

Familiar vs. unique in a diachronic perspective: Case study of North Germanic

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The aim of the present study is to follow the development of the definite article in North Germanic, in particular taking into account the unique reference expressed by the nascent article. The study is based on the corpora of Old Swedish, Old Danish and Old Icelandic texts written between 1200 and 1550. The texts chosen for the corpus represent four genres, i.e. legal prose, religious prose, profane prose and sagas. The study is grounded in the notion of weak vs strong definiteness (Schwarz 2009), which we wish to explore diachronically.

Preliminary results of the study show that both Danish and Icelandic exhibit similar developments, although with different rates, i.e. very low values for the grammaticalizing article with unique referents in the first period studied, gradually rising (in Danish first in the last period studied, in Icelandic already in the second one). The situation in Swedish is more ambiguous, with relatively high values in the first period studied already, an issue we hope to address in our presentation.

It is clear from this preliminary data that the unique reference lags behind in terms of definite expression, in comparison to the strong definiteness type that is direct anaphora. However, we wish to look into the unique contexts qualitatively as well. In the presentation, we hope to discuss the following issues:

1. Are there more than one type of unique reference, e.g. a more global one (the Sun) and more local one (the dog, in the family who only owns one dog)?
2. Does the nascent definite article appear in the more local ones first?
3. Could this local uniqueness be conceived as a case of indirect anaphora (a context ambiguous between strong and weak definiteness), thus providing a link in the grammaticalization chain?

References: • Schwarz, F. 2009. *Two types of definites in natural language*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts dissertation.