Eldar Heide:

Approaches to the study of linguistic identity in the Viking Age

How did the Viking migrations influence linguistic identities in Europe? To my knowledge, this question has hitherto not been addressed by scholars. I will try to define the problem and discuss the types of evidence that may cast light on the question.[1] My knowledge relevant for this question basically concerns Scandinavia, and through Matthew Townend 2002 I also have some knowledge of language conditions in Viking age England.

The expansion from Scandinavia in the Viking age brought the Scandinavian language community in contact with new language communities, or increased such contact, and it brought those language communities in contact with – or in closer contact with –the Old Scandinavian language community. This language contact obviously had linguistic consequences. Some of those consequences are objective and can be observed in the languages themselves, and they have been addressed by many scholars. Extensive research has been done on words and place-names borrowed between languages because of the Viking expansion. The results of such studies are relevant to linguistic identity, but do not directly concern that topic, because language change does not necessarily imply change of linguistic identity. A language can be considerably changed because of contact with another language, but if the users of the language are unaware of the changes – or they are aware of the changes, but conceive the language as one and the same all the time – their linguistic identity may still be the same.

Linguistic identity does not result from objective factors that constitute a certain language, but from subjective factors such as perception of community with other users of a certain language variety and perception of contrasts between one's own language and other languages, and between one's own language community and other language communities. Accordingly, when we investigate changes in linguistic identity caused by the Viking migrations, we are not

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[1] This article is based upon a 15-minute paper given at the workshop "Migration And Transcultural Identities In The Viking Age", University of Nottingham, 29 March – 1 April 2006. The article has obvious short-comings, but because it addresses an unexplored field, I hope my thoughts still may be of interest to others. The question of national identities in the Middle ages has been addressed by many scholars, cf. for instance Lunden 1994 and 1995, Bagge 1995, Mundal 1997 and Geary 2002, with references to earlier works. My intention is to stick strictly to linguistic identity and the Viking Age.

investigating objective changes in languages, but something subjectively *conceived* by the users of the languages. Therefore this question is very difficult. The users of the languages are all dead, so we cannot ask them about their linguistic identities, and they did not write essays on the topic before they died. But still I believe it is possible to get some understanding of linguistic identities in the Viking age. I will try to sketch out some types of sources that we can use and some possible approaches. From the following types of sources it should be possible to approach the issue through indirect reasoning:

- Ethnographic parallels from recent times.
- Contemporary sources.
- Later medieval sources.
- Linguistic products of language contact.
- Language names.
- Place names.

Ethnographic parallels from recent times

I believe ethnographic parallels from recent times are the type of sources that may give us the most developed idea of linguistic identities in the Viking age. Although this evidence is the most uncertain, it can show us the range of possibilities and remind us that the situation in the past may have been very different from what we take for granted. One interesting example is the language notions of the San people of the Kalahari desert. When the San are asked what language they speak, they cannot answer, because there is no answer. According to Janson 1997 (: 16 ff), the San people have no name for their own language, but linguists and anthropologists have collected more than 140 designations for it. Apparently the language is not an important element in the identity of the San people, and the same may be the case in other pre-modern societies. However, the context of the Kalahari desert is very different from Viking age Europe. The San used to live in tiny groups with no contact with other groups for most of the year, and they did not trade. In such a situation, it is understandable that linguistic contrast to other peoples is not an important identity factor. In Viking age Europe, on the other hand, there was a lot of trade and other long-distance contact, and most people were grouped with large quantities of people in some kind of state formation. In such a situation, it is hard to imagine that linguistic contrasts were not an

important identity factor. Nevertheless we should keep in mind that the language situation of the Viking age was qualitatively different from the present-day situation, because except for Latin there were no standard languages. Unlike today, the linguistic world was not divided into clearly defined and monumental "blocks" which form our linguistic identities from childhood. Basically, there were only different ways of speaking, more or less intelligible. This is a situation we can hardly imagine. – Another example I would like to draw attention to points in a direction very different from the San example. In modern Norwegian, a certain type of dialect name is identical with the inhabitant name for the same region. For example a person from Tromsø is called a *tromsøværing*, and the dialect of Tromsø is also called *tromsøværing* – which would parallel Scottish English being called *"Scotsman". This points to a very close connection between language and identity. Another interesting feature is that a dialect speaker will have two identities connected to his native language: A person from Tromsø is a speaker of *tromsøværing* and a speaker of Norwegian – depending on the situation. We should expect similar things in the past. Evidence from recent times can also make us aware of the fact that nationality and linguistic identity not necessarily correspond. Emigrant nations will stick to the linguistic identity of their homeland long after a new national identity has emerged – as Melberg 1951 (:147 ff.) points out. Compare for instance the many nations of the English and Spanish-speaking worlds.

Contemporary sources

On this topic Viking age sources from the Nordic countries and England hardly give any information, as far as I know (cf. Townend 2002). Continental sources I do not know.

Later medieval sources

Later Old Norse sources give us substantial information about language conditions in the Viking age – if we may assume that Icelandic tradition three or four centuries later still reflected conditions in the Viking age. Townend has demonstrated how these sources can be used in a retrospective method to explore language conditions, and concludes that Old Scandinavian and Old English in the Viking age were mutually intelligible. If this is right, we can get important information on linguistic identity from the claim in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* 1938 (: 70) that England, Norway and Denmark had the same language until the conquest by William the Conqueror. (Ein var þá tunga á Englandi sem í Noregi ok í Danmǫrku.) To us, Old English and

Old Scandinavian were obviously different languages, so if they were conceived as one and the same, it indicates that people in the Viking age would conceive unintelligibility as the border of their own language area. – Probably there is considerable more information on linguistic identity to be found in the Old Norse sources. I have not examined them for that purpose, but I will give an example that I happen to know about, in order to illustrate a possible way of reasoning. In *Eiríks saga rauða* 1935 (p. 233), which partly tells about settlement in America, it is told that Þorfinnr Karlsefni caught two native American boys. The saga writer says that the Scandinavians brought the boys with them and *kenndu þeim mál* – 'taught them speech'. It does not say that the Scandinavians taught them *their* speech, or the *Old Norse* speech, or something like that. The phrasing "taught them speech" indicates that at least 13th century Icelanders had an ethnocentric linguistic identity, considering their own language as *the* language, and unintelligible vernaculars as babble. Probably this was also the case in the Viking age, because such an attitude to other languages and their speakers is not unusual. *Barbarian* (Greek *barbaros*) literally means 'person whose speech is babble', from an ethnocentric Greek point of view, and the Slavic terms for a German (*nemtsy* in Russian) literally means 'speechless'.[2]

Linguistic products of language contact

Linguistic products of language contact may indirectly give us some information about the relative status of the groups in contact and consequently the linguistic identity of the speakers in the past. Language contact studies have shown that status differences between languages in contact are crucial for the product of the language contact. Let us assume a situation of long-lasting co-existence of a high-status language with few speakers and a low-status language with many speakers, where one of the languages finally dies, or they melt together. Then in the surviving language the phonology and intonation will basically be the one of the low-status language, whereas a large proportion of the vocabulary will come from the high-status language, particularly designations for high-status phenomena. English is a good example of this. It has many Scandinavian and French loan-words, but the pronunciation is hardly influenced by those languages at all. The language of the fjords of Finnmark in Northern Norway is another good example: Sámi used to be the majority language of those areas, but its status was low, and today most people have converted to Norwegian. The Norwegian that results from this process hardly

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[2] Thanks to Ildar Garipzanov for this information.

contains any Sámi words at all, but it *sounds* like Norwegian spoken by native Sámi-speakers. I cannot go further into this. My point is that there are such patterns, and that on the basis of these patterns it should be possible to say something about language and identity in the past. Partly based upon this kind of reasoning, Jurij Kusmenko and Mikael Rießler argue that the relationship between the Sámi and the Scandinavians was much more equal in the Middle Ages and before than in later times. (Example: Kusmenko 2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2005 and Rießler 2002.) Koivulehto (2002) reconstructs conditions in the bronze age on the basis of this kind of reasoning.

Language names:

Language names may give us some information of linguistic identities at the time the names were formed. The ethnocentric name "speech" that I just mentioned is an example of this. Another good example is *dǫnsk tunga* 'Old Scandinavian', literally 'Danish tongue'. The name is first attested in *Víkingarvísur* by the Icelander Sighvatr Þórðarson, generally assumed to be composed in 1014-15 (Finnur Jónsson 1912-15 B I: 213, 216; *Heimskringla* 1941 II: 39), and is attested several times in 13th century Icelandic sources. The fact that Icelanders at least from the late Viking Age onwards call their language "Danish tongue" indicates that Old Scandinavian in general was referred to by that term – as has been pointed out. This in turn implies that people all over Scandinavia to a certain degree had a common linguistic identity, or, in other words, that the linguistic differences within the Scandinavian language were neutralized at a certain level of consciousness. The term for the common language may also indicate where and when this neutralization of linguistic identities among the Scandinavians reached its peak. It must have been in a situation where the contrast between Scandinavians and non-Scandinavians was more important than internal contrasts, and where Danes dominated among the Scandinavians. Hammerich (1953: 120) has suggested that the term originated among the Scandinavians in the Danelaw during the Viking age, because this was the situation there, and therefore Danish would be the logical term for the common Scandinavian language.[3] The term Danish tongue also implies that at least in the western Scandinavian area, the contrasts to the languages in the north and east – Sámi, Finnish and Karelian – were less important for linguistic identity. Several other language names as well give indications about what contrasts were the most important in the past: *Saksa* is

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[3] Melberg 1951 (: 89 ff.) and Sandøy 2000 discusses the development of separate language names that followed the disintegration of the common Scandinavian language.

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the Finnish name for German, *allemagne* and the like is the French, Spanish and Portuguese name for German, and "Saxon" (Melberg 1951: 164) is the Welsh and Irish name for English (*Saeson* and *Sasanaigh* [<*Saxain*]). Yet the fact that the Germanic invaders of England called their common language English, i.e. "Anglish", not Saxon, gives some information about the internal linguistic identities of the Germanic invaders. *Deutsch*, literally "Peopleish", gives a piece of information on a different side of a linguistic identity, because it is contrasted to Latin.

Other interesting language names are *Russian* and *French*, and the name of the dialect of Normandy, *le normand*. In the first place, these names did not refer to the non-Germanic languages that they now refer to, but to the short-lived languages of Germanic conquerors of the early Middle Ages. French originally was the language of the Franks, Russian was the language of the *rus*, the ruling class from Sweden; and *le normand* originally was the language of the north-men, the Scandinavians. Possibly the process behind the transference of the terms can say something about linguistic identities in the past. I can see two ways to explain the transference. One possibility is that when the Franks, *rus* and north-men stopped speaking their own languages, they still regarded themselves as Franks, *rus* and north-men, and therefore transferred the names of their original languages to their new languages. If this was the case, which I find the most probable, the language names shows how the ethnic identity of the conquerors outlived their linguistic identity. Another possibility, which Melberg puts forward (1951: 190 ff.), is that the people will want to be like the rulers, and therefore call themselves the same as the rulers, and may therefore transfer the name of the rulers' language to their own. (The late Greek habit of calling the Greek language "Roman" [*rhōmaîika* = "Romaic", Melberg 1951: 201 ff.] would parallel this.) Also if this was the case, the language names contain information about linguistic identity in the past. – A lot more could be said about language names, but I hope this is enough to visualize some ways of reasoning from them.

Place names
Scandinavian place names indicate that the people who lived there when the names were given had a Scandinavian linguistic identity. Townend (2002: 43 ff.) argues that Old English place

names transformed into Scandinavian indicate that Old English and Old Scandinavian were mutually intelligible[4], which of course has implications for identity.

Conclusion

Although exploration of linguistic identities in Viking age Europe obviously is a very difficult task, I do not consider it fruitless. By indirect reasoning from diverse sources, I am sure it is possible to reach interesting results. Such research would be valuable not only for its own sake, but also to modify certain post-modern, relativist ideas of ethnicity. If ethnicity is something outward, it may be changed like a piece of clothing. But people don't switch languages with a click of the fingers, so when we take language into account, ethnicity and identity are more stable phenomena.

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[4] On the question of intelligibility between Old Scandinavian and other Old Germanic languages, I would like to mention Nesse 2002 and Heide 2003. Their conclusions support Townend.

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