A RELEVANCE THEORETIC APPROACH TO THE
INTRODUCTION OF SCANDINAVIAN PRONOUNS IN ENGLISH

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1. Introduction

The introduction of Scandinavian third person plural pronouns has traditionally been accounted for as a result of the influence of languages in contact, as well as a change in which phonetic, morphologic and syntactic factors, played a crucial role (Barber, 1993; Baugh & Cable, 1993; Blake, 1992; Görlach, 1997; Pyles & Algeo, 1982). Without denying the validity of previous approaches, this work will present a complementary explanation that could contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon from the pragmatic framework of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995). It will be argued that the loss of inflections and the development of the original Old English (OE henceforth) third person pronoun involved a loss of procedural meaning (Blakemore, 1987, 1992; Wilson & Sperber, 1993) which affected the recovery of explicatures of utterances by hearers. Therefore, the introduction of the new pronominal forms could be explained as an attempt at constraining in a better way the recovery of those explicatures, since pronouns are both truth-conditional and procedural expressions (Wilson & Sperber 1993).

First of all, I will present very briefly the pronominal system in OE and its evolution to Middle English (ME henceforth), together with an account of the loss of verbal inflection. After having done so, I will introduce some of the basic theoretical postulates of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995) on which this work is based, and, finally, I will present my proposal to understand the changes that took place in the evolution of the pronominal system.
2. The evolution of the third person pronoun from OE to ME

OE personal pronouns were inflected according to four grammatical categories: number (singular, dual, plural), case (nominative, accusative, genitive, dative), person (first, second, third) and gender (masculine, feminine, neuter). The different forms of the third person pronoun can be seen in the following table:

**Table 1: OE third person pronoun**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Masculine</strong></td>
<td><strong>Feminine</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominative</td>
<td>he</td>
<td>héo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accusative</td>
<td>hine</td>
<td>híe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive</td>
<td>his</td>
<td>hire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dative</td>
<td>him</td>
<td>hire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the evolution of the paradigm of pronouns to ME this grammatical category retained a considerable degree of the complexity that characterised it in OE, since these words preserved distinctive subject and object case forms, except for the neuter, and the other distinctions in terms of person, number and gender. As Ekwall (1980:95) points out, they also underwent phonetic changes, mostly weakening of their distinct forms, since emphatic and unemphatic forms could be distinguished.

The evolution of the OE feminine singular form has an unclear history. The feminine pronoun had a variety of nominative forms, and one of them became identical with the corresponding masculine form because of the process of phonetic weakening – “[...] certainly a well-nigh intolerable state of affairs” (Pyles & Algeo, 1982:158). The predominant form in East Midland speech, and the one that was to survive in standard PDE was *she*. This form would display a case of homonymy (Görlach, 1997:65) or, in Hopper and Traugott’s

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1. This system was asymmetrical from the beginning, since duals were found only in the first and second person and gender only in the third person pronouns.
2. As regards the masculine singular pronoun, it can be said that the accusative form *hine* survived into ME only in the South; elsewhere *him* took over. This form has also survived into Present-day English (PDE henceforth) only in south-western dialects of British English as the weakened form *[n]*. Pyles and Algeo (1982:120) mention that this can be attested in examples such as “Didst thee zee un?”, i.e., “Did you see him?”.
(1993:99-100) terms, of *polysemy*³. Thus, for Pyles and Algeo (1982:120) this form might be a development of the demonstrative *sēo* rather than of the personal pronoun *hēo*, since the sound change undergone by the feminine nominative form of the pronoun made it coincide with that of the masculine pronoun. Stevick (1968) argues that the development of the new nominative form of the feminine was a case of morphological development due to the need to establish gender contrast⁴. The neuter form *hit* was kept when stressed, notably at the beginning of a sentence. The loss of the initial [h-] was due to lack of stress and is paralleled by a similar loss in the other *h-* pronouns when they were unstressed. The origin of *its* was obviously not a development of OE, but a new analogical form occurring in Modern English.

As regards the third person plural forms, only the OE dative has survived; it is the regular spoken, unstressed, objective form in PDE, with loss of initial *h-*⁵ as in the other *h-* pronouns. The native nominative form *hi* remained current in the Southern dialect, and its corresponding objective and genitive forms were used in both the South and Midlands. But the most remarkable change was the introduction of the plural forms *they, thai* which were derived from Scandinavian influence. These forms prevailed in the North and in the Midlands, the areas where the contact between the native population and the Scandinavian invaders was stronger. The corresponding objective and genitive forms *them, thaim, theim* and *their* were principally used in the North during most of the ME period. Ultimately, the Scandinavian forms in *th-* were to prevail, possibly because they “[...] were felt to be less subject to confusion with forms of the singular” (Baugh & Cable, 1993:101). Thus, the situation of third person pronoun in ME can be illustrated with the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³ According to Hopper and Traugott (1993:69), the difference between *homonymy* and *polysemy* would that in the former case one form can be ambiguous because it has two or more unrelated meanings associated with it, whereas in the latter case that form has two or more related meanings associated with it.

⁴ The feminine accusative *hīe* has not survived, except in the southern region until the later 13th century, when it was supplanted by the *hir(e) or her(e) current elsewhere. This merger in the feminine might have also influenced the merger of dative and accusative forms in the masculine.

⁵ This can be seen in examples such as “I told ’em what to do” (Pyles & Algeo, 1982:121).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Feminine</th>
<th>Neuter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nominative</strong></td>
<td>He</td>
<td>she, ho, hyo, hye, hi, scho, cho, he</td>
<td>hi, it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective</strong></td>
<td>Him, hine</td>
<td>hir(e), her(e), hi</td>
<td>hit, it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Genitive</strong></td>
<td>His</td>
<td>hir(e), her(e), hires</td>
<td>his</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. **The loss of verb inflections**

The changes that occurred in the evolution from OE to ME have often been explained from a traditional viewpoint “[...] as the result of a highly complex cooperation of sound changes, syntactic changes, and analogical changes” (Moore, 1968:228). Among the sound changes that occurred in the evolution of the pronoun from the former to the latter stage, I have mentioned the weakening of its phonological form. This weakening, as we have seen, would have originated a certain state of confusion among interlocutors, since it could have been relatively difficult for them in some circumstances to distinguish between the different pronouns used in speech. This confusion could have been resolved in an initial stage with the help of verb inflection, for OE marked the verb for mood, tense (present or past), grammatical person and number. If we consider the set of inflections for the present tense, it can be appreciated that a distinction was clearly established between the third person singular and plural, as illustrated below in table 3. This distinction was even more accurate in the past tense, where, on the one hand, OE had different sets of inflections for both weak and strong verbs, and, on the other, it also distinguished grammatical person by means of vocalic gradation or ablaut. Thus, OE had a root vowel for both the first and third person singular and a different one for the second person singular and for all the persons of the plural.

**Table 3: OE verb inflections**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Present tense</th>
<th>Past tense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong and weak verbs (Class I)</td>
<td>Weak verbs (Class II)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 sg.</td>
<td>-(e)þ</td>
<td>-aþ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 pl.</td>
<td>-aþ</td>
<td>-iaþ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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6 It should be noticed that OE inflections also distinguished verb-class (weak or strong), as displayed on the table.
However, this situation changed in the evolution to ME. Firstly, the OE tendency to place lexical stress upon the first syllable of a word resulted in a weakening and subsequent levelling of verb inflections, with a corresponding loss of distinctions for grammatical person and number (see table 4 below). Secondly, throughout all this evolution there were cases of what McMahon (1994:70) calls *systematic analogy*, which can be better observed in the past tense. On the one hand, we find cases of *analogical extension* (McMahon, 1994:71), which is what happened with those strong verbs that took the dental suffix characteristic of weak verbs to form their preterit form, and with those verbs that were influenced by others belonging to a different class. This influence resulted in the formation of the past tense according to a different pattern\(^7\). On the other, what is more important for the purpose of this paper is that there were examples of *analogical levelling* (McMahon, 1994:73), because there were verb stems that were re-organised so as to display the same sound in the past\(^8\). By means of this change, the further distinction between the first and third person singular and the forms of the plural was lost, since now all the grammatical forms in the preterit showed the same vowel and not the four-grade distinction formerly used.

**Table 4: ME verb inflections**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Present tense</th>
<th>Weak verbs</th>
<th>Strong verbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 sg.</td>
<td>-(e)b, -(e)b, (e)s</td>
<td>-e</td>
<td>-Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 pl.</td>
<td>-e, -en, -(e)s</td>
<td>-Ø, -en, -e</td>
<td>-e, -en</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As I have said at the beginning of this work, it is my intention to offer an interpretation of these changes in the light of Relevance Theory, not because I want to deny the validity of previous explanations, but because I think that this theoretical framework can contribute to a

\(^7\) Among the first group of verbs that took the dental suffix of weak verbs we find, for example, OE *gλiðen, crēpen, helpen, āken,* or *wēpen.* Among those that were influenced by others belonging to a different class we could mention PDE *to slay,* which in OE had the forms *sλēan-sλōg-sλōgon-slǣgen,* and whose present tense was reformed from the past participle, whereas its past tense *slew* is due to the analogy with other präterits such as *blew* or *grew.*

\(^8\) The most typical adduced example of this change is that of OE *cēosan-cēas-curon-(ge)coren,* which in ME evolved to *cēsen-cēs-cēsen-cōren/cōsen.* By means of the re-establishment of a sound that had changed in a
more accurate understanding of the cognitive factors that influenced the evolution of those linguistic forms. Therefore, let us now introduce very briefly some of the postulates of this theory on which the explanation I am going to suggest is based.

4. **Relevance Theory and the changes in 3\textsuperscript{rd} person plural pronouns**

4.1. **Basic postulates of Relevance Theory**

Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995) envisages communication as an ostensive-inferential process in which the speaker produces an ostensive stimulus that draws the addressee’s attention towards a particular set of assumptions she wants to communicate. In this process, the addressee’s task is to discover what the speaker intended to say, what she intended to imply, and her intended attitude to what was said and implied (Wilson, 1993:337-341). In order to find out what the speaker intended to say, the hearer uses his knowledge of the language – his grammatical knowledge – which will provide him with the range of linguistically possible interpretations of an utterance, although it will not tell him the exact interpretation that is intended on any particular occasion.

Every utterance communicates a set of assumptions, some explicitly, and others implicitly. What the speaker intended to say belongs to the explicit side of communication. For the hearer to discover what was said by the utterance, he will have to decode its sense, disambiguate any ambiguous expressions, assign reference to any referential expressions, restore any ellipsed material, and narrow down the interpretation of vague expressions (Wilson, 1993:338).

Utterance interpretation is a two-phase process. The first one is a modular decoding phase that provides the linguistically encoded logical form of the utterance. This logical form is used as input to the second central inferential phase, in which it is contextually enriched and

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previous stage of the evolution of the language because of rhotacism, the semantic relationship between the forms of the verb was made clearer (McMahon, 1994:74; Trask, 1996:109).
used to construct a hypothesis about the speaker’s informative intention (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 1993:1). The result of this process of enriching a linguistically encoded logical form to a point where it expresses a certain proposition is the construction of what Sperber & Wilson (1986, 1995) call the *explicatures* of the utterance. Every utterance can have a variety of interpretations, all compatible with the information that is linguistically encoded. However, not all these interpretations occur to the hearer simultaneously, since some of them require more effort to think up. The order in which the possible interpretations of an utterance can occur to the hearer is to some extent predictable, although it is unlikely to be the same for all the addressees at all times. Hearers are endowed with a single, very general criterion for evaluating interpretations of utterances, a criterion that is powerful enough to exclude all the possible interpretations of an utterance except the one that satisfies that criterion. As Sperber & Wilson (1986, 1995) say, human cognition is relevance-oriented: we have expectations of relevance and we pay attention to information that seems relevant to us. Relevance is defined in terms of *contextual effects* and *processing effort*. Contextual effects cost some mental effort to derive, and the greater the effort needed to derive them, the lower the relevance. The processing effort required to understand an utterance depends mainly on two factors: first, the effort of memory to construct a suitable context in which to interpret that utterance; and second, the psychological complexity of that utterance. Greater complexity implies greater processing effort and detracts from relevance. Some of the sources of psychological complexity of utterances can be their linguistic structure or the occurrence of words that are much more difficult to process than others (Wilson, 1993:345-348).

4.2. *Conceptual and procedural meaning*

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9 The explicatures of an utterance are “[...] a combination of linguistically encoded and contextually inferred conceptual features” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986:182).
Within the framework of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995), a very important contribution is the distinction between conceptual and procedural meaning. Utterances express propositions, which are conceptual representations, and those propositions have truth conditions. In the inferential phase of comprehension the hearer constructs and manipulates those conceptual representations. Thus, as Sperber & Wilson (1986, 1995) and Blakemore (1987, 1988, 1992) argue, utterances can be expected to encode two basic types of information: representational and computational, or, which is the same, conceptual and procedural information. While conceptual representations can be brought to consciousness, procedures cannot, since we do not have direct access to grammatical computations or to the inferential computations used in comprehension (Wilson & Sperber, 1993:16).

These two types of information, as Wilson & Sperber (1993:2) mention, crosscut each other. Firstly, there is a class of truth-conditional constructions that encode concepts. It includes manner adverbials such as seriously or frankly, which encode concepts that are constituents of the proposition expressed by the utterance, and hence contribute to the utterance’s truth conditions. Secondly, there is another class of non-truth-conditional constructions that encode concepts. It groups various types of sentence adverbials, as well as illocutionary adverbials such as seriously or frankly. These expressions encode concepts which are constituents not of the proposition expressed, but of higher-level explicatures (Ifantidou-Trouki, 1993). Thirdly, there is a further class of non-truth-conditional constructions that encode procedures. Among its members we find discourse connectives such as so or after all, which encode procedural constraints on implicatures (Blakemore, 1987, 1988, 1992). Finally, there is a forth class of both truth-conditional and procedural expressions, in which Wilson & Sperber (1993:20-21) include personal pronouns. According

10 This means, as Wilson & Sperber put it, “[...] information about the representations to be manipulated, and information about how to manipulate them” (1993:2). A conceptual representation has logical properties, since it enters into entailment or contradiction relations, and can act as the input to logical inference rules. But it also has truth-conditional properties, since it can describe or characterise a state of affairs.
to Wilson & Sperber (1993:21), “Pronouns impose constraints on explicatures: they guide the search for the intended referent, which is part of the proposition expressed”.

However, it is not very clear that pronouns encode fully conceptual information. Following Blakemore (1992:70), it can be said that “[...] pronominals are simply a key to a concept and a context which have their source either in the previous discourse or in the situation of utterance. Since this key has certain lexical properties [...] the hearer is constrained in her search for an appropriate concept and context”. Therefore, Wilson (1997) suggested that pronouns should be seen as procedural expressions that contribute to the proposition expressed by an utterance. Pronouns encode schematic or skeletal concepts that need to be fleshed out.

4.3. Changes in the pronominal system: a Relevance-Theoretic account

The changes that took place in the evolution of the pronominal system from OE to ME are going to be explained in terms of some of the postulates of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995) and in terms of the distinction drawn by Wilson & Sperber (1993). More exactly, this explanation will be based on the existence of procedural expressions that encode schematic or skeletal concepts, which constrain the development of the explicatures of an utterance (Wilson, 1997).

We have just seen that pronouns belong to the class of schematic-conceptual and procedural expressions that impose constraints on utterance explicatures by guiding hearers in the search for referents. In OE pronouns originally had both schematic-conceptual and procedural meanings. However, due to the weakening of their phonological forms these forms began to lose those meanings, which led to the confusion between the different forms of the singular and the plural in the third person. The immediate consequence of their phonological reduction and subsequent loss of schematic-conceptual and procedural meanings was that
interlocutors had to rely more on the inflections to avoid misunderstandings and to recover the logical form they had to use as input for the second inferential phase in utterance interpretation. Inflections can also be said to have schematic-conceptual and procedural meanings (Padilla Cruz, in press a, b).

However, the weakening and subsequent loss of the inflections for person and number, as has been seen in tables 3 and 4, could also have involved a loss of schematic-conceptual and procedural meanings of those inflections. It can be said that those inflections in OE also imposed constraints on the explicatures of the utterances in which they were present, since they guided the search for their intended referent. The placement of OE lexical stress on the first syllable of words, with the subsequent reduction or loss of final unstressed vowels and final consonants, could even have made it more difficult for the hearers to find out the logical form that started the second inferential phase of the process of utterance interpretation, particularly in the case of the third person. Cutler (1987) has shown that the distortion of some phonetic segments increases the difficulty of the hearer’s interpretive task, since he cannot recover a fully propositional logical form. As Ruíz Moneva comments,

The objective to lead towards the maximum possible understanding with the least possible effort would also lie behind the grammatical simplification [...] . The aim here would have been to get the most important referential ideas, for which the inflectional endings must have been fairly superfluous. The faster elimination of these endings would also have been favoured by the oral character of the interchanges, in the sense that for this kind of context the effort conveyed in communication, which aims at referential content rather than at linguistic or formal accuracy, would be relevant (1997:190).

In order to solve this problem, we can see that OE began to develop a more fixed word order in which pronouns tended to be placed by the verb, began to acquire progressively the grammatical functions those inflections had and increased in obligatoriness. Nevertheless, this solution could only have worked to a certain extent, since the polysemy existing in the case of the third person pronoun would have involved ambiguity in many circumstances. Therefore,
as a result of this concatenation of intervening factors, the door was open for the incorporation of the Scandinavian plural forms of the third person pronoun into the English language in those areas where it got into contact with that language. The benefit brought to the linguistic system by these Scandinavian forms was mainly the recovery of its ability to impose effectively constraints on the explicatures of the utterances in which they occurred with minimum effort, since its phonological form was completely different from that of the singular pronouns. In the singular forms, as we have seen before, changes were also occurring aimed at establishing gender contrast between the masculine and the feminine (Stevick, 1968). The change of the feminine pronoun was due to the need to develop a fully propositional logical form.

This loss of truth-conditional and procedural meaning could also be perceived in the cases of analogical levelling in which the paradigms of some strong verbs were re-organised so as to display the same sound in both the preterit singular and plural (Padilla Cruz, in press a). In OE the different gradational series of the preterit could also be said to have both schematic-conceptual and procedural meanings, since they informed the hearer about the referent of the utterance. The first vowel of the series would inform that the referent was either first person singular or third person singular, whereas the second vowel of the series informed that the referent was either second person singular or one of the three persons of the plural. Since in the evolution towards ME we have seen that personal pronouns began to acquire those functions, and that problems due to ambiguity were finally solved with the borrowing of Scandinavian pronominal forms, it could be said that in those verbs in which the paradigm was levelled so as to unify their stem vowel, the different vowels of the gradational series lost both their procedural and schematic-conceptual meaning.

However, there could be a further factor that influenced that loss. The existence of one grade for the two persons of the singular and another for both the second person singular and
the three persons of the plural in OE preterit would have involved an element of psychological complexity for the hearer. This would have increased his processing effort when interpreting the utterances in which those forms occurred, which, at the same time, detracts from relevance. As Sperber & Wilson (1986, 1995) argue, psychological complexity of utterances is not only a matter of their syntactic complexity, but is also related to other factors, such as the frequency of occurrence of some words. In the case of OE past tense, the existence of two vowel-grades could be an example of psychological complexity, since both of them were used to express the same temporal information. The only feature that distinguished those stems was that they encoded different information about the grammatical person and number, i.e., about the referent of the utterance in which they occurred. As has been stated, in the change from OE to ME personal pronouns acquired both the schematic-conceptual and procedural meanings that inflections and the series of grades had in strong verbs, so there was no need to encode again those meanings by means of the different vowels of the stems for the preterit. Since that information had been encoded in the personal pronouns, the distinction between the different grades in the preterit became redundant. Keeping that distinction between the stems for the same tense would have involved more psychological effort when processing the utterances, an effort that was unnecessary since the grammatical information they encoded had been overtaken by the personal pronouns.

5. Conclusion

I hope that I have shown in this paper that the theoretical framework of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995) can be a valid and very useful tool to account for some of the grammatical changes that have taken place in the history of the English language. I think that

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11 Wilson (1993:348), for example, mentions that the occurrence of less frequently-encountered words such as sibling as opposed to the linguistically more complex form brothers and sisters in the sentences below involves much processing effort and, thus, detracts from relevance:
   a) I have no brothers or sisters
its proposal of an enrichment of the logical form of an utterance to a point in which it becomes fully propositional can be of great help to explain why those changes occurred. As has been seen, the phonological distortion of grammatical items resulted in hearers’ inability to recover a propositional form, which might have caused many misunderstandings. Thus, linguistic change might have been triggered by hearers’ need to obtain fully propositional forms, which are the input of the inferential computations that take place in the comprehension process. Therefore, I think that Sperber and Wilson’s (1986, 1995) valuable insights into communication should be incorporated in the field of historical linguistics to gain a more comprehensive understanding of linguistic changes in terms of the cognitive factors underlying those changes, since this field has been traditionally dominated by phonological and syntactical accounts of those changes.

Nevertheless, I must acknowledge that a more complete explanation of the changes discussed in this paper from the point of view of Relevance Theory should also have included some considerations about the possible contextual effects that hearers might have achieve (Wilson, personal communication). Although this was originally outside the scope of this paper, before concluding, I am going to suggest very briefly some directions in which such an explanation could be pursued. It is very usual to state that by means of language human beings establish relations of identity with the different members of a linguistic community that use a particular linguistic variety. Therefore, when the changes illustrated were present in the speech of certain groups of individuals, hearers could have retrieved a wide array of weak implicatures to the effect that they were showing their ascription to a particular social group, that they had a certain register that allowed those changes, and so on. Needless to say, it is too soon to conclude that this might have been so. What must be noticed is that these contextual effects could have been similar to poetic effects (Sperber & Wilson, 1995:222) or that they could have been the result of inadvertent ostensive communication.

b) I have no siblings.
6. References


----- (In press b) “Relevance Theory and the Morphologic Evolution of the Present Tense from Old English to Early Modern English”, in Actas del XXIV Congreso Internacional de AEDEAN.


