4

Languages and ethnic groups

MICHAEL BARNES

The linguistic prehistory of Scandinavia

For as far back as we can see, the languages of Scandinavia (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden) have been either of Indo-European or Finno-Ugrian origin. At what point these types of speech first established themselves in the region is not wholly clear. Human activity can be demonstrated in Scandinavia as early as 10,000 BC, but it is unlikely, on comparative linguistic grounds apart from anything else, that the language or languages spoken by the earliest inhabitants were the ancestors of any of those spoken today.

Recent scholarly opinion (based on the meagre linguistic and archaeological evidence available) suggests that a group of Indo-European speakers moved into what is now Denmark, southern Sweden and southern Norway some time in the second half of the third millennium BC (cf. Chapter 2), probably spreading quickly into northern Germany (if the move there was not simultaneous).[1] Such dating, however, is attended by many uncertainties and amounts to little more than educated guesswork. To add to the uncertainty, it has been argued by some that language change should be seen less in terms of mass migrations and more as a manifestation of cultural changes.[2] Historically, it is of course of great importance to know how a particular form of language came to be in a certain area at a certain time. But from a purely linguistic point of view it can only be concluded that somehow and at some time, probably not later than 2000 BC, but possibly earlier, Indo-European speech came to southern Scandinavia and northern Germany. The form of this speech would still have been close to the Indo-European parent language, it is thought, although the emergence of certain differences is assumed as a result of the gradual attenuation of linguistic contacts.

1 H. F. Nielsen, *The Germanic Languages. Origins and Early Dialectal Interrelations* (Tuscaloosa, 1989), pp. 35–6.
2 For example, C. Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language. The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins* (London, 1989, 2nd edn).

The innovations which established what we now call Germanic as a distinct branch of Indo-European, on the other hand, are considered to have taken place in the new homeland – in part, possibly, as the result of influence from one or more indigenous languages.[3] Linguistic interference is certainly a plausible – though not a necessary – explanation for the radical changes in phonology and morphology that affected the developing Germanic, and could also account for the fact that approximately a third of its vocabulary is without cognates in other Indo-European languages. Whatever the non-Indo-European input, Germanic clearly became dominant in southern Scandinavia and northern Germany, wiping out virtually all traces of the earlier language or languages; the place-names of southern Scandinavia, for example, are almost entirely of Germanic origin, and of those few which are not, the majority have been interpreted as Sami (Lappish).

About the coming of Finno-Ugrian-speaking peoples to Scandinavia very little is certain and various hypotheses have been put forward. Comparative linguistics (for example, numbers of early Germanic loanwords interpreted as a reflection of language contact) and later areas of location have to some suggested that the ancestors of the Sami were the first Finno-Ugrian speakers to arrive, perhaps in the period 2000–1500 BC. Proponents of this view have hypothesised that the Sami made their way into what is now southern Finland by an overland route and subsequently moved northwards into present-day Lappland; but as late as the beginning of the Viking Age they are considered still to have been present in many parts of Finland, as well as in the northern half of Norway and Sweden. Not much later than these proto-Sami, and certainly long before the birth of Christ, various groups of people speaking forms of Baltic Finnic, which were to become the later Finnish and Karelian dialects, migrated into Finland, some going overland and some across the Gulf of Finland.

An alternative hypothesis that has recently gained ground envisages immigration by Proto-Finnic or Uralic speakers from the south into southern Finland at some unspecified date in the pre-Christian era, perhaps even as early as the end of the Ice Age. The subsequent split into Sami and Finnish is seen as the reflection of a cultural split into a primarily hunting and primarily farming community, between which there gradually arose a clear ethnic and linguistic boundary. From an archaeological point of view it has been suggested that the Typical Comb Ceramic culture, which spread over Finland in

3 E. Haugen, *The Scandinavian Languages. An Introduction to their History* (London, 1976), pp. 102–3; Nielsen, *The Germanic Languages*, pp. 28–32.

the late fourth millennium BC, belonged to proto-Finnic speakers, and that the contemporaneous slate culture of northernmost Scandinavia may mark the beginning of the ethnic identity of the Sami (Chapter 3). Whenever and however Finno-Ugrian speakers originally arrived in Finland, it seems most likely that they encountered an indigenous population, but here, like the Germanic speakers in Norway and Sweden, they obliterated virtually all traces of their language(s).

The existence of a large number of Germanic loanwords in modern Finnish in a form that is compatible with their having been borrowed before Germanic itself split into different groupings testifies to early contact between speakers of these two very different types of language. Given the apparent age of the loans, it is not impossible that some of this contact took place before the migration into Finland, but that will depend entirely on one's view of when the migration took place. Archaeological finds have suggested to some that there was a Scandinavian–Germanic immigrant population in Finland during the Bronze Age and even earlier,[4] though others interpret these finds simply as evidence of contact between the two ethnic groups at the relevant period. Finno-Ugrian influence on Germanic has also been mooted.[5] It is suggested that both the initial stress and the minimal tense system of Germanic (with its basic present–past contrast) may have been adopted as a result of contact in the Baltic area between speakers of the two types of language, but there is little evidence otherwise of far-reaching Finno-Ugrian penetration of Germanic, and these two points of similarity – striking as they are – are probably coincidental.

Finnish and Sami

Written records of Finnish, a few fragments apart, do not go back further than the sixteenth century, while Sami first appeared in written form in the seventeenth. Our conception of the development of these two branches of Finno-Ugrian therefore rests on comparison of their various post-Reformation manifestations with each other and with related languages.

Finnish appears from the start to have consisted of a number of different dialects, which broadly speaking can be divided into a western and eastern group. Speakers of these dialects gradually moved inland and northwards, possibly pushing the Sami before them and/or causing extensive language

4 P. Sammallahti, 'A linguist looks at Saami prehistory', *Acta Borealia*, 2 (1989), pp. 8–9; cf. Chapter 2.

5 For example, W. B. Lockwood, *Indo-European Philology* (London 1977, 3rd printing), pp. 123–4.

shift (though see below). To what extent they themselves were under pressure from speakers of Germanic during the first millenium of the Christian era is unclear: Germanic loanwords seem to have entered Finnish at different periods, but it is impossible to say whether the influence was continuous. It is not until the crusade of the latter part of the twelfth century that extensive Swedish political involvement in Finland begins.

Sami is now customarily divided into nine dialects. It is thought by some that the initial splits took place about AD 800,[6] as a result both of voluntary migrations and of the encroachment of Finns and Germanic speakers, who gradually drove linguistic wedges between the natives. But it has also been argued that at the beginning of the Viking Age the dimensions of the Sami area were much as they are today, and that irregularities in Proto-Scandinavian loanwords indicate that there was already considerable dialectal differentiation in Sami at the time they were adopted.[7]

Germanic and Scandinavian

Northern Germany and southern Scandinavia, as has been indicated, are considered by virtually all linguists working in the field to have been the cradle of Germanic.[8] The development of a characteristically Scandinavian form of this branch of Indo-European therefore has largely to do with the spread of Germanic to the east, south and west, with resulting linguistic splits between the different groups of speakers involved.

A gradual expansion, dated by many between 1000 and 500 BC, saw the frontiers of Germanic pushed as far south as the present-day Netherlands and central Germany and as far east as the Wisła (Vistula).[9] It is reckoned that at this period all Germanic speakers still shared a common language (often called 'Common Germanic'), though probably with some dialectal differentiation. Around the beginning of the Christian era the Goths decamped far to the east and south, seemingly having been in the Wisła area for a period of time, although their original home may have been in Scandinavia as indicated by the place-names Gotland and Götaland, allegedly related to 'Goth'. Meanwhile, other Germanic tribes were moving down towards present-day

6 O. H. Magga, 'Samisk språk', in B. Molde and A. Karker (eds.), *Språkene i Norden* ([no place], 1983), p. 101.
7 Sammallahti, 'A linguist', pp. 6–7.
8 Nielsen, *The Germanic Languages*, p. 36; C. Henriksen and J. van der Auwera, 'The Germanic Languages', in E. König and J. van der Auwera (eds.), *The Germanic Languages* (London, 1994), p. 1.
9 Nielsen, *The Germanic Languages*, pp. 36–7.

southern Germany and areas east of there, and in the fifth century came the migration of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes to England.[10]

The linguistic consequences of these migrations were several. First, there appears to have been a split between East Germanic (Gothic and related forms of speech) and the language of those who formed the remaining Germanic continuum extending from Scandinavia to central Europe. (The case for a split between East Germanic and Scandinavian on the one hand and a West Germanic branch on the other has been argued, but the linguistic and historical evidence seems to be against it.)[11] The language of the continuum has been dubbed 'North-west Germanic', but this has been a changing concept, sometimes embracing all Germanic speech outside Gothic and the other languages of the eastern branch, sometimes only Scandinavian and Ingvaeonic or 'North Sea Germanic' (itself a fairly elastic term). Undoubtedly, as Germanic tribes and/or speech dispersed, dialectal differentiation will increasingly have developed. The earliest extant manuscript records (between the sixth and ninth centuries) certainly show considerable phonological, morphological and syntactic differences between different types of Germanic as well as a wide variety of idiom; these can hardly have appeared overnight.

A major problem in determining when North Germanic or Scandinavian can be said to emerge as a separate linguistic entity is posed by the language of the early runic inscriptions (AD 200–600). Most of these are found in Denmark, Norway or Sweden. They exhibit an archaic form of Germanic, and one which is remarkably homogeneous given the inscriptions' wide geographical and chronological spread. It has been argued[12] that this language is North-west Germanic, notwithstanding the fact that it is almost entirely found in Scandinavia, since the forms in the inscriptions could as easily give rise to reflexes in (at least some) West Germanic languages as in later Scandinavian. The argument alleges that characteristically North Germanic or Scandinavian features did not develop until AD 450, and that they hardly become visible in the inscriptions until AD 550 or later. This is to some extent a matter of perception. There is the contrary view that the retention of archaic features is what

10 Ibid., pp. 36–63.

11 Haugen, *The Scandinavian Languages*, pp. 107–13. In his *Germanic Languages*, Nielsen, on the other hand conducts a wide-ranging survey of the problems involved in grouping the Germanic languages, and decides that even now too little detailed work has been done for hard and fast conclusions to be drawn.

12 For example, by E. H. Antonsen, *A Concise Grammar of Older Runic Inscriptions* (Tübingen, 1975), especially pp. 26–8; see more recently Nielsen, *The Germanic Languages*, pp. 5–12; Nielsen, 'On the dialectal split of Ingveonic West Germanic from the early runic language of Scandinavia', in K. Düwel (ed.), *Runische Schriftkultur in kontinentalskandinavischer und -angelsächsischer Wechselbeziehung* (Berlin, 1994), pp. 117–27.

characterises the emerging Scandinavian. It has also been claimed,[13] in opposition to the above, that the language of the inscriptions does contain a significant number of Scandinavian innovations: in phonology, morphology and word meaning.

It is certainly hard to make clear pronouncements about the linguistic affinity of some inscriptions. The Gallehus runic horn,[14] perhaps from the period AD 350–400 and found in southern Jylland, has the sequence (transliterated):

ekhlewagastiz:holtijaz:horna:tawido

'I Hlewagastiz, related to someone called *Holta* [?], made the horn.' It would be hard to argue that southern Jylland, if that is where the horn was inscribed, was home to Scandinavian speech in the fourth century, and there is indeed nothing in the inscription that is incompatible with some later type of West Germanic or other. The pronominal form **ek** has been claimed as Scandinavian, but it also appears in Old Saxon and Old Low Franconian. The nom. m. sg. ending **-z** is lost by the time of the earliest written manifestations of what are clearly West Germanic dialects, but there is no way of knowing when the ending was dropped in any of them. The single-barred runic **h** used in the inscription has been contrasted with the double-barred variant found in continental Germania and Anglo-Saxon England, but the evidence for such a clear distinction in use has recently been shown to be tenuous.[15]

The Tune stone from Østfold in Norway,[16] on the other hand, possibly from AD 300–400, may well contain characteristically Scandinavian features; for example, the nom. m. pl. in **-ez** (Gothic *-ai*, OE *-e* etc.), and the use of **arbija** in the probable sense 'funeral feast' (cf. Gothic *arbi*, OHG *erbi* 'inheritance', ON *erfi* 'funeral feast').

The question of what kind of Germanic was spoken in Scandinavia between the departure of the Goths from northern Europe and AD 550–600 cannot thus be answered conclusively one way or the other. In part it is a question of definition, in part it depends on interpretation of sparse and difficult source material. Many of the innovations which appear to have taken place in Scandinavian between AD 550 and 750 – the so-called 'syncope period' – may have started to develop much earlier, notwithstanding their absence from the inscriptions. We do not need the problematic assumption of a runic koine or traditional

13 O. Grønvik, *Runene på Tunesteinen* (Oslo, 1981), pp. 33–69.
14 L. Jacobsen and E. Moltke (eds.), *Danmarks runeindskrifter* (København, 1941–2), no. 12.
15 R. I. Page, 'New runic finds in England', in [no. ed.], *Runor och runinskrifter* (Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien. *Konferenser*, 15, Stockholm, 1987), p. 194.
16 W. Krause and H. Jankuhn (eds.), *Die Runeninschriften im älteren Futhark* (Göttingen, 1966), p. 72.

spelling[17] to make this plausible. The new vowel qualities ([æ] [ø] [y]) resulting from the distant vowel assimilation known as mutation, for example, would probably have gone unnoticed by speakers until the conditioning factors – unstressed /i/ /j/ /u/ /w/ – were lost and the mutated vowels phonemicised.[18]

The syncope period and the 'differentiation' of Scandinavian

It is the changes associated with the syncope period AD 550–750 that mark the emergence of a thoroughly Scandinavian form of speech. Syncope itself involved the loss of all unstressed short vowels unless protected by particular phonological environments. Other Germanic languages were affected by the trend as well, but not to the same extent. Mutation is also found in the various forms of West Germanic, but is not so widespread a phenomenon there as in Scandinavian. The diphthongisation known as breaking (which gives ON *jafn, jǫrð*, compared with German *eben, Erde*, English *even, earth*), is known from Old English as well as Scandinavian, but has somewhat different causes and results in the two types of speech. Entirely Scandinavian are such changes as the loss of initial /j/ and of /w/ before rounded vowels (ON *ár, orð*, German *Jahr*, *Wort*, English *year*, *word*) and loss of final /n/ (which meant that the large word groups of weak nouns, weak adjectives and infinitives came to end in a vowel rather than /n/, cf. ON *fara*, OE *faran*, German *fahren* 'go, travel'). The characteristic suffixed definite article and *-s(k)* verb form (the latter with various functions, including reflexive, reciprocal, and passive) are also thought to have developed during the syncope period, but the first examples do not appear before the eleventh century.

The linguistic state after 700–750 is often known as Common Scandinavian. The uniformity suggested by this term may, however, reflect our lack of data as much as the real situation.[19] The earliest extant vernacular manuscripts (Iceland and Norway: twelfth century; Denmark and Sweden: late thirteenth) confirm the existence of numerous and significant linguistic differences between the various areas of Scandinavia. Many scholars have in fact reckoned with an 'East Nordic–West Nordic' split from as early as the end of the syncope

17 M. Syrett, *The Unaccented Vowels of Proto-Norse* (*NOWELE Supplement*, 11, Odense, 1994), pp. 20–1, 30–1.
18 Haugen, *The Scandinavian Languages*, p. 152.
19 M. Barnes, 'How "common" was Common Scandinavian?', in K. G. Goblirsch et al. (eds.), *Germanic Studies in Honor of Anatoly Liberman* (*NOWELE*, 31/32, Odense, 1977), pp. 29–42.

period (East Nordic is roughly the language of Denmark and Sweden, West Nordic that of Norway and later of the Atlantic colonies such as Iceland), but while certain of the features on which this distinction is based were doubtless in being by about 700 (e.g. more extensive breaking in EN, cf. *jak v*. WN *ek* 'I'), some important ones were not. Thus, monophthongisation of the falling diphthongs /ei/ /au/ /øy/ to /e:/ /ø:/ /ø:/ can be seen from runic inscriptions to have begun in Denmark around 900 and to have spread into Sweden during the eleventh century.

How far the EN/WN classification represents the true state of affairs at any period is questionable. By the end of the Viking Age, as Christianity and manuscript writing became established, the developing Danish and Swedish clearly possessed a number of features that distinguished them from the developing Norwegian and Icelandic. Equally clearly, however, the speech of Jylland and Sjælland must already have been diverging from that of Götaland and eastern Sweden, since our earliest vernacular manuscripts from these areas, written some two hundred years later, document a host of linguistic differences.

Scandinavian and other languages in the Viking and Middle Ages

There has been considerable debate about the extent to which *post*-syncope Scandinavian and the other Germanic tongues of the North Sea area were mutually intelligible.[20] Much clearly hangs on the definition of intelligibility. The far-reaching structural and lexical similarities between Scandinavian on the one hand and Old Saxon, Old English and, as far as can be determined, Old Frisian on the other, seem likely to have made rudimentary communication possible without the need to resort to language learning, but it is hard to see how this can have risen much above the slow articulation of simple phrases accompanied by gesticulation.

The high level of mutual understanding between Old Norse and Old English implied by certain Icelandic sagas, for example, is contradicted by the difficulty the modern learner of the one language has in reading the other. The distance between the written manifestations of Old Norse and Old Saxon and of Old Saxon and Old English seems equally great. Some forms of each language may,

20 See the discussion in E. Simensen, 'Språkkontakt over landegrenser', *Collegium Medievale*, 7 (1994:1), pp. 33–50.

of course, have been more easily comprehensible to speakers of neighbouring tongues than others, but concrete evidence for such 'transitional dialects' is virtually non-existent. Several recent studies of language contact between Anglo-Saxons and Norse settlers in England postulate two forms of speech so different that a pidgin was needed to facilitate communication.[21]

21 See the survey in M. Barnes, 'Norse in the British Isles', in A. Faulkes and R. Perkins (eds.), *Viking Revaluations* (London, 1992), pp. 65–84.