

## Getting going on a path Old English noun phrase typology and the emergence of the definite article *the*

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The English article *the* developed out of the OE demonstrative *se(-seo-þæt)* as an overt and obligatory marker expressing definiteness in a subset of NPs. The phenomenon has been interpreted in the past as triggered by the loss of nominal morphology (cf. Philipsen 1887, Christophersen 1939, Heinrichs 1954) or as functional reanalysis towards or within DP structure (Lyons 1999, Osawa 2007, Philippi 1997). Mostly however, the development has been identified as a grammaticalization path *par excellence* (cf. Traugott 1982, Lehmann 1994, Himmelmann 1997, Lyons 1999). However, the author believes that although some of these accounts provide process schemes that loosely fit the phenomena descriptively, they are explanatorily weak and do not deal with the causes of either the actuation of the change or its apparently irreversible spread within the population.

This paper relates the fate of the article to more generally observable patterns in the pre-head components of OE definite NPs. It argues that the increasing frequency of the OE demonstrative – which eventually lead to its grammaticalization – may reflect a tendency of speakers to overproduce NP patterns that were highly frequent in Old English discourse and therefore experienced as prototypical.

Empirically, the paper is based on a large quantitative analysis of definite NP types in the *Peterborough* and *Parker Chronicles* (as syntactically annotated in the *YCOE* and *PPCME2*). Theoretically, it takes a generalized Darwinian approach to language evolution (cf. Dawkins 1989, Lass 1997, or Ritt 2004), in which constituents of linguistic competence are regarded as neural association patterns (cf. Rumelhart & McClelland 1986) whose transmission among speakers is driven by an imitation instinct that manifests itself most prominently in accommodation. The proposed framework is compatible with frequency studies (Bybee & Hopper 2001, Bybee 2003) which postulate that it is the high token frequency of grammaticizing phrases and its effect on cognitive representations which provides the triggering device for many changes. Also, among other things, the author's argument is grounded in the concept of analogy – one of the leading mechanisms in human cognition (Anttila 2003, Fischer 2007).

Although arguments will be given why grammars in which demonstratives are reinterpreted as default definite determiners are likely to spread at the cost of grammars in which they are not, the main focus of this paper will be on the initiation of the change. It will be shown that the reinterpretation of demonstratives as default definite determiners seems to have led to the increased production of the very types of NP patterns that had been frequent in the first place. It will therefore be argued that the emergence of the definite article might be interpreted as a 'hyper-accommodation' to what were perceived as the most common NP-types in Old English discourse. Dealing with the *Why* and *How* of the earliest stage of emergence as well as viewing the development as a type of frequency and analogy effect, the present proposal complements and adds to current alternative views.

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## Corpora

YCOE – York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose

PPCME2 – The Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English