

A note on the relationship between Scandinavian and Low German

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Abstract

Recent work on language contact between Scandinavian and Low German during the Middle Ages widely assumes that the varieties were linguistically close enough to permit some kind of receptive multilingualism, and hence an example of dialect contact. Two arguments that have been invoked in support of this scenario are the lack of (1) meta-linguistic comments on flawed understanding, and (2) attested bilingualism. However, towards the end of the most intense contact period, in the early sixteenth century, there is indeed meta-linguistic information in the preserved sources suggesting that intelligibility was restricted. Furthermore, there are also examples of code-switching and active bilingualism indicating that the varieties were clearly perceived as distinct languages. This paper presents such examples from Norwegian primary sources that have not been observed in recent scholarship. Based on this evidence, it is argued that the relationship between the languages by the early sixteenth century was asymmetric, Scandinavians being able to understand Low German more often than vice versa.

Keywords: Scandinavian, Low German, language contact, multilingualism, code-switching.

1 Introduction

The medieval contact between Scandinavian and Low German has been the subject of much scholarly interest. Traditional accounts focus on the massive amount of lexical borrowings that entered the Scandinavian languages during the Middle Ages. The last 30 years or so have seen a revival of the field from new perspectives (cf. the contributions in Elmevik and Jahr 2012), and more attention has been given to the importance of language contact for the grammatical changes that the Mainland Scandinavian languages underwent. Another much discussed issue has been the question of linguistic distance between the varieties involved and whether the contact scenario was closer to dialect contact than language contact. A popular hypothesis in recent years has been that the varieties were mutually intelligible and that speakers of Scandinavian and Low German communicated through a form of *receptive multilingualism*.

The fragmentation of dialect areas into separate languages, and subsequent contact between varieties where the difference between language and dialect is unclear, applies to many specific situations in language history (cf. e.g. Wright 2012). The particular issue of intelligibility between closely related languages has been much discussed in Germanic (especially Scandinavian), and comparable research exists for the Romance languages (e.g. Ciobanu and Dinu 2014). This paper will attempt to shed more light on the contact situation between Scandinavian and Low German during the Late Middle Ages, and is further intended

contribute to discussions of comparable contact situations elsewhere.

While there has been much research activity in the area in recent years, some information in the medieval sources has not been sufficiently observed in previous work. Two aspects of the contact situation will be addressed here: first, meta-linguistic comments regarding language understanding; and second, examples of code-mixing and bilingual scribes. Most of the evidence presented here has not been discussed before, or has only been treated in older studies that are not reflected in the recent scholarly debate. Incorporating these perspectives may contribute to a more complete understanding of the relationship between Scandinavian and Low German at the end of the Middle Ages. It is argued that the linguistic distance between Scandinavian and Low German by this time was larger than has sometimes been claimed, and that the relationship was asymmetric: Norwegians (who needed it) were bilingual, whereas speakers of Low German were not.¹

Section 2 gives some background on receptive multilingualism and discusses methodological issues in dealing with this phenomenon in the past. Sections 3 and 4 present two kinds of evidence regarding the relationship between the varieties: meta-linguistic comments in medieval texts (Section 3) and evidence of bilingualism (Section 4). The contact situation and the relationship between the languages – or rather their speakers – during the early sixteenth century is then discussed in Section 5, before some concluding remarks in Section 6.

2 Mutual intelligibility and receptive multilingualism

A crucial issue regarding the medieval contact situation has been the question of whether the varieties involved should be considered different languages or dialects. This question might be rephrased as follows (Trudgill 2000): where on the continuum between these extremes was the linguistic reality located, i.e. to what *degree* were the varieties mutually intelligible?

Similar questions have been addressed in many comparable situations past and present. Much recent research (e.g. Gooskens 2007; Frinsel et al. 2015) focusses on measuring intelligibility by relying on linguistic factors and controlling for previous exposure, an approach that is far removed from practical communicative contexts and that may not be directly comparable to the medieval situation. Gooskens (2007) compares the situation in Scandinavian with Dutch, Frisian, and Afrikaans, where mutual intelligibility is also possible. However in practice communication by receptive multilingualism is less common, since Frisians also speak Dutch and speakers of Afrikaans rarely come into contact with Dutch and Frisian because of the geographic distance. This seems to indicate that established communicative patterns are important.

2.1 Receptive multilingualism

The term *semi-communication* was used by Haugen (1966) to describe the relationship between contemporary Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish (and dialects of these languages), where speakers of closely related languages understand other varieties based on their own monolingual competence. Other scholars have used different terms, and I shall use receptive multilingualism here (cf. Braunmüller 2012: 95 on the different terms). No speaker of any

¹ Dutch and Low German formed a dialect continuum and throughout this article “Low German” is used as a superordinate term for this continuum; however, where necessary, linguistic differences between Dutch and Low German dialects will be noted.

language is oblivious to variation, as everyone is exposed to different dialects and registers. As an extension of this, incomplete understanding of a similar variety may develop into some form of passive or receptive multilingualism, where speakers learn to understand the other variety through their own competence. It is, however, very hard to keep this phenomenon apart from bilingualism in written records, as will become evident.

Three factors can be singled out that have been suggested to affect mutual intelligibility (see e.g. Gooskens 2007: 446): 1) attitude; 2) contact and exposure; and 3) linguistic distance. A fundamental premise of receptive multilingualism is the willingness to understand each other (Braunmüller 1995b: 41). This is to a large degree governed by the communication situation, yet not easy to test with modern sociolinguistic approaches to language attitudes. Recent studies have pointed to limited effects of non-linguistic factors (attitude and contact) on intelligibility (Gooskens 2007: 446), but the practical necessities of medieval business encounters must have provided a great incentive to understand, which may not be directly comparable to present-day experiments. Braunmüller (2012: 97) notes “the absolute *desire* to understand each other, especially in trading situations.”

One important point that has emerged in recent research on modern languages, however, is that intelligibility between two varieties may be asymmetric (see e.g. Frinsel et al. 2015 with references on Scandinavian; Ciobanu and Dinu 2014: 3316 on Romance). For instance, Norwegian speakers generally understand Swedish and Danish better than vice versa, probably because the widespread use of dialects in Norway makes them used to linguistic variation (cf. Gooskens 2007: 453, 462). The regularity in phoneme mapping between languages can also be asymmetric, as demonstrated by Frinsel et al. (2015) for Swedish and Danish; for instance, Danish /ə/ may correspond to both Swedish /ə/ and /a/. The possibility of asymmetric intelligibility must therefore also be kept in mind when considering earlier contexts.

The question of mutual intelligibility between medieval Low German and Scandinavian was the main focus of a project led by Kurt Braunmüller in Hamburg 1990–1995 (cf. the summary with a bibliography in Braunmüller 2012). Through contrastive analyses of linguistic structure and lexis, the project concluded that the varieties studied were in fact mutually intelligible, and Braunmüller (1995b) describes the semiotic strategies involved in contact through receptive multilingualism. The hypothesis is then that this was the mode of communication between speakers of Middle Low German and Scandinavian during their long contact period from the High Middle Ages to Early Modern Time (e.g. Braunmüller 1995a, 1997).²

2.2 Research on other Germanic languages

Moulton (1988) addresses the general question of mutual intelligibility among the older Germanic languages. Rather than the situation in present-day Scandinavia, Moulton takes the similar case of Swiss German dialects as his point of departure. Swiss Germans speak their own dialect in interaction with people from other dialect areas (probably with some accommodation), despite significant linguistic differences, and through exposure learn to “convert” the input and understand other dialects than their own. By comparing the differences between Swiss German dialects to differences between various Old Germanic versions of the Lord’s Prayer, Moulton argues that medieval Germanic peoples would have been able to

² Braunmüller (2012: 96) still considers this a hypothesis, since the available evidence does not allow us to (dis)prove it.

communicate in a similar manner – with a bit of practice. He remains agnostic, however, as to how long this situation lasted, as the different varieties were gradually diverging and eventually became recognised as different and distinct languages (Moulton 1988: 26; cf. Berg 2016 on the recognition of different Scandinavian languages).

Townend (2002: 182–183) concludes that there was probably “adequate mutual intelligibility between speakers of Norse and English in the Viking Age.” The qualification in “adequate” is important, and he suggests that one may also speak of “pragmatic intelligibility”, by which he means the ability to understand single words. This facilitates simple communication, especially with some mutual accommodation regarding articulation, yet is not the same as perfect understanding of rapidly spoken complex sentences. This description may fit the communication between speakers of Low German and Scandinavian as well.

2.3 Methodological approaches

In his book-length treatment of the somewhat similar contact situation between Old English and Scandinavian in Viking Age England, Townend (2002) draws on modern attempts to measure intelligibility and identifies four major methods that can all be adapted to historical contexts dependent on written sources (Townend 2002: 13–17):

1. Informant tests: Townend argues that exchange between English and Scandinavian place-names is a historical equivalent of modern informant testing.³ Written texts in one language ostensibly expected to be understood by speakers of another may also give similar information.
2. Informant opinions: Direct statements (or implicit in the description of proceedings) in medieval sources about comprehension or lack thereof between the varieties involved.
3. Linguistic comparison: To establish the linguistic similarity between two varieties by comparing linguistic structure, genetic relationship, phonological inventory, lexis, etc. is obviously suitable also for historical language stages – to the degree that these can be reconstructed.
4. Social relations: Indirect evidence from various disciplines, most importantly history, but also philology, art history, archaeology etc., illuminates the social relations between the involved varieties, including sociolinguistic factors such as contact (language exposure) and language attitudes (“desire to understand”, Braunmüller 2012: 97).

A full evaluation of both the linguistic similarities allowing mutual intelligibility as well as the sociolinguistic context favouring it must include all of these methods. Previous studies of Scandinavian and Low German language contact have focussed on linguistic comparison (no. 3) and the social relations between speakers of Low German and Scandinavian (no. 4). I shall try to adduce evidence gained by methods 1 and 2 in the above list to reach a more complete picture of the contact situation.

2.4 Evidence from written sources

³ For instance, the substitution of Old Norse *heimr* for the Old English cognate *hām* ‘homestead’ in place names implies that the Scandinavians understood the meaning of the previous English name (Townend 2002: Ch. 3).

The Hamburg project dealt mainly with Swedish and Danish, and used linguistic comparison as its main method (no. 3 above). Jahr (1999) discusses the Norwegian situation more thoroughly, and considers various strategies for proving or disproving the hypothesis that communication between speakers of Low German and Scandinavian was possible through some kind of receptive multilingualism. One such strategy is searching for direct statements on the intelligibility of languages in preserved sources from the period (cf. method 2 above). Jahr (1999: 130) knows of only one instance “where there is a direct reference to comprehension”; cf. also Braunmüller (2012: 96–97) in a similar vein. However, there are more to be found, and a number of observations will be considered in Section 3. Most of these refer to written texts, yet there are also examples that mention spoken language.

There are typological differences between the results of language and dialect contact (Trudgill 1994; this is a recurring topic of Trudgill’s work). Jahr (1999) exploits such differences as a kind of negative evidence for assuming dialect contact: normal outcomes of language contact, e.g. widespread bilingualism, mixed languages, and code-switching, are not attested in Scandinavian late medieval sources (Jahr 1999: 131–135; cf. also Braunmüller 1995a: 16–17). This supports the hypothesis of mutually intelligible varieties, as such a scenario provides no reason for being actively bilingual. However, exactly these kinds of contact phenomena appear in sources overlooked in previous research, and evidence of bilingual scribes code-switching between Low German and Scandinavian is presented in Section 4.

One must keep in mind in the ensuing discussion that our evidence is written, whereas the contact between speakers of these languages was mainly oral. It is easy to envision different comprehension of written and spoken versions of the same language, but hard to measure this for past times. There is no easy way to overcome this obstacle, and we need to be aware of it in our interpretation of the available data.

3 Meta-linguistic information on intelligibility

Direct statements on the (un-)intelligibility of some variety in the historical records are equivalent to eliciting informant opinions in present-day contexts. Such remarks are presented here according to whether they emphasise understanding or lack thereof, which coincides with the national origin of the informants in an interesting pattern.

3.1 Lack of comprehension

The one explicit statement about lack of mutual intelligibility commented on by Jahr (1999: 130) is found in a letter from German merchants in Bergen to their superiors in Lübeck in 1502, where they mention a letter from the Swedish Council of the Realm with the following words:

- (1) *vppe swedesch gescreuen den wy noch so gruntlike nicht vorstan hebben*
‘written in Swedish, which we have not understood so well’⁴
(From Brattegard 1932: 302)

⁴ All translations are my own; this applies both to linguistic examples and quotes in languages other than English.

Taken at face value, this would imply that even Germans living in Bergen could not understand written Swedish. Although the Scandinavian languages were and remain mutually intelligible, different writing traditions may have posed an extra obstacle with the Swedish letter compared to a text in Norwegian. The merchants further add that they will have the letter translated into German, and it is clear that the Germans were at least apt to employ ad hoc translators, although it appears that they did not have anyone at hand.

The German humanist Hartmann Schedel published a world history called *Liber Chronicarum* in 1493 (often referred to as the *Nuremberg Chronicle* in English). It includes a short description of Scandinavia where it is told that the “Germans” could not understand the language in Denmark:

- (2) *Daciam Theutones hodie Danorum appellant marchiam, cuius lingua Germanis incognita est*
‘The Teutons today call Dacia the march of the Danes, whose language is unknown to the Germans’
(From Karlsen 2014: 237)

It is unclear whether “Theutones” and “Germani” were synonyms for Schedel (Karlsen 2014: 240 n. 20), although it seems likely. His description of Scandinavian geography is rather vague and erroneous, which casts some doubt on the value of this remark; on the other hand, Schedel has a fairly good understanding of the contemporary history of Scandinavia and it thus seems likely that he also had an impression of the relative intelligibility of the languages.

In 1532 Henrik Rantzau, a German-speaking Dane from Schleswig-Holstein, wrote to his brother-in-law about a letter that had arrived (DN XIII, no. 585, in Danish), but which he could not read:

- (3) *Jck hadde ouirsth keynen schriuer dede konde Dansk leszenn vnnd virsthann*
‘But I had no scribe who could read and understand Danish’
(DN XIII, no. 587)

In the example, again a native speaker of German complains about lack of comprehension, and goes on to ask his brother-in-law for an explication of the contents. Skautrup (1947: 169) mentions a couple of similar examples regarding Danish officials of German origin who could not understand Danish. Johann Wenth was bishop in Ribe around 1540, but he did not speak Danish and had to use an interpreter during visitation. Jørgen Klingenberg, who was steward (*statholder*) at the royal castle in Copenhagen in 1539, complained that he did not understand the charters that he put his seal on because they were written in Danish. These examples of Danish officials with no command of Danish clearly demonstrate the important position of Low German within Denmark as a language of the state (cf. Winge 1992).

3.2 Comprehension

On the other hand, there are examples that demonstrate comprehension of Low German by Scandinavians. In 1539, three citizens of Oslo testified that they had examined an accountancy book that had belonged to the deceased Henrich Hollender.⁵ Twice they make

⁵ Henrich was probably an immigrant merchant. He is also mentioned in DN II, no. 1128 (1539), and is

clear that although the book was written in Dutch (*hollendsche maall*), it was intelligible to them, as shown in (4) and repeated almost verbatim at the end of the charter.

- (4) *paa hollendsche maall schreffuit dog oss well forstandeligt*
'written in Dutch language yet intelligible to us'
(DN II, no. 1127)

The use of “Dutch” (*hollendsche maall*) is interesting in itself, as all German and Dutch dialects were usually called German (Winge 1992: 31–32; cf. example 5). The fact that they felt the need to stress (twice) that Dutch was intelligible should indicate that this was by no means obvious (cf. Nedkvitne 2014: 92). The citizens have surnames (*Busk, Been, and Lassen*), which indicates that they belonged to immigrant merchant families and may well have been bilingual (only the nobility in Norway had surnames during the Middle Ages).

A written reference to spoken language is found in a letter written in Rome in 1522 by the exiled archbishop of Trondheim (in medieval times called *Nidaros*), Erik Valkendorf, and addressed to the Danish Council of the Realm. Erik refers to a meeting in Amsterdam with a Dutch woman and includes a quote in the original language (bold-faced):⁶

- (5) *hwn sagde paa tydske **min suster wil iw in den torn hebben, wnd sy wil iw doet hebben, och spoerde megh ...***
'She said in German: “My sister wants you in the tower [i.e. prison] and she wants you dead”, and asked me ...'
(DN I, no. 1059)

Apart from the fact that the archbishop and/or his scribe could understand the quote and even reproduce it in writing much later, the quote also shows the expectation that the addressee would understand it.

3.3 Mutual intelligibility?

The examples set forth here provide evidence of German-speaking people not understanding Scandinavian and Scandinavians understanding Dutch (which was almost the same as Low German). This is, I believe, crucial. Everything points towards Scandinavian speakers understanding Low German/Dutch; compare also the statement by Skautrup (1947: 34) on the situation in late medieval Denmark: “Man hører [...] aldrig, at tysken (plattysken) ikke blev forstået” [One never hears that the German (Low German) was not understood]. I have, however, found one such instance from Norway. A note on the political situation in 1528–1529 expresses fear that foreigners (*fræmmende*) might take over Norwegian fiefs (DN X, no. 578), and cites a concern said to be common among the farmers that “we do not understand any German” (*vii fforstaa jnghen Tyske*). This raises doubt about the conclusion by Nedkvitne (2014: 88) that “cultural tensions based on language between Germans and Scandinavians in this period were unimportant”. It is likely though that the possibility of losing valuable fiefs was more alarming to the Norwegian nobility than communication problems, and the

probably the same man as *Henryck Hianzen Hollender* who issued DN II, no. 1113 (1535).

⁶ The mentioned sister is Sigbrit Willoms. She was of Dutch origin, but moved to Bergen where she established herself as a petty trader. Her daughter Dyveke became the mistress of King Christiern II, while Sigbrit became one the king's most important advisors, especially in financial matters.

purported worries among farmers may have been nothing more than a suitable argument. It is in any case interesting that “foreign” is immediately associated with German language, not with Swedish or Danish. This points to a perceived unity among the Scandinavians – at least those who expressed themselves in writing, i.e. the upper classes – against the others, i.e. the Germans. As social factors are important for mutual understanding among related varieties (cf. Section 2.3), this is probably a relevant point, enhancing communication among Scandinavians, yet alienating them from the Germans.

4 Bilingualism, translations, and code-mixing

The lack of widespread bilingualism, code-switching, and translations between the languages has also been taken as an indication that the languages were mutually intelligible (Jahr 1999: 131–132; Braunmüller 2012: 97), since there would then be no need to switch between them. It should be noted that this applies to translations for practical and economic-administrative purposes; prose literature was indeed translated, and such texts formed the basis for the linguistic comparison of the Hamburg project mentioned above. Braunmüller (2012: 97) notes the occurrence of translations from the second half of the sixteenth century onwards, and links this change in practice to the divergence of the involved varieties.

Closer scrutiny of the Norwegian sources does, however, bring to light both bilingualism and code-mixing at a slightly earlier date. Although we are forced to concentrate on written sources, a rare direct reference to oral bilingualism is found in a document from 1486 (DN V, no. 936) about the arrival of an English ship to Marstrand in southern Norway (present-day Sweden). It is noted that the ship had an interpreter who spoke both Norwegian and German.⁷ This also shows that trade with the British was conducted through interpreters (cf. Berg in press.).

4.1 Bilingual scribes and translations

Nesse (2002: 118–123) discusses a number of letters between Norwegians and Germans in Bergen and texts of interest to both groups from 1330–1727. She concludes that the normal practice was that each group wrote its own language. Nonetheless, translations were not especially infrequent, as seen in a number of documents translated from Danish into Low German in the 1530s and 1540s. In one of them, DN XI, no. 661, written in Bergen in 1543, the scribe Jørgen Hansson states that he has translated the text from “Danish or Norwegian” into German “as best as I could”. He was, then, by his own testimony bilingual.

The original language in such cases is often referred to as “Danish or Norwegian”, for instance in a couple of Dutch translations of Norwegian charters (DN V, nos. 1077 [1534] and 1091 [1538]). This may have been a way of referring to Danish written in Norway, due to insecurity about the difference between the languages (possible for the Dutch scribes but not for Jørgen Hansson), or just a tautological expression with roots in classical rhetoric, as Nesse believes (2002: 98–99, 120). The Scandinavian languages do not seem to have been recognised as three clearly separated entities with specific properties during the Middle Ages (cf. Section 3.3 on the sense of Scandinavian unity); the first clear examples of inter-Scandinavian linguistic opposition are found in the early sixteenth century (Berg 2016).

⁷ Incidentally, this is also the first known occurrence of Norwegian (*norske*) as the name of the language; its use as a national adjective is older (Berg 2016).

People were certainly aware of dialectal differences, but they were not connected to ideas of national languages, as far as we can tell. Danish and Norwegian continued to be used more or less interchangeably as language names, and I agree with Nesse that phrases such as “Danish or Norwegian” probably meant very little.

In March 1532 a deal was made in Trondheim between representatives of the archbishop and a Dutch mariner who was going to take a ship from Trondheim to the Netherlands and back again. The contract (DN VII, no. 692) is written in Low German and signed by the skipper. The same hand as the signature also wrote two receipts related to the deal (DN VII, nos. 693–694) in Dutch.⁸ There are clear linguistic differences between the documents, and the handwriting of the Low German contract resembles the handwriting of Scandinavian documents from the archbishopric at the same time. A scribe in Trondheim ostensibly wrote the text, and did so in Low German for the benefit of the Dutch skipper. On the other hand, a contemporary note related to the deal but made only for internal administrative purposes (DN VIII, no. 678) is written in Scandinavian.

The scribe may himself have been a German. A few years later, a scribe called *Henrick tysk* ‘German’ worked in Trondheim (Seip 1936: 67, 88, 114). The commander at Bergen Castle also had a German scribe around 1531; a list of employees (DN XIII, no. 582) mentions both a scribe and specifically a German scribe. This would not be necessary if all involved parties could easily read and understand both languages, and indicates a need on the Norwegian side to be able to produce documents in Low German.

Wilhelm Franck, a man who is mentioned in documents from 1523–1530, is known to have been multilingual. He is first called a servant of Joachim I Nestor, Prince-electoral of Brandenburg, and was probably of German origin (DN XIII, no. 199). He later went into the service of the exiled King Christiern II of Denmark and reported to the king in writing (DN IX, no. 559; X, nos. 488, 492, 501, and 560). Wilhelm’s Danish is peculiar, even considering the variable orthographic practices of the time, probably due to Danish being a second language for him. Nesse (2002: 143) mentions similar “broken” language in letters by Klaus Kniphoff, a Dutch man who wrote a letter in erroneous Danish. Wilhelm Franck also issued a letter in High German (DN X, no. 615), but that seems to have been written in another hand. Some preserved receipts are said to be written “with his own hand”. In addition to Danish, there are also two in Low German (DN XIV, no. 350; X, no. 497) and one in High German (DN XIV, no. 363). I have not been able to inspect the originals, but there is no reason to doubt his word that they are written by himself in these cases. Wilhelm Franck thus provides an example of a multilingual person exploiting a wide linguistic repertoire in writing.⁹

4.2 Code-mixing in accountancy books

Most medieval scribes are anonymous and can only be identified across texts based on palaeographic criteria and consistent orthography. If the aim is to identify a scribe writing in two (or more) different languages, the latter point becomes useless, as each language may have its own orthographic customs even in a pre-standardised period. In an edition of accountancy books from the archbishopric of Trondheim in the 1530s (Seip 1936), such palaeographic identification is carried out and reveals that some scribes were in fact bilingual.

⁸ The original documents are in the Norwegian National Archive, München papir nos. 3149, 3150, and 3151.

⁹ I am grateful to the Danish National Archive for making photocopies of his letters available to me. Unfortunately, it was not possible to track down the receipts. According to the information in DN, they are written on single sheets of paper (i.e. not only preserved in a copy book) and hence probably genuine.

Hand G in the edition identifies himself as Gaute Taraldsson. Gaute is a known figure from the period: he was a Norwegian, educated in Cologne and Leuven, and served the archbishop in Trondheim and later the king of Denmark-Norway. He wrote manuscripts VI and VII in Seip (1936), both concerning hired Dutch mariners (or mercenaries). The text itself is rather uninteresting, consisting mostly of names, but there are also a few short comments in Scandinavian and an abundance of Low German loanwords. They are not adjusted to Scandinavian spelling customs, e.g. *Veltskerer* ‘barber’ with <v> for initial /f/, a practice unknown in Scandinavian.¹⁰ We may also note the striking difference between the section headings: ms. VII has the Low German terms *Stiireluden*, *Skiplude*, *Bodzluden* (from Low German *lūt* ‘people’), ms. VI Scandinavian *Styremend*, *Skipmend*, *Bodzmend* (*mend* ‘men’). The compounds are terms for various maritime positions, and we see that the first element in each is similar or even identical. Gaute also wrote DN XII, no. 570, and made a transcript of DN XII, no. 572, in Low German. The transcript has independent spellings that seem to be more “normal” Low German (i.e. closer to the Lübeck norm) than the Dutch-marked spellings in the manuscript after which the text is printed.¹¹ It is typical of medieval scribes to follow one’s own orthographic habits even when copying a text word by word, and the fact that Gaute ostensibly had orthographic habits in Low German means that he was bilingual and able to write both languages.

Manuscript IV in the edition is written by two hands, labelled D and K; the former identifies himself as Peter Bartschjer ‘barber’. The heading of this manuscript is given in both Latin and Low German (*Anno Christi mdxxxvj / Jnt jaar xxxvj*), and it is an account of the archbishop’s estate in Bergen for 1536. The text is mainly in Scandinavian (Danish with Norwegian interference), yet there are also Low German entries, as in (6a–b), and code-switching (6c), all by hand D.¹²

- (6) a. *Jtem gereckendt all ding dodt met Kleine Pauell dat myn heer blyfft em skyldiig xliij bg. g.*
‘all things accounted and settled with Kleine Pauell so that my lord owes him 43 Bergen-guilders’
(Seip 1936: 139)
- b. *Jtem gegewe dem kyper viij β*
‘given to the buyer 8 shilling’
(Seip 1936: 146)
- c. *Jtem gerekendt medt Roleff Røwekamp all ding dodtt saa dat he blyfft minnum here skyldug viij voger fiisk oc ij st^e miöll*
‘accounted and all things settled with Rolef Røwekamp so that he owes my lord 8 voger fish and 2 units of flour’
(Seip 1936: 137)

As usual in listings from this time, Latin *item* marks the beginning of each entry. The units of measurement (*voger* has no English equivalent) are Scandinavian, except *st[ykk]e*, which was

¹⁰ Nesse (2008: 58) notes that the translation of Norwegian *ffallentin* to Low German *valentin* (personal name) shows that the name was pronounced with initial /f/ in both languages. Here we find adaptation to different orthographic practices in the two languages.

¹¹ Gaute’s transcript is in the Norwegian National Archive, München papir no. 4199.

¹² Nesse (2002: 142) did not find any code-switching in documents from Bergen. She probably did not consider this source because the archbishop himself was based in Trondheim, yet his representatives in Bergen conducted trade with Dutch and Low German merchants.

borrowed from Low German *Stucke* ‘unit’. (6a) has a Scandinavian spelling of *skyldig* ‘indebted’ for the usual Low German *schuldich*. (6c) by the same scribe is very similar, yet switches to Scandinavian from *minnum* ‘my.DAT’. The spelling < saa > in the subjunction *saa dat* is probably due to Scandinavian orthographic practice where < aa > could denote /o/ or /ɔ/; the normal Low German form was < so >.

Hand K also code-switches. At one point he writes something like (6a) in Low German, then switches inter-sententially to Scandinavian in giving the date: *Detth skedde paa helge kors affthen* ... [it happened on Feast of the Cross eve ...]. (7) is a heavily mixed example by hand K:

- (7) *Anno 1536 alting klar geregnet met Hans Køne dett min herre bliffuer honum skuldich effwen j^e smalt woge fisk*
 ‘all things set and accounted with Hans Køne that my lord owes him exactly 100 woge fish’
 (Seip 1936: 135)

The sentence starts as (6a), but *geregnet* with < g > shows Danish influence despite the Low German prefix *ge-*; the subjunction *dett* is Low German, as is *effwen* ‘exactly’; the rest of the sentence is in Scandinavian. The spelling of *skuldich* is also interesting: Low German would normally have *schuldich*, Scandinavian *skyldig/-ug*, so it appears to be a compromise form. Spellings like < geregnet > and < skuldich > are clear signs that the scribe was influenced by two conflicting orthographic codes.

4.3 Code-mixing phenomena

The most interesting examples provided here are similar sentences drawn from similar sources, and so one might assume that we are dealing with some kind of fixed phrasal structure characteristic of accountancy writing. Nevertheless, the independent way in which these phrases are written as well as the occurrence of orthographic compromise forms and genuine code-switching forces us to conclude that the scribes of manuscript IV had some knowledge of both Scandinavian and Low German. These bilinguals are found in the milieu that dealt with foreign merchants on behalf of the archbishopric. This is hardly a surprise. Braunmüller (1995b: 36 n. 2) points out that scribes working in a bilingual environment (*in casu* Stockholm) had to master both written languages, and Nesse (2002: 99 and elsewhere) likewise points to bilingual scribes such as the aforementioned Jørgen Hansson.

It is harder to find code-switching outside economic-administrative documents (cf. Berg *in press*), and the Hamburg project found no such examples in “official documents” (Braunmüller 2012: 98). Code-switching with Latin is also found mainly in informal documents, and this seems to be a common pattern across languages (Schendl 2012: 527). In other text types we frequently find Low German loanwords, yet rarely clear examples of code-switching. A letter from 1535 may give another example, depending on your conception of what constitutes a code-switch.

- (8) *... att thet wore jcke van noden att y och the skulle drage her vp till oss*
 ‘... that it was not necessary that you and they should come up to us’
 (DN XII, no. 560)

van noden ‘necessary’ in (8) is clearly Low German, but may be analysed as a lexical borrowing. The next day two similar letters (DN XII, nos. 562 and 563) were written to other addressees by another scribe, and this phrase appears in both of them as *aff nōdhenn*, a form adapted to Scandinavian. The same scribe that wrote DN XII, no. 560, also wrote DN XII, no. 559, the same day, where we find the form *schadelicht* ‘harmful’ with a spelling influenced by Low German (cf. above on ⟨ch⟩ vs. ⟨k⟩). In no. 559, he did not use the phrase *van noden* or any variant of it, but rather paraphrased the meaning with *haffue behoff* ‘have need’. Taken together, this may indicate a bilingual scribe at work.¹³

As pointed out by e.g. Jahr (1999: 132), conclusions about individual professional scribes cannot be extended without reservations to larger groups of people. Nevertheless, this discussion has shown that there are at least some sure cases of bilingual scribes. One of the reasons why we have so few examples of code-mixing may be that documents of an economic or administrative nature are rarely preserved from earlier times, yet it is in texts of this kind such phenomena usually occur and there may be more to be found in the archives (cf. Berg in press.).

5 Discussion

The primary sources examined above allow further discussion of some aspects of the contact situation between Scandinavian and Low German. I shall start out by returning to the question of receptive multilingualism, before I discuss the role of Low German in the relevant speech communities and some aspects of writing practice that are relevant to our understanding of the available sources.

5.1 Receptive multilingualism revisited

As mentioned initially, it has become customary in recent years to assume mutual intelligibility between Low German and Scandinavian. The research of Braunmüller and others supporting this hypothesis was based on Danish and Swedish (cf. Section 2.4). Due to the close relationship between Norwegian and Swedish/Danish, it is not unreasonable to believe that the results apply to Norway as well; however, the sociolinguistic situation was not identical. In her discussion of the issue, Nesse (2002: 133–138) concludes that the possibility for receptive multilingualism was probably weaker in Norway. Within Norway, Low German was an especially important language in Bergen, where the Hanseatic League had one of its four main trading stations, the *Kontor*. For several hundred years, a large colony of Germans lived and worked there, and this intensive contact situation has been used as an explanation for some peculiar features of the Bergen dialect (Jahr 1999; Nesse 2002). However, the same situation did not necessarily apply to the rest of the country, and Nesse (2008: 51) emphasises that the receptive diglossia she assumes for Bergen was a local system, “not something to be expected all over Scandinavia”.

The time frame is probably essential, yet not always made clear by those discussing the contact situation. The contrastive analysis of the Hamburg project was based on texts from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, “towards the end of the most intense language contact period, when many of the linguistic results of this language contact were already well

¹³ The scribes are anonymous and their identification is based on palaeographic criteria. The original documents are in the Norwegian National Archive, München papir nos. 3295, 3296, 3298, and 3299.

established” and may not be directly applicable to the earlier situation (Jahr 1999: 129). This implies that the languages became more similar due to contact, although there was also dialectal divergence (at least in Scandinavian). If we assume that these factors balanced each other, it seems plausible that the conditions for receptive multilingualism were similar a couple of hundred years earlier. According to Braunmüller (2007: 34–38), receptive multilingualism became less widespread late in the Hanse era, identified as the sixteenth century, because of historical developments. The evidence presented here seems to corroborate this view, and I think it is important to underline that receptive multilingualism was an acquired skill resulting from contact and exposure.

5.2 Economic-administrative documents

Some trade deals and receipts in Low German were mentioned in Section 4.1, and although these are not abundant, other preserved examples do exist. One is DN XIII, no. 666, issued in 1541 by Bartram Bene to Ralef Elefsson (probably a Low German spelling of the Norwegian name Rolf Eilifsson) on behalf of another Norwegian man. This is an example of a Low German merchant issuing a receipt in Low German to a Norwegian.¹⁴ A rare example of an official document written in Low German is DN II, no. 764. This is a charter issued by four men in Oslo in 1445 and involves other citizens of Oslo. Several of the people involved have foreign names and may have been immigrant merchants, and that probably explains the language choice (cf. Nedkvitne 2014: 93). In any case, the fact that officials in a Norwegian city could use Low German in a legal document is a prime example of the language’s status.

The fact that receipts and trade agreements in Low German were accepted as legally valid is excellent proof that Norwegians were able to read the language. This, then, is an example pointing towards intelligibility that may be compared to modern informant testing (method 1 in Section 2.3). However, that does not permit us to posit that comprehension was reciprocal. The contract with the Dutch mariner mentioned above (Section 4.1), probably written by a local scribe in Low German, should, I believe, be taken as an indication that the skipper would not easily understand a Scandinavian text. In any case, it shows that Norwegians were both willing and able to produce documents in Low German, a deviation from the communication pattern where Norwegians and Low Germans both wrote their own language in interaction with the other group. Nonetheless, the latter practice was the rule, as is evident in DN VIII, no. 597 (1528), and DN XXII, no. 276 (1535), for example, which are written in Scandinavian with signatures in Low German.

5.3 An asymmetric relationship

The examples in Section 4 demonstrate that several scribes in the service of the archbishop in Trondheim had at least some command of both languages; to what extent they were actively bilingual, we cannot say for sure. It was mentioned in Section 4.1 that a list of employees at Bergen Castle around 1531 includes both a “scribe” and specifically a “German scribe”, and the archbishop employed a scribe of German origin as well. It is hard to see any reason for this other than a need to be able to produce documents in Low German, as was actually done in the 1532 deal discussed in Section 4.1. Although there is no direct reference to a translator

¹⁴ Note the similarity in name between Bartram Bene and Bertill Been mentioned in DN II, no. 1127 (Section 3.2). This may be two ways of rendering the same name, or they may have been related. Bartram Bene was born in Rostock (Nedkvitne 2014: 92).

as such, this surely means that the claim by Nedkvitne (2014: 90) that “there is no evidence of translators in Bergen or other Scandinavian towns” needs qualification. Nedkvitne is a historian and bases his claims on Braunmüller (1995a) and Jahr (1999), but even the cautious qualifications these scholars give are ignored in Nedkvitne’s interpretation.

Low German had an especially prominent position in Denmark: the Danish royal family was primarily of German descent, and many Danish noble families hailed from the German-speaking duchies of Schleswig-Holstein (cf. Skautrup 1947; Winge 1992). This made Low German akin to an official language in Denmark and there were Danish officials who did not speak or even understand Danish (cf. Section 3.1). It appears that whereas many Scandinavians could understand Low German, it might not have been equally easy the other way round, and there are in fact direct testimonies to this effect, as discussed in Section 3.1. This is contrary to claims that there are no indications of language problems in the sources (Nedkvitne 2014: 91).

Braunmüller (1995a: 17–18) comments with regard to the asymmetry between Scandinavians and Low Germans that “der hanseatische Kaufmann [...] sich sozial wie vor allem ökonomisch in einer überlegenen Position befand” [the Hanseatic merchant was socially and especially economically in a superior position]. There is no wonder, then, that such differences in social status and economic power between the speakers are reflected in their motivation for learning the other language. There would be more reason for a Norwegian merchant to learn the Low German of his trading partners than vice versa. The dominant role of the Hanseatic League in international trade made Low German the most important language in the North Sea area, and when we reach the end of the Middle Ages around 1500 this was reflected in an asymmetric relationship between the languages. Whether the situation was the same in previous centuries is hard to ascertain.

6 Conclusions

The claim made in this article is that many Norwegians, at least those dealing regularly with German and Dutch merchants, were certainly able to understand Low German, and some were actively bilingual. There are both direct statements confirming this, and in other cases it follows from philological analysis. However, the evidence presented here does not permit us to assume that this was because of a general receptive multilingualism, possible between all speakers of these languages. On the contrary, this appears not to have been the case: intelligibility was asymmetric and Norwegians learned to understand the socioeconomically more important language. This was an acquired skill. Nonetheless, it should be clear that the genetic relationship and typological similarity between the languages made learning much easier.

This conclusion is based on the evidence of written sources, often referring to lack of comprehension of written texts. These meta-linguistic statements have been overlooked in previous work. The evidence of written texts cannot automatically be transferred to oral communication, and because the material presented here is typical of what actually exists, receptive multilingualism must remain a hypothesis, however plausible (cf. Braunmüller 2012: 96). It is likely that there was development over time, both in the relationship between the linguistic varieties and in communication patterns, yet it appears that by the sixteenth century, Norwegians who needed it were bilingual, whereas speakers of Low German were not. This points to the importance of pragmatic factors and language attitudes, i.e. the need to understand and willingness to learn.

We should in any case not imagine that conversations went smoothly the moment a German set foot on Scandinavian soil, or vice versa; it probably took substantial effort to achieve that level of receptive multilingualism. This qualification of “mutual intelligibility” must be underlined, and I refer again to Townend’s expression “adequate mutual intelligibility”, which is probably a suitable description also of the medieval relationship between Low German and Scandinavian.

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