7 The role of contact in English syntactic change
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As an English historical linguist I will concentrate on the syntactic influence of languages that were spoken/written in England during the Old and Middle English periods and the very early Modern period, ignoring the influence of the Celtic substratum (a topic which will probably be addressed by Theo Vennemann) and of languages that influenced English after it had become a colonial and world language (which will be addressed in quite of few of the papers offered). In other words, I will be mainly concerned with the influence of Scandinavian, Latin and French on the English morphosyntactic system as it developed in the British Isles in the earlier periods.

I will first address some general issues, such as what has been said about the differences between phonological, lexical and syntactic borrowing (the lesser permeability of the syntactic level in this respect), and the way in which syntactic borrowing typically takes place (creeping in where it is least salient). I will also consider the different socio-cultural and demographic circumstances under which the above three languages influenced English. These three aspects will, at the same time, be themselves subject to investigation in connection with the instances of borrowing that I wish to look at.

Whether a particular construction is borrowed or not is not always so easy to decide. A good starting point is to do some comparative research, i.e. in what ways does the morphosyntactic system of English differ qualitatively from its sister Germanic languages (German, Dutch, Swedish etc.) or differ from them in the rate of development of any changes taking place. This is also one of the methods used by linguists wishing to establish in how far English is shaped by a Celtic substratum. It is notable, for instance, that English acquired a word order that became increasingly more fixed than is the case in the other Germanic languages, and it lost its inflectional system much earlier. Another way in is to look at Present-day English constructions that did not occur in Old English, and do not occur in the sister languages, which can then be investigated with respect to the possibility of their having been influenced by contact with other languages, at the same time finding out in how far these new forms may also be due to internal developments.

With the above in mind, I will look at a number of morphosyntactic constructions where contact has been suggested or seen as a possibility, such as the influence of Old Norse on the emerging determiner system and the pronoun system and on the development of particle verbs, the influence of French on adjectival position and prepositional phrasal expressions, the influence of Latin on new infinitival constructions etc. I will argue that most of these constructions can be explained not just by contact but by a combination of contact and internal developments; in other words, one needs to look at the system as a whole to understand the nature of their ‘borrowing’. In this light it is also of interest to look at foreign constructions that entered in certain styles but did not quite make it, to find out in how far the circumstances of their introduction differed from the circumstances of the ones that did. Another important factor in borrowing that needs to be looked at is the factor of frequency, not just how frequent the foreign construction may have been heard (or seen), but also how frequent the native construction was that was replaced or kept.