# THE ORIGIN AND DIFFUSION OF ENGLISH 3SG -*S*

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## ABSTRACT

Verbal 3sg -*s* is generally attributed (in one way or another) to Norsification. Recent accounts fail to motivate both the generalization from 2sg to 2pl in the north and the restriction of -*s* to irregular monosyllabics in Early Modern English. Generalization from *is/was* and *has* to other (irregular) monosyllabics of high frequency is confirmed by the distribution in Ogura and Wang (1996). That there was no direct link to Nordic is clear from the general absence in the early period of 3sg -*s* on verbs borrowed from or influenced by Old Norse.

## 1. Scandinavian hypotheses

Verbal 3sg -*s* is generally attributed (in one way or another) to Scandinavianization. Recent accounts fail to motivate both the generalization from 2sg to 2pl in the north and the restriction of -*s* to irregular monosyllabics in (southern) Early Modern English.

There have been no fewer than three different ideas of the way in which -*s* is the result of Scandinavian influence. The first hypothesis is that the identity of the second and third person singular in Old Norse prompted the same identity in northern English, with -*s* directly borrowed from Norse. Keller (1925) dates the Scandinavian change of -*s*/-*z* to -*r* in 10th c.[1] Thus, OIce. *em, ert, er* ('am, are, is')

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[1] If there is any error here it is on the conservative side. Icelandic manuscripts write *es* for later *er* 'is' (etc.) until ca. 1200 (pace Berndt 1956: 199, who dates the change to ca. 800). Non-rhotacized forms are preserved in (1), the earliest law text in Icelandic [ca. 1150-75] (MS AM 315d folio [Finsen 1852: 219-226]). By the time of the Physiologus manuscript [ca. 1200] (AM 673a I quarto [Dahlerup 1889]), both relative *es* and 3sg *es* are written *er* (2); cf. Blaisdell (1959: 19, 33).

(1)   oc   sva   þar   es     eigi   es   sina             i
       and   so   there  that   not    is  withered.grass  in
       'and there where there is not withered grass in (it)'   [3: 24]

at the time of the settlements was *em, es, es*.[2]

Keller cites *barutz* 'he breaks/you break' on the Björketorp stone (600-800) as evidence of the identity of 2/3sg during the viking period (*cf.* Kisbye 1982: 81). This 2/3sg identity is ostensibly mirrored in the Lindisfarne and Rushworth Gospel glosses (10th c.), where 2sg -s variably occurs in 3sg; *cf.* (Lindisf.) *loseð/loses* 'loses' (Mt. 10.39); *cymeð* 'comes' (Matt. 24: 50) beside *cymes* (Matt. 24: 46); *lufað* 'loves' (Matt. 6: 24) beside *lufas* (Matt. 10: 37); etc. (Berndt 1956: 106, 209; Brunner 1965: 271-273). The supposed reflex of this situation is generalization of *is* through the entire singular (*is I*, etc.) in the focal area (Kolb 1965: 139-141).

The second Scandinavian hypothesis takes English 3sg -s from the reflexive-medio-passive *-sk*. This hypothesis can be disposed of quickly. For one thing, *-sc* was consistently written in Norse manuscripts until mid 13th c. (Ottósson 1992: 57-59, 117-119). Moreover, *-sk* is directly represented in several English words, e.g., *bask* < OIce. *baðask* 'to bathe (oneself)' (de Vries 1977: 22; Kisbye 1982: 80; *cf.* Hansen 1984: 62). Note also the Anglicized form of OIce. *bú-a-sk* 'to prepare oneself; get ready' in ME *busken* 'prepare; get ready; array; go' (Moskowich-Spiegel Fandiño 1993: 512-515; de Vries 1977: 63), preserved in northern *busk* 'make ready' (Thorson 1936: 22).

The general idea of the third of the main Scandinavian hypotheses is that -s was a phonetic adaptation of *-þ* under Nordic influence. Kroch, Taylor and Ringe (2000: 379) see the imposition of less marked -s for more marked *-þ* as a result of imperfect learning of English among the Scandinavians of the Danelaw. They acknowledge that Old Norse had /þ/, but argue that (1) replacement of a marked by an unmarked segment is frequent in adult language acquisition; (2) Norse had /ð/ except word-internally while English had /ð/ only word-internally; (3) in Norse, /s/ but not /þ/ could occur in final position; and (4) verbal endings in Old English were weakly articulated and prone to misperception. This last point is especially misleading because the third person ending, as van Gelderen (2000b) shows, was very strong in earlier English, and even allowed for pro-drop, in contrast to the first and second person endings which were prone to reduction since Old English and rarely allowed pro-drop. It is likely this very strength of the third person that enabled *-þ* to resist for so long a time against innovated -s.

Moreover, the Kroch, Taylor and Ringe view is a relatively minor variation on Jespersen's speculation that "-s was ... substituted for *-þ* because it was more easily articulated" (Jespersen 1942: 18). The phonetic adaptation hypothesis was questioned even by Ross (1934: 72), who actually believed that *-þ* became -s phonetically, because it was inconsistent with the distributional facts signaled by Holmqvist (1922; *cf.* Berndt 1956: 200-202).

## 2. The distributional facts and paradigmatic generalizations

Holmqvist (1922) demonstrated that the identity of 2/3sg was an illusion; that, in reality, 2sg -s spread first to 2pl (and 2pl imperative), then to 3pl,[3] and, last of all, 3sg. The statistical evidence has been reassessed in detail by Berndt (1956: 204), who cites the following percentages (rounded off) of -s per category in the Lindisfarne and Rushworth Gospels: 2sg 89%, 3sg 33.4%, 1pl 66.2%, 2pl 66.6%, 3pl 45.1%. Stein (1986: 640) modifies the figures slightly. His percentages for -s (including the Durham Ritual) are 2pl 66%, IMPVpl 54%, 3pl 42%, 1pl 42%, 3sg 31%, which strongly supports Holmqvist's generalization from 2sg to 2pl.[4]

To sum up, the comparative rarity of 3sg -s is problematic for all three Scandinavian hypotheses. For hypothesis I, the identity of 2/3sg in Old Norse is simply irrelevant to the Northumbrian spread of -s from 2sg to 2pl. Hypothesis II is irrelevant to -s as any sort of person agreement marker, and ignores the fact that *-sk* is directly represented in English. Hypothesis III falsely predicts that the highest figures for -s should be in the 3sg and fails to predict that 2sg should play any role whatever, much less that -s should have spread from 2sg to 2pl.

A generalization involving second person and imperative forms is not at all unexpected. The bond among second person forms and imperatives is well known (*cf.* Kuryłowicz 1964: 240-241). A similar generalization (but from 2sg imperative to 2sg to other forms of the paradigm) is documented for Río de la Plata Spanish by Moyna (1996: 26, 84): innovation of oxytonic imperatives,

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(2)  þa    missom    ver    skipsens    þess    er    oss    er    áðll    hiolp    í
     then   miss.1pl   we    ship.the.GEN  that.GEN  that   uss.DAT  is    all    help    in
     'then we miss that ship that for us all help is in'  [III: 18: 22]

[2] Assimilation of 2sg *-z* and 3sg *-þ* to liquids and nasals entailed the identity of 2sg and 3sg, generalized to the present indicative of all verbs in West Norse, but to all tenses and moods in Old Swedish (Kuryłowicz 1947 [1960]: 81-83).

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[3] The 3pl -s in Middle English occurred in the North and the Northeast Midlands (LALME, maps 652, 653; McIntosh 1983: 236, 243). See Schendl (1996: 147-149) for discussion, syntactic constraints on the occurrence of pl *-(e)s* and *-(e)th*, and the subsequent history. There seems to have been convergence with Celtic (Klemola 2000; Vennemann 2001: 356-358). It has also been suggested that the standard English pl *are* was reinforced by the OIce. 3pl *eru* (Kisbye 1982: 80; Hansen 1984: 61).

[4] Keller (1925: 86) finds this generalization to the second plural remarkable: since "Anglo-Frisian" (against which, see Nielsen 1998: 72-74), at any rate, pre-Old English, had a single form for the entire plural, the very presence of a differentiated 2pl is likely due to Scandinavian influence. While the diffusion of -s occurred via the second person and imperative forms, it spread quickly to the entire plural, thus reinforcing the lack of differentiation in the plural.

such as *tené* (standard *ten*) to *tener* 'have', motivated 2sg *tenés* (replacing *tienes*), then other paradigmatic forms.

It is also worth mentioning that, on any of the Scandinavian accounts, it is a complete accident that, after a long period of variation, *-s* ends up precisely where it is etymologically justified in *is*. Stein (1986: 648) interprets Berndt's data to indicate confusion of the endings because of the mixing of the languages, but maintains that *-s* was advantageous phonotactically. Still, it is difficult not to imagine that the ultimate outcome of 3sg *-s* had something to do with native *is* where *-s* always occurred in the third person singular.

## 3. An account of the distribution

After a period of generalization, I submit, the restriction of *-s* to the third person singular was initially triggered by retention with *is* and *has* (3sg *hæfis* 'has' and *næfis* 'has not' are frequent in the Gospel glosses). Then 3sg *-s* spread to other monosyllabic bases, especially those ending in a dental, e.g., *sitteþ* (Matt. 19: 28) beside *sittes* (Matt. 25: 31+) 'sits'; *cueðas* (frequent) 'says'; and so on.

What happened between then and Middle English is unfortunately shrouded in obscurity because of the lack of northern texts during that period. However, the records of the London Grocers' Company in (1) provide overlooked distributional information.

(1) a.   *Also he grauntez to al þe company euery ȝer*
       *aftor þat he duellez in london to gyffe a pipe of red wyn*
       *For the whilke benefet he hase gyffyne...*    (LGrC: 2.190) [1428]

    'Also he grants to all the company every year after he dwells in London
    to give a pipe (cask) of red wine, for which benefit he has given...'

  b.  1.   *the whiche* 'which'
      2.   *who so brekythe* 'whoever breaks' (LGrC 2.190) [1429]
  c.  *yaffe* 'gave' (LGrC 2.193) [1431]

A northeast midlander evidently wrote the entry in (1a). All three of the 3sg forms (*grauntez, duellez, hase*) end in a sibilant; *whilke* has its Danish form; and *give* begins with /g/. Contrast the entries (1b/c) in a more southerly dialect. Consistently, in entry after entry, there is a correlation of *-s* with other northern features, and *-þ* with other southern features. I will assume this is not accidental.

Evidence from the orthoepists is offered by Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (2000: 238) in (2).

(2)
    Writing in 1586, William Bullokar allows the use of -S as a poetic contraction of -ETH. In the 1620s, Alexander Gill labels HAS as a northern variant of HATH, regarding the forms with the dental fricative (HATH and DOTH) as normal, but adds that in other verbs -ETH can shorten to -s or -z, or become -ez after a sibilant. Finally, in 1643 Richard Hodges notes that, although -(E)TH may appear in writing, it is commonly pronounced -s or -z in ordinary speech. ... Hodges, too, continues to use the unsyncopated suffix with the dental fricative in his transcriptions of liturgical speech in *The English primrose* (1644). Variation is therefore clearly in evidence in the verbal suffix in the spoken registers of Londoners even in the middle of the seventeenth century.

The variation among Londoners in 17th c. is a continuation of that in 15th c. in (1). Also important are Hodges' notice that many people said *-s/-z* but wrote *-(e)th*, and Gill's notice that *has* is northern but *-eth* can "shorten" to *-s/-z*.

Letters confirm "the relatively late syncope of the vowel in the third-person verbal suffix -(E)S even in less carefully monitored registers in the South. Although the process had commenced in the North in the Middle English period, the syncopated suffix appears to have gained currency in London only in the second half of the sixteenth century" (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2000: 242). Their results show a drop of 3sg *-s* in London dialect from 30% in 1460 to 0 in 1500, followed by a sharp rise between 1540 and 1580, and by 1660 *-s* reaches nearly 100%. The explosion of *-(e)s* in London between 1580 and 1619 coincides with loss of the post-stem vowel in the third person singular, motivating the orthoepists to interpret "the syncopated *-s* as a colloquial contraction of -ETH" (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2000: 244).

It is significant that all of the verbs in the LGrC entry (1a) for 1428 are monosyllabic. Something along the lines of generalization from *is* and *has* to other (irregular) monosyllabics of high frequency is confirmed by the distribution of 3sg *-s* in Early Modern English, Period I (1500-1570) and Period II (1570-1640) (Ogura and Wang 1996). The highest figures for 3sg *-s* in Period I in their corpus are found with *have* (6 examples) (vs. 366 *hath*!), *know* (5), *pray* (4), *go* and *think* (3), *make* and *keep* (2), and *give, take, stand, need, pay, tell, follow, answer*, all with 1 token. In Period II, the figures for 3sg *-s* on the frequent irregular verbs increase: *say* (84), *have* (34), *come* (34), *make* (21), *go* (16), *think* (11), etc. At the same time, *-s* on regular verbs failed to increase, or even decreased: *pray* (1), *pay* (1), *answer* (2), *pass* (2), etc.[5]

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[5] Irregular verbs as a class share numerous morphological and cognitive properties distinct from regular verbs in English, and possibly universally (Pinker and Prince 1991).

That there was no direct continuation from Scandinavian is clear from the general absence in the early period of 3sg -s on verbs borrowed from or influenced by Scandinavian. In the corpus of Ogura and Wang (1996), apart from *give* (Period I: 1 example of -s; Period II: 9 examples) and *take* (I:1; II: 8) other verbs with likely Scandinavian links (*want, dwell, call, die, get, quicken, cast, raise*) never take -s in Period I (but note *duellez* in the LGrC entry (1a) from 1428, prior to their Period I), and rarely admit it in II: *get* (6), *want* and *dwell* (5), *call* (1), the rest zero.

## 4. Conclusion

The crucial point by Hodges in (2) that many people were saying -s/-z but writing -(e)th is ample testimony that textual statistics are of little value except as a general indication of the types of verbs that were more apt to show 3sg -s. More crucial evidence is that of the London Grocers' Company records, in which 3sg -s correlates with other northern features (*whilk, give*, etc.) while -(e)th correlates with other southern features (*which, yaffe*, etc.). This confirms that -s did in fact spread from the North. At the same time, however, the oldest distribution shows that -s had nothing to do with Scandinavian, but spread from 2sg to 2pl and 2pl imperative, then to the rest of the plural, and, last of all, to 3sg. The most frequent forms with 3sg -s were *is* and *has* (*hæfis, næfis*), from which -s diffused first to other irregular monosyllabics (especially those ending in a dental), then to regular monosyllabics, the status attested in the London Grocers' Company records, then, finally, over the course of several centuries, to all verbs. The change, not surprisingly, was far more advanced than is reflected in the canons of writing.

In summary, the cognitive interconnections among irregular monosyllabics facilitated the diffusion of -s in the 3sg from *is* and *has*, while the English-specific strength of the third person retarded the diffusion (except in the north) to regular and polysyllabic verbs.

The replacement of -þ by -s had an interesting syntactic consequence. While there was apparently no difference in the use of null subjects with either 3sg form in Northumbrian (van Gelderen 2000b), the victory of -s in London ca. 1660 correlates with the final loss of null subjects (van Gelderen 2000a) and, shortly after that, the loss of V-to-I raising (Lightfoot 1999: 161-167; Miller 2002: 277, 379). This implies that -þ had pronominal features not shared by -s.

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