammatical features, chiefly through dialect levelling (Siegel, 1985). Siegel (1985) also distinguishes between *regional* and *immigrant* koiné languages. The former consists of regional dialects becoming a single language and stabilising into a single form, such is the case with Koiné Greek, whereas the latter results from mass immigration into foreign nations and forming a new dialect or language in a given location. This essay will be working under these criteria, arguing for, at the very least, a stabilised *regional* koiné.

A common misconception is that a koiné language requires some form of political backing, which would give the resulting language higher overt prestige than others; Koiné Greek and Middle Mandarin (*Guānhuà*) are examples of such languages (Adrados, 2005; Coblin, 2000). However, examples showing the contrary exist: Taiwanese Hokkien, referred to as *gòngtóng qiāng* by locals, koinéised from a mixture of Quanzhou and Zhangzhou dialects, in spite of a Mandarin Chinese-only policy being enforced by the government (Tsao, 2013; Tsung-Lun, 2022).

Modern Hebrew is the best example of a koiné language in common use today, being spoken by millions across the world. When Zionism was gaining prominence thanks to Theodor Herzl, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was tasked with reviving Hebrew as a spoken language. Prior to this, Classical Hebrew had gone extinct in the 5th Century, being restricted to liturgical usage à la Koiné Greek. To revive the language, Ben-Yehuda loaned words from the Sephardic and Mishnaic dialects, as well as the Germanic language Yiddish, in addition to creating new words, and compiled them in the Ben-Yehuda Dictionary of 1908 (Blau, 1981; Halperin, 2015). This makes Modern Hebrew exceptional among koinés in that it koinéised despite linking languages existing amongst Jewish settlers, such as English, Yiddish, German, and Slavic languages (Halperin, 2015).

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Historical Context & Criteria Evaluation

Middle English is the English language as it was spoken from 1066, the time of the Norman invasion, to around the 14th-15th Century (O'Neil, 2019). Focus will be placed on Early Middle English, which will be defined as the language spoken in the *Peterborough Chronicle* (c.1100, abbreviated as PC) and abbreviated as EME.

In 865, Viking colonisation began in Great Britain, ending with the Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum sometime before Guthrum's death in 890. This treaty was a peace agreement, legitimising Guthrum's rule over East Anglia and founding the Danelaw, while also allowing King Alfred to continue his rule over Mercia. However, it was also a trade agreement, ruling that hostages should be kept during trade to promote "peaceful behaviour" (Attenborough, 1922; Lavelle, 2010). This fulfils the second and third criteria set out by Siegel (1985), considering there was no linking language available at the time.

Thus, prior to the Norman invasion in 1066 there were around 200 years of Anglo-Dane communication and trade, at all levels, giving ample opportunity for language contact (Tydings, 2021). This was a perfectly surmountable task for Old English and Old Norse: up until the 5th Century, Old English and Old Norse were very closely related, making the languages just comprehensible enough for koinéisation to occur (Townend, 2002). Therefore, the first criterion laid out by Siegel (1985) is fulfilled. Dawson (2003), building on Baugh and Cable (2002), believes that the period of 878 to 1042 is the critical period for Nordic influence on English, and, in this essay's view, koinéisation.

Were Old English and Old Norse mutually intelligible?

For koinéisation to occur, languages should be mutually intelligible enough to allow convergence to occur; otherwise, it is difficult to impossible for dialect levelling to occur. While Old English and Old Norse are considered different languages today, evidence such as The First Grammatical Treatise (Icelandic: *Fyrsta málfræðiritgerðin*, c.mid-12th Century) and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* (c.1280) considered the two languages intelligible (Crawford, 2021). Without native speakers of the language being alive today, the level of intelligibility cannot be empirically proven, but linguistic data and outside context are available.

Crawford (2021) assesses the mutual intelligibility of Old English and Old Norse, and notes two historical Norse sources that appear to point to them being such. He first cites *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* (c.1280), a saga where the character *Gunnlaugr* serves an English king; within said poem, it is stated that the language of England was the same as that in Denmark and Norway. The First Grammatical Treatise on phoneticizing literary Old Norse brought forth English as an example and also stated that the English "are of one language with [the Danes]," yet had better phonetic

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5526/esj.373

writing by comparison, arguing to follow their example (translated by Crawford, 2021).[1] Indeed, the writer of this grammatical treatise seemed to consider Old English and Old Norse the same language.

Crawford (2021, 00:06) also stages a hypothetical conversation between an Old English and Old Norse speaker, giving some linguistic data, including a scenario where the two languages' names for "boars" didn't match (OE: *bāras*, ON: *jofar*), prompting a negotiation of meaning using the synonym "*eoforas,"* extract proceeding:

> "OE: *pa gréata baras aron fulloft be bare brygge.*
>
> EN: *Those great boars are often by the bridge.*
>
> ON: *<Bāras>. <Beirars>. Hvat eru <Beirar>?*
>
> EN: *<Bāras>. <Beirars>. What are <Beirar>?*
>
> OE: *Gréat *bristlig der. Eoforas.*
>
> EN: *Great bristly beasts. Eoforas.*
>
> ON: *Jofrar! Já, þú seger satt. Góða veiði í dag, granni.*
>
> EN: *Boar! Yes, you're right. Good hunting today, neighbour.*
>
> OE: *Gea, and pē. And gōd weder!*
>
> EN: *Yes, and you. And good weather!*
>
> ON: *Gott veðr! Ok tryggvar orvar.*
>
> EN: *Good weather! And true arrows.*"

At the time, the grammatical structures of Old English and Old Norse were still similar – 250 years apart – and relied more on word order rather than structure to get meaning across (Tydings, 2021). Such conversations would not have been abnormal between individuals on the borders of the Danelaw. To this end, we see Old English and Old Norse poetry using the same alliterative verse, seen in classics such as *Beowulf* and *Hervararkviða*, which were commonly spread through word of mouth rather than writing (Hallberg, 1975; Russom, 1998). Therefore, this was one such case

[1] A digital reproduction of The First Grammatical Treatise can be found here: https://etext.old.no/. A translation with commentary can be found in Hreinn Benediktsson's *The First Grammatical Treatise: Introduction, Text, Notes, Translation, Vocabulary, Facsimiles,* published in 1972 by University of Iceland Publications in Linguistics.

Essex Student Journal, 2024, Vol. 16(1)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5526/esj.373

where language contact could occur outside of trade, simply through common interest. In this case, the use of word order to intuit meaning appears reasonable.

The lack of written form for poetry was not a coincidence: Old English and Old Norse were of equally low prestige; Görlach (1986) notably states that West Saxon, for a speaker of the Anglian dialect of Old English up north, would have been as distant as Norse, and communicating in both their dialect and Old Norse may have been necessary to communicate efficiently. An apt comparison could be Mandarin Chinese dialects; within the language group, intelligibility is barely above 45%, requiring many speakers to default to "Standard Mandarin" as a bridging language (Chaoju and van Heuven, 2009). In both cases, there is ample linguistic variety, both featuring extremely distant forms of the same language family; ergo, to trade and survive, one needs to be linguistically flexible.

Loanwords & Grammatical Shift

The number of Scandinavian loanwords seen in English needs no introduction. It begins with *kalla*, meaning *call*, the first documented loanword, dated 993 (Jesperson, 1968). In modern day, over 2,000 English words are of Scandinavian origin, 400 of which are in regular use (Geipel, 1975). The contact was extensive enough that the ubiquitous *they*, *them*, and *their*, third-person plural pronouns, were borrowed. This is exceptional, as words of this class are among the least likely to experience this during language contact (Durkin, 2009). Indeed, in the cases of *they* and *their*, these words had displaced the Old English equivalents *hīe* and *heora*, respectively (Jesperson, 1968).

EME famously witnessed a significant drop in levels of deflexion (particularly the instrumental case), and a loss of grammatical gender, within the 24 years in which the PC was written and beyond (Shores, 1970; Allen, 1997; Jones, 2017; Tydings, 2021). Tydings (2021) notes that in the Second Continuation of the PC (1132-1154), nominative and accusative case marking was lost in pluralisation, and accusative direct object marking was lost. This coincided with the rise of the dative form "him," which rose from 17% to 37% between the First and Second Continuations; thereafter, the genitive case would rise. These all imply significant levels of dialect levelling prior to the invasion of the Normans, a crucial element of koinéisation (Mohan, 1976, cited in Siegel, 1985).

The main counterargument against the koiné hypothesis is that there is very little evidence outside of the Peterborough Chronicle. The Yorkshire dialect, however, is rarely reviewed in this discussion, despite it providing some additional evidence. Yorkshire is an important area in English history, being at the centre of the historical region of the Danelaw, and resultantly an area of ample Scandinavian influence. One Old Norse word in the Yorkshire dialect, garth (from *garðr*), defines a fold or yard close to a house or other, larger enclosures, possibly related to *garden* in Standard English, and was first documented in the 12th Century (Rhodes, 2015; Yorkshire Historical Dictionary, 2024). This word has multiple derivatives, including but not limited to *headgarth*, *calgarth*, *foregarth*, and *kil-garth*, following the iconic adjective + noun compound word rules we

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see in all Germanic languages. Rhodes (2015) documents numerous Yorkshire dialect words of Norse origins, such as *arse* (from *ars*), *hey up* (from *sey upp*), *bait* (from *beit*), *gate* (from *gata*, referring to a way or street), *muck* (from *myki*), and *nay* (from *no*). These words have all been seen in other dialects or otherwise been standardised since their initial documentation, signalling significant, continuous use over hundreds of years.

But what does all this evidence mean? One may hasten to deem kalla as a defined beginning for the "Koiné Middle English," but it would be just that: hasty. The grammar had not yet begun its deflexion. The Early Middle English period of 1150-1350, as denoted by de Leonardo and Márquez (2011) and what begins with the PC, remains an apt designation. Accounting for the initial influx of Norse vocabulary into the Yorkshire dialect and beyond, as well as the supplanting of heora with þei, it neatly packages the period in which the grammar of the language begins to stabilise. This would also include texts such as Layamon's *Brut* (c.1200) and the Auchinleck manuscript (1330). As the period ends, "Chaucery Standard" English is codified in 1430, and William Caxton's French translations that would contribute to upending English vocabulary begin in 1479. This would position the "Koiné Middle English" period as lasting for around 200 years, should EME itself be redefined in this way.

Conclusion

This essay has covered Norse materials discussing the matter of the Old English language, cultural elements such as poetry, grammatical analysis of The Peterborough Chronicle, and 12th century loanwords seen in the Yorkshire dialect of English. Given the evidence, the notion of Early Middle English being a stabilised, regional, koinéised language between Old Norse and Old English, seems highly probable.

While the mistakes of the "Middle English Creole Hypothesis" are largely behind the academic community, defining EME is of legitimate rhetorical interest: rethinking the history of the most impactful language in the world aside, it provides significant insight into the culture and daily lives of those living during the post-Danelaw period of British history. This paints a thoroughly different picture compared to the common stereotypes of hatred and brutality seen in media depictions. Is it not thought-provoking, the idea of the Anglo-Saxons and Danes negotiating trade across the borders, or perhaps sharing a pint of ale, discussing their last hunting trip? That these interactions indirectly led to our modern usage of the singular "they?"

Nevertheless, with a significant lack of linguistic data from before the 12th Century, it is difficult to empirically assess whether EME is a koiné or not. Indeed, there is a missing link: there are scant few Old English texts representing the transition to Early Middle English, let alone within one region. Within the constraints of the limited evidence, it is possible that by using the given period designation, usage-based corpus studies on other existing literature, such as Ancrene Wisse, Sawles Warde, Hali Meiðad, Seinte Juliene, Seinte Katherine, and Seinte Margarete, or perhaps forming a

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5526/esj.373

periodical corpus off the University of Michigan's, could allow for a more accurate assessment of this hypothesis.

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