

DYNAMO

REPORT II:

CASE ATTRITION IN MIDDLE SWEDISH AND THE PLACE OF THE PERIPHERAL RULE IN HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

JOHN SWEDENMARK

JOHN@ling.su.se

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses theoretical implications of a peculiar phenomenon that occurred in Swedish during the 14th and 15th centuries (with parallels in many other languages): Case endings hanged on long after they were needed; no longer dependent on the obligatory grammar of Swedish, they fulfilled the requirements of genre. I describe the phenomenon as peripheral rules since their broaching does not lead to ungrammaticality.

My discussion also touches upon topics concerning the epistemology of grammar and sketches a program for forthcoming investigations into Middle Swedish.

CASE ATTRITION IN MIDDLE SWEDISH AND THE PLACE OF THE PERIPHERAL RULE IN HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

Consider the case when the speaker or writer applies an obsolete grammatical form; for instance in present-day Swedish the plural verbal ending in tacky archaisms such as¹:

Detta äro alla glada tomtars julparad
This-SING is-PL all merry gnomes-GEN Christmas parade

where – apart from being incorrect even from the point of view of the grammar of earlier stages of Swedish to which it alludes – the form ”äro” instead of ”är” is motivated by its cultural environment, in this case a poster at a retro style Christmas fair.

This is a clear case, since we as contemporaries know that the verb plural is obsolete, and since the author proves himself not in command of the grammatical device he tries to handle. But to most convinced Christmas celebrators ”äro” certainly added to the atmosphere of Christmas, just like the smell of traditional Glühwein and gingerbread and children’s choirs from loudspeakers high upon poles.

When linguists examine mediaeval texts in search for grammatical regularities, this kind of usage becomes a problem, which can be put in epistemological terms:

When we investigate the grammar of the Old Swedish language,
what is the object of our investigation?

The answer for traditional descriptions is two-layered: *the material answer* is that we scrutinize the remaining texts, from the runic inscriptions up to the sixteenth century;

¹. I owe this example to a field observation by Jan Anward.

the theoretical answer is that we search for the underlying linguistic system, as presented in paradigms, tree structures or other kinds of notation.

Ideally the researcher will seam these two perspectives together by going through the texts and reporting their regularities, sometimes postulating forms that have not been found but whose existence is predicted by general assumptions about the linguistic structure of Old Swedish, and of language in general. And the outcome is a reconstruction that entails the evidence found in the texts.

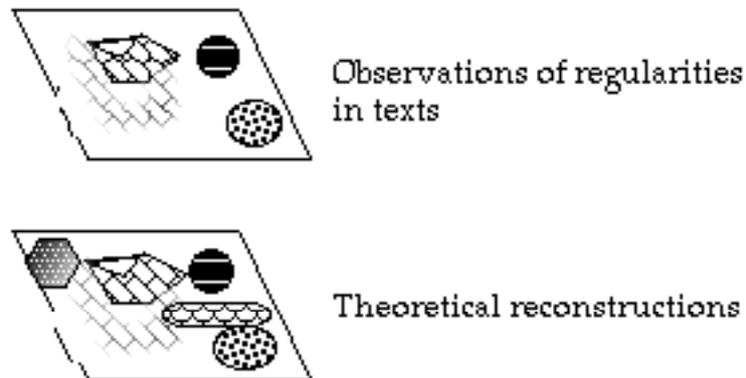


Fig. 1. The twofold object of study

FIGURE 1

Let me now zoom in and look at this convergence more in detail. As a beginning researcher, I learn to handle statements like:

-omen is the definite plural dative ending

(where *-omen* is an abstraction representing all the ortographic varieties).

Thus, I know that if I come across a token of this ending in a text, I can infer that the noun has the following grammatical qualities:

- It is plural
- It is definite
- It is dative

These being the conventional names of the categories of Old Swedish nominal inflection. Here is a concrete example, from an autograph by Birgitta:

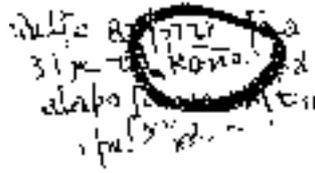


FIGURE 2: A piece of handwriting by Birgitta

The encircled word is "konong", *king*. When Birgitta has finished the writing of the stem, incidentally abbreviated by a superscribed stroke, she lets her stylus proceed, leaving a trace, "e" that conveys (what we can call) grammatical information, in this case a rather unusual dative assigned by the governing preposition "til", *to*, which otherwise usually assigns the genitive.

Is this an error or not, and if so, what is its relevance to the study of grammar? I shall return to this question, but to begin with, I would like to treat it as *an example of an example*, and ask once more: What is the object of study here?

A piece of handwriting confirms the traditional account of the grammar of Old Swedish, in the same way the Buddha of Helgö² confirms trade connections between Birka and the Far Orient. There is *an indexical relation* between the token and the grammar.

In other words, each isolated inflection of Old Swedish is treated as the outward representation of a (simple or composite) grammatical content, and not as what once was a piece of living language. And this is all that can be reported. Within such a dualistic framework, there is no room within the science of grammar for stylistic variation; except on a macro level, the statistics that will hopefully be possible when and if a collected database of Old Swedish texts sees the light of day.

Furthermore, the damage caused by dualism is aggravated by the fact that the inventory of grammatical categories – even within very advanced abstract theories – is thoughtlessly taken over by way of automatic inheritance from the tradition of Classical studies. Criticizing this import is not exactly new. But it has the serious disadvantage of creating an impression that historical linguistic change is fundamentally only a change of costume.

For instance, most discussions³ dealing with the reason why Swedish lost its case endings have the same answer ready at hand: the case forms died out because they were no longer needed; the Swedish language had found other ways of saying the same thing. But this observation – regardless of its value as explanation or not – should lead to the opposite question:

Why do unnecessary forms such as the Old Swedish case endings
linger on in spite of their own superfluosness?

². A famous archaeological object found at excavations in 9th century soil outside Stockholm.

³. Cf. Teleman (1975), as well as the standard descriptions (Falk-Torp, Nygaard, Wessén).

(Observe that pseudo-explanations such as "friction", "habit", "the inertia inherent in all kinds of change" are no answers but only alternative ways of presenting the problem.)

My answer is the following, simple as it may sound:

They serve other purposes than expressing grammatical meaning.

In order to put the dual indexical relation into question, I shall now approach it from another angle with the help of two impolite questions.

The first one is concerned with the documents:

1/ How representative is writing, especially as performed during the Late Middle Ages, of anything but its own – changing – conventions?

The second question is:

2/ How do we in fact think of an object such as the grammar of Old Swedish? Is it – quoting a popular formula – "situated in the brains of its speakers", is it a handy description of recurrent forms, or is it something else?

And the following two answers – that do not aspire to contain the whole answer – report themselves:

1/ We cannot consider "writing" in general; what we stand before as researchers is a repertoire of written genres, each with its special distribution of grammatical forms. In other words: the type of document must always be taken into consideration, even when we are studying grammar.

A handful of examples:

- the heavy use of verb-first sentences in the oldest law texts, due to tradition and filling the purpose of expressing conditional relations between sentences
- the tendency towards an autonomous preposed definite article in 14th century chronicles
- the extreme case of dative forms lingering on in Biblical translations until the beginning of the nineteenth century⁴
- the story of the ending -r, that is lost almost from the

⁴. Ståhle (1970) sums up the history of biblical translations.

beginning as a nominative marker, but is reintroduced as a somewhat mockingly suffix, such as the names of the seven dwarfs that mind Disney's Snow White: Trötter Tjocker Butter Blyger Glader Toker and Kloker.

And the answer to the second question:

2/ Current descriptions of Old Swedish, regardless of doctrine, are inhibited by a common tacit assumption that the grammar of a language is in some way existing in itself. The inhibition is not so much manifested in actual confessions as in the habit of *morphematic thinking*.

Morphematic thinking goes back to one fundamental error:

THE MORPHEMATIC FALLACY:

One cannot treat traditional labels (eg \pm plural \pm dative \pm definite) of grammatical categories as the contents of grammatical forms (eg -enom).

The consequence of the morphematic fallacy is a kind of short-circuit. The signifier is treated as a member of a class of signs, and not as carrying meaning. Subsequently, all grammatical meanings wind up as representatives of themselves, and thus all alike, and thus devoid of meaning, as far as the description is concerned. Furthermore, the fine interplay between marking and non-marking (and the delicate use of syncretisms) becomes obscured when all variants are treated on a par.

For these two reasons – the grammatical diversity of genres and the wish to avoid the short-circuit of morphematic thinking –, preliminary to any possible account of the disappearance of case marking in Old Swedish, there is a need for *a description that captures the absence and presence of morphological markers in different syntactic environments – and from a genre perspective*.

I have tried to describe the actual operative markings in the form of rules as described in Stephen Anderson's *A-morphous morphology* (1993), where structural conditions determine structural changes. This framework disallows any postulation of grammatical meaning without overt expression. Each rule is investigated for occurrence under predicted structural conditions in an assorted array of sample texts. The distribution of the rule's applicability in certain syntactic environments is shown in tables such as the following.

These kinds of tables are used in an ongoing investigation into sample texts, differing in age and genre. The figures show how often a rule is applied in its presumed circumstances:

EXAMPLE OF GENRE INVESTIGATION (PRELIMINARY FIGURES)						
Rule: [+masculine, +subject] -> -r						
	1 RUNES	2 LAWS	3 14THC LEGEND	4 14THC THEOL	5 15THC VARIOUS	6 MODERN SW
TYPE OF NP						
Ordinary NP	1/46	5/41	7/86	13/89	3/178	0/100
Proper name	10/47	8/12	0/12	0/3	0/25	0/100
Adjective	0/0	8/13	1/8	4/19	1/13	0/100
Total	11/93	21/66	8/106	17/121	4/216	0/100
Percent (-r when possible)	12%	32%	8%	14%	2%	0%
Syntactic function						
subject	10	6	7	14	2	0
predicative	1	15	1	3	2	0

As is well known, and mentioned above, case marking already from the earliest sources on is dethroned as the central device in Swedish grammar. Strict rules of word order (or rather the mutual order of *phrases*) took over the task of separating subject from object and indirect object from direct object.⁵ This is part of the general movement that gave rise to today's Western European languages, and the whole complex of invention is still only partly described.

The case endings are therefore an endangered species; in Tryggve Knudsen's words "om lydlovene gjennom sine virkninger i trykksvake stavelser kan bryta ner endelser, så må de ha støtte i andre tendenser i sproget dersom de skal make å slette ut for alvor de gamle kategorier"⁶.

However, the dative endings seem to receive new life, or at least an indian summer, when the postposed definite article is introduced in connection with the rise of configurationality. But they remain chiefly for another reason; they express something other than grammatical meaning. They give an old-fashioned and hieratic impression and render extra weight to the indirect object and the prepositional phrases, especially in the rhythmically refined Lutheran Bible translation.

At this stage, I would also like to refer to my ongoing investigation into Mediaeval genres. I am building up a large corpus which is searched for the following categories:

⁵. Diderichsen (1941), Fourquet (1938).

⁶. Knudsen, 1967, page 14

Genre (eg. laws, legal deeds, legends...)
Type of NP (eg. single noun, proper name, noun phrase...)
Mention (eg. intertextually given, first mention, second mention...)
Articles (eg. no article, preposed indefinite article, postposed definite article)
Case marking (eg. no overt change, nominative, dative...)
Sequence marking (preceding/following the verb)
Syntactic function (eg. subject, object, adverbial...)
Animacy (eg. ego, human, abstract...)

The outcome – to be presented at future conferences – will be a detailed chart of rivalling tendencies in Middle Swedish.

(I shall also return another time to the intriguing interplay between the rise of maximal projections (phrases), the semiotics of their mutual ordering, and the loss of other kinds of overt syntactical marking.)⁷

Here, I would like to introduce the notion of *peripherality*.

Peripheral grammatical rules are rules that are genre-bound and non-obligatory outside of the genre in question.

”Historical linguistics is text linguistics.” During the investigation into Old Swedish, the researcher encounters without exception over the gap of history a scribe whose task it is during rewriting of texts – and in this age writing was rewriting – to add certain context-dependent devices, that may or may not correspond to his or her actual speech habits. Here we find the reason for the tendency (observed by myself and others, but not as yet calculated statistically) to omit and the errors committed, at a steady growing rate.

What grammatical forms did the scribe use for everyday purposes, then; we don’t know – or rather, it is another investigation. The only testimony consists of dialects and centuries much younger representations of spoken language, in plays and other representations of dialects. All that can be said is that the requirements of genre act through the scribe, and that he or she was taught to write in a certain manner, where certain grammatical forms so to speak were part of the calligraphy, thereby making the document capable of serving its intended purpose.

⁷. Swedish rather abruptly converts to a general syndrome of change that took its beginning in Middle Age Latin (Cf. Beckman (1934), Vincent (1994) and Harris (1981) Kiparsky (forthcoming). I am at present working on a presentation of the circumstances of this adaption to European standards, simultaneously dealing with the history of Swedish and issues of configurationality.

THEORETICAL MODEL OF
PERIPHERALIZATION

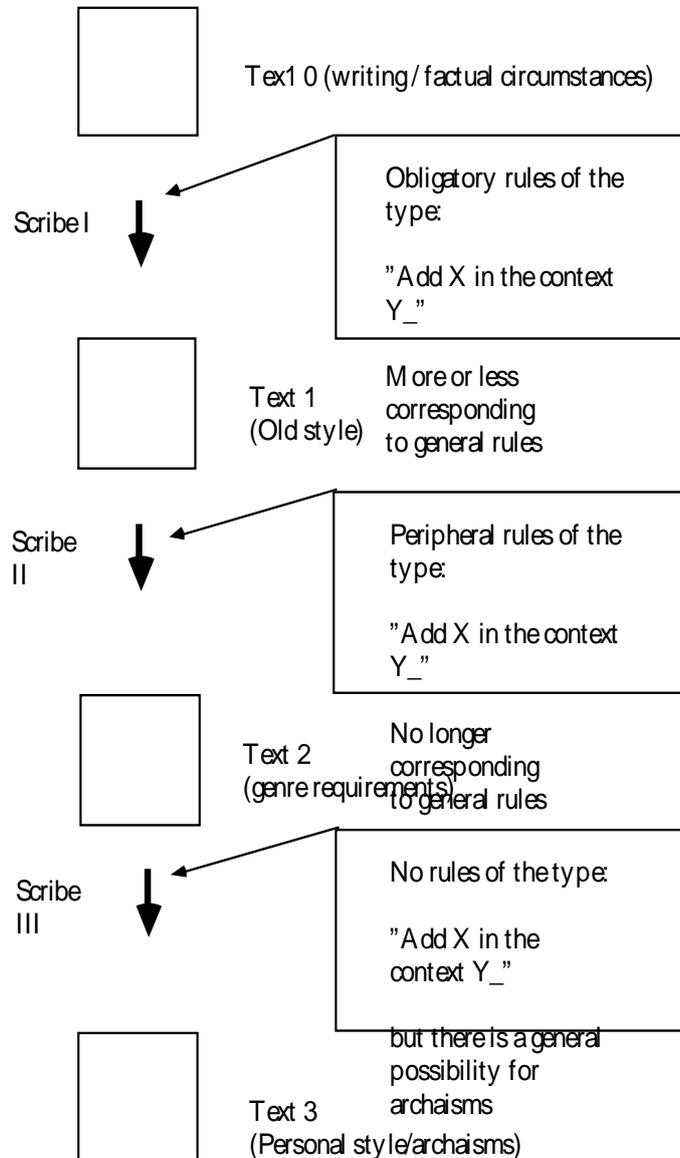


FIGURE 3: Three stages of peripherality

At a later stage, the mastery of obsolete historical forms can be a central element in a writer's elaboration of a personal manner that bears his or her unmistakable imprint, for instance such masters as Jöns Budde in the late 15th century or Peder Swart in his books and letters.

This division between genre requirements and personal style coincides with Roland Barthes's concept pair *style/écriture*, where the style is the system of expressions

dictated by the historical situation and the writing is the presence in the text of the writer's unique personal qualities.⁸

I therefore suggest for further meditation a tripartition between three stages in the history of a grammatical device:

- At first, it is obligatory regardless of genre, and therefore not susceptible of carrying other kinds of meaning than grammatical ones.
- Then, the form is genre-bound, and helps the text serve its purpose, sometimes with an almost performative force.
- At the last stage, it can occur with a subjective, "eccentric" value.

I am not sure that these three stages are of any direct practical use, viz. for periodization, nor that their evolution is uni-directional; a stylistic device can grammaticalize, for sure. They are first and foremost a theoretical construct, with the purpose of helping us think about peripherality as a relevant issue in the study of grammar.

To conclude, let me return to the word "kononge" above in what is presumably Birgitta's own handwriting. It could be claimed that she is simply mistaken, being in a hurry to jot down her fresh revelation: either choosing the wrong suffix or contaminating the prepositional phrase with the almost equivalent bare dative. Another interpretation is that this is her normal usage, for instance when speaking. But whatever the interpretation, "kononge" is a deviation committed within a genre, and as such at stage 2.

*This paper was originally read at the
Conference of Scandinavian Linguistics,
Oslo, january 1995.*

⁸. Barthes (1953). I am grateful to Birgitta Holm for making this association.

REFERENCES

Anderson, S 1993:

A-Morphous Morphology.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Barthes, R 1953:

Degré zéro de l'écriture.
Paris: Seuil.

Beckman, N 1934:

Västeuropeisk syntax.
Göteborgs högskolas årsskrift XL.

Diderichsen, P 1941:

Sättningsbygningen i de gamle skaaanske lov.
København: Ejnar Munksgaard.

Fourquet, J 1938:

L'ordre des éléments de la phrase en germanique ancien.
Publication de la faculté des lettres de l'université de Strasbourg, fascicule 86.
Paris: Les belles lettres.

Harris, M 1980:

The marking of definiteness: a diachronic perspective.
Papers from the 4th International conference on historical linguistics. Edited by Elizabeth Closs Traugott, Rebecca Labrum & Susan Shepherd. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Kiparsky, P. (forthc.):

Indo-European origins of Germanic syntax.
Clause structure and language change. Edited by Ian Roberts & Adrian Battye.
Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Knudsen, T 1967:

Kasuslære I.
Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Ståhle, C-I 1970:

Svenskt bibelspråk från 1500-tal till 1900-tal.
Skrifter utgivna av nämnden för svensk språkvård 10. Stockholm:
Läromedelsförlagen Svenska bokförlaget

Teleman, U 1974:

Reductions of a morphological case system.
The Nordic languages and modern linguistics 2. Edited by Karl-Hampus Dahlstedt. Stockholm.

Vincent, N 1994:

Historical syntax.
Course taught at Australian Linguistic Institute, July 1994. (Handout copies.)

FIGURE 4: An embroidered example of peripheralization ('the-drop-of-coffee the best are').
With special thanks to Ing-Marie Mellenius