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## 15 Variation in a Norwegian sixteenth-century scribal community

**Sources:** The texts to be discussed were written by scribes of Scandinavian origin employed by the archdiocese during the period 1510–1537. Official letters and charters have sometimes been preserved by the recipients, whereas many drafts and various administrative notes have survived in the diocesan archive, which the last Catholic archbishop brought with him when he fled to the Netherlands following the Reformation in 1537. This archive is today kept in the Norwegian National Archive in Oslo, together with most other documents written in Norway in the Middle Ages.

**Abstract:** Since the political union with Denmark left Norway with no central administration in the late Middle Ages, the chancery of the archbishop in Trondheim was the only scribal milieu of any significance in the country. From 1510 onwards Danish replaced Norwegian as the language used by the archdiocese, and the scribes had to find their way between Norwegian tradition, Danish models and their own spoken language (lists of scribes show that they were of diverse geographic origin). In a time of no regularised orthography, we will expect to find individual variation and interference from the spoken language of the scribes. However, mutual influence between the scribes should eventually result in a more or less heterogeneous orthographic norm. Of the texts in Scandinavian (many charters were written in Latin, especially those addressed to the Holy See), the more formal ones appear to conform to contemporary Danish, whereas less formal writings, especially bookkeeping only meant for administrative purposes, show far more Norwegian interference. The correlation between stylistic level and dialectal variation is striking, and seems more important than individual variation. I claim that such register variation is a way to gain indirect access to language attitudes in written corpora. The systematic difference between stylistic levels, between “pure” Danish and a language with Norwegian traits, demonstrates that there existed within the chancery an idea about what language was suitable for official use; a meta-linguistic awareness of “good” and “bad” language. There also seems to be a development in time, as many of the first writings after the language shift appear more normal Danish. Thus the scribes apparently found a middle road between Norwegian and Danish as they got used to the language.

# 1 Introduction

This contribution will present some of the findings of a PhD project in which I have studied the chancery of the archbishop in Nidaros/Trondheim<sup>1</sup> in late medieval times as a scribal community. Here, I shall address the shift to Danish as the written language in Norway and examine especially the orthographic variation in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century in relation to dialectal and register variation. I hope to demonstrate how a comparison between orthographic variation and register variation may give us indirect access to language attitudes in written corpora. First I shall have to give a historical backdrop of the late Middle Ages in Norway and discuss some principles regarding the study of orthographic variation, before I move on to patterns of evidence observed and try to draw some conclusions, both on my specific case study and more generally on the use of written sources in language history.

During the late Middle Ages Norway lost its independence and came to be dominated by its more powerful neighbours, Sweden and Denmark, through various political unions; after 1380 no king resided permanently in Norway. Power, as well as the writings of a growing administration, was increasingly centralised in Copenhagen. The decline was cultural as well as political. After about 1350 hardly any literary works were written within the Norwegian borders, writing being restricted to administrative and legal functions, mostly documenting economic transactions. The Norwegian borders corresponded roughly to those of the Nidaros archdiocese, and thus the Catholic Church became the strongest *national* power, as shown by the archbishop's political role as leader of the Council of the Realm (*Riksrådet*). As the political unions left Norway with no central administration in the late Middle Ages, the chancery in Trondheim came to be the only significant scribal milieu in the country, and by far the largest such institution in Norway until the Reformation in 1537. It dealt not only with religious activities, but also with the administration of the archdiocese's vast properties throughout Norway and the fief administered on behalf of the king.

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<sup>1</sup> The archdiocese was called Nidaros after the city's original name, however, in the late Middle Ages the city itself was usually called Trondheim.

## 1.1 The language shift

The political development and the prestige of the language associated with political power were important elements in the language shift,<sup>2</sup> as Danish replaced Norwegian as the written language used in Norway during the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century (Mæhlum 2005; Haugen 1976: 245–248 and 329–332; the classic account in Norwegian is found in Indrebø 2001.) The Danish kings put their own men into important administrative posts in Norway, and together with a great deal of intermarriage within the Scandinavian nobility, this led to an increasing number of the higher classes – those associated with writing – being Danes using Danish. But Norwegians too started to write Danish. This happened either as a sudden shift, which was mostly the case in institutions (such as the dioceses), or by introducing Danish elements into basically Norwegian texts in a gradually increasing amount, so that at some point the language must in fact be considered Danish. In the Trondheim chancery the shift appears to have been a sudden one, as the new archbishop in 1510, the Dane Erik Valkendorf, ostensibly enforced Danish as the official language of the see. The scribes then had to find their way between the local tradition and dialect and Danish written models.

The language shift shows a dimension of successive domain loss, starting in the highest social layers (see Mæhlum 2005: 1912–1913). Public letters from the king are written in Danish from 1450; the highest level of Civil Service (where we find many of the immigrated Danes) shifted during the following decades and the church followed suit around 1500 (the various sees at slightly different times). Among local civil servants and judges Norwegian was in use well into the 16<sup>th</sup> century, nevertheless, with only a few rural exceptions, Danish was the only available written code in Norway by around 1530.

## 1.2 The scribes and their spoken language

The scribes of the ecclesiastical chancery were a mixed bunch. Salary lists preserved for the archdiocese during 1532–1537 (published in Seip 1936) show a staff of about twenty employees mentioned with the title “scribe” (*scriffwer*). Most of them worked at the archbishop’s palace in Trondheim or at his nearby castle, a few at his residence in Bergen. Some of them had nicknames showing that they were of foreign origin, like *Jens jwte*, perhaps from Jutland, although *jute* was

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2 I use the term “language shift” here, although Norwegian and Danish were certainly dialects from a strictly linguistic point of view (see below).



used about other Danes as well; *Michil helsing*, Helsingland is a historical district in Sweden; and we even find one *Henrick tysk*, 'German'. Nevertheless, the majority were probably Norwegians recruited from the cathedral school in Trondheim.

The difference between Norwegian and Danish was dialectal in a linguistic sense and the two varieties were mutually intelligible, however, there were some isoglosses that distinguished most Norwegian dialects in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century from most Danish. Some important points on similarities and differences can be summarised as follows (see Brøndum-Nielsen 1950–1973; Hansen 1962, 1971 for details on Danish):

**Diphthongs:** Danish early on monophthongised the proto-Scandinavian diphthongs, whereas they were retained in Norwegian.

**Unstressed vowels:** The unstressed vowels were all reduced to schwa in Danish, usually written ⟨e⟩.

**Lenition:** The unvoiced plosives /p, t, k/ changed to /b, d, g/ in inter-vocalic or post-vocalic word-final environments in Danish.

**Flexional morphology:** Norwegian retained more of the old Scandinavian inflections than did Danish.

**Syntax:** Syntactically, the differences were small and negligible.

**Lexicon:** There were notable differences in the lexicon, both in inventory and in certain word forms.

Some of these phonological changes affected Norwegian dialects, but only later and marginally (for instance lenition on the south-western coast, monophthongs in the south-east), and not the dialects in the Trondheim area. Although there is no way of establishing with certainty the scribes' geographic and dialectal background, it seems safe to assume that they spoke a dialect which differed from Danish in the aforementioned features. Thus, they could not produce written Danish based on their own dialect, but had to learn how to spell.

## 2 Orthography, norm, and variation

Medieval orthography was not regular and standardised in the modern sense, and we find individual variation and dialectal spellings. However, "the scribes did not spell 'at will', but according to variable (and historically mixed) conventions", as Milroy (1992: 134) remarks on the orthography of Middle English. Their point of departure was a set of sound-letter correspondences, yet the range of variation was much wider than we are used to. As a counter-force to this variation

we expect that mutual influence between the scribes of a chancery would result in some kind of orthographic norm, more or less heterogeneous. In this way our modern standard languages emerged out of the central chanceries of Europe in the early modern period (see Vandebussche and Deumert 2003).

“Norm” in a medieval context cannot be understood in the same manner as we use the term today: “Das Mittelalter kennt noch keine Normierung durch Kodifizierung, sondern nur spontane Normierung” (Goossens 1994: 84). The codification of standard languages by grammarians and academies belongs to modern times, whereas a common understanding of how a written text should look like naturally developed within scribal milieus, both based on education and cooperation in daily practice (“spontane Normierung” in Goossens’ terms). This distinction can also be given terminological expression by “standard” and “norm” respectively. The relationship between the two notions may be expressed as follows, from a description of the development of Modern English by Nevalainen and van Ostade (2006: 288): “[S]tandardisation is often facilitated by the prior development of suitable supralocal norms, being, as it were, superimposed upon them.” A local norm in use in a chancery (or similar institution) may gain more widespread use and become established as a supralocal norm, which later may be codified as a standard.

An important point for the present context is that the language shift in Norway cannot be viewed as a continuous development of the written language, but rather as a break in tradition. This situation is parallel to those described by Goossens (1994) for Occitan in southern France and Low German in northern Germany; neither evolved into, but was rather replaced by, French and High German respectively. The language written in early 16<sup>th</sup>-century Norway was much closer to Danish than to the Norwegian tradition going back to Old Norse, which to a certain degree prevailed in other text types and regions than those discussed here. Thus I believe it to be a sound methodological assumption that influence from older Norwegian writings is negligible, and that orthographic features which agree with spoken Norwegian and differ from Danish should be treated as dialectal interference and not as written loans from older Norwegian writings. This assumption cannot be made for genres that follow older writings more closely, as certain juridical matters.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> King Magnus VI’s national law from 1274 in Old Norse was in force and continuous use until 1604, and legal language used many fixed phrases from the law code. However, such texts are not treated here.

## 2.1 Style and dialect

Generally, non-standard features are more likely to surface in informal genres than formal ones (see for example Finegan and Biber 2001; Sebba 2007). Even if the term “standard” is problematic in my context, the scribes did attempt to write some sort of Danish, and norwegianisms were deviations from this. If we accept this assumption, then studying texts on different levels of formality may give us indirect access to language attitudes, as the most formal texts should be in what the scribes considered to be the “best” language. Differences between a draft and the final version of a document may also be useful when both are preserved, as the final version presumably was more elaborate and carefully written.

The two works cited above both deal with present-day language and society, and we must address the question of how far we may press the old axiom of “using the present to explain the past” (as formulated e.g. in Labov 1994). The basis for socio-historical linguistics<sup>4</sup> must be the uniformitarian principle “that the linguistic forces which operate today and are observable around us are not unlike those which have operated in the past” (Romaine 1982: 122; compare the discussion in Labov 1994: 21–25). The problem is of course that the social forces governing modern society are available to us in a totally different manner than those of the past, known only from fragmentary records. The relationship and interaction between language and social factors, which is the sociolinguistic object of study, is only available to us as far as we can reconstruct the social setting of language. Thus, the uniformitarian principle is a working hypothesis, not because it might offer the ultimate answer, but simply because we have no other point of departure. And its application depends “on locating points of contact and similarity between the present and the past” (Labov 1994: 20).

I believe that some kind of stylistic or register variation is such a point of contact and similarity. Roberge (2006: 2311) claims that “social and stylistic variation may be inferred from text type (private versus public), hypercorrection, and authorial intent.” Following this, I have tried to group texts according to their function (“authorial intent”) or genre (“text type”), e.g. internal administrative writings, official declarations, letters to various addressees, and drafts or copies of such texts. I have then searched for orthographic patterns within and between groups, to see if the hypothesis of a correlation between dialectal interference and level of formality is reflected in the corpus (compare the method in Romaine 1982, which also looked at stylistic levels).

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4 Or historical sociolinguistics, both terms are used (see for example Roberge 2006).



The stated connection between language and level of formality also implies that variation between several versions of the same text, or between texts with the same function, presumably was regarded as unmarked. When two texts were supposed to carry the same meaning, orthographic variation between them must have been considered neutral, whereas the occurrence of a feature only in informal texts indicates that it was stigmatised, or at least considered unsuitable for more formal text types.

## 2.2 Orthographic and “real” variation

Variation in a written corpus may be of two distinct types: a) purely orthographic, or b) reflecting phonological reality. The first type points to the allowed variation within the norm and is interesting as a sign of the stage in the standardisation process, whereas b) is the traditional interest of linguists. In language change two variants of a variable will usually fluctuate for some time, before one of them gains the upper hand. This applies regardless of whether the change happens in the spoken language or only in writing.

I shall briefly consider type a), nevertheless, my main focus is variation that points to the aforementioned linguistic differences between Norwegian and Danish. Even though Norwegian preserved more of the inflectional morphology (for instance, some dialects have retained the dative case to the present day), this left no impact on the written language. The variation appears to be restricted to the spelling of individual lexemes and/or the aforementioned phonological features, of which the use of diphthongs is an especially prominent Norwegian feature; /ei/ is by far the most frequent one, for instance in the indefinite articles *ein* and *eit*. Lenition or lack thereof is a bit harder to judge from the sources, as there was also a chronological development in Danish orthography, where e.g. <th> must be considered the spelling of /d/ in many words, before <ð> became the standard spelling (<þ> > <th> > <ð> in many pronouns and demonstratives, where the change in spelling occurred much later than the phonological change of initial /θ/ > /d/).

## 3 Findings and patterns

The sources I use consist mainly of charters, as no literary works in the traditional meaning were written in Norway during this time. There are very few charters from the archdiocese during the first period after Danish came into use in 1510.

The tendency, however, seems to be that writings for which the archbishop was responsible used an orthography within the normal scope of variation in Danish. In contrast to this, a couple of charters issued by the cathedral chapter show far more Norwegian interference. In the Latin sermon book *Breviarium Nidrosiense*, printed in Paris<sup>5</sup> for the diocese in 1519 and edited by members of the chapter, there are two pages in Norwegian, despite the language used in official letters from the see at that time. This clearly demonstrates how the language shift was initiated from above by the archbishop, and it is probable that he brought with him new scribes from Denmark; else it would be hard to explain the smooth shift. This was probably the case for a scribe who followed archbishop Erik at least during 1515–1522, as several of the letters issued by Erik are written in the same hand, a hand which shows hardly any Norwegian features.

The anonymity of most works from this period is another complicating factor. Only careful palaeographic studies can identify scribes, making it difficult to judge whether we are dealing with individual or group variation. No matter how consistent a scribe was in his orthography, if other scribes had different practices the orthography of a larger corpus will vary. Thus, even variation between different genres, which, according to my previous line of thought should be treated as the result of language attitudes (good/bad language in different settings), may also be explained as different scribes being assigned to different tasks. Nevertheless, I will argue that this would be just as clear an indication of language attitudes as an individual scribe varying his orthography, as the assignment of scribes must then have been governed by their perceived linguistic competence.

The sources flow more richly in the 1530s, largely due to the random preservation of documents. From this period more informal writings (drafts, transcripts, administrative notes) are preserved, precisely the kind of texts most frequently showing Norwegian features, and which are not known from the years immediately following 1510. It is necessary to restrict the comparison to texts with similar functions. In some respects the writings from this period, after twenty years of Danish, show more Norwegian features than the earlier ones. This may indicate that the scribes had found a middle road between their Danish models and Norwegian tradition and spoken language. The Norwegian interference also seems to correlate – to a certain extent – with the degree of formality of the document.

Normally, official letters to prominent Danes are written in “well-formed” Danish, although not without Norwegian forms; the occasional diphthong betrays their origin. However, in more informal notes, one might find different spellings marked by heavy Norwegian interference. One example is a note on the reasons

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5 There was no printing press in Norway until 1643.



for arresting the nobleman Nils Lykke in 1535.<sup>6</sup> The reason for its existence is obscure; it may have been a draft for some otherwise unknown letter, but in any case was not itself meant to be sent anywhere. It has several of the mentioned features (diphthongs like *weit* 'know.PRES.', *eyn/eit* 'one/a', unstressed *a* in *wttan*, *innan* 'without, within', and typical Norwegian forms like *leet* 'let.PRET.', *honom* 'him' where Danish would have different vowels (*lot*, *hannem*).

### 3.1 Free orthographic variation

Medieval orthography allowed some variation in the orthography with no relation to the correspondence between a sound and a sign/letter, either in the individual orthography of a single scribe or as equal variants in larger corpora. As mentioned above, this range of variation can be identified either by variation within a text, or by comparing several versions of the same text. I shall first look at a letter of instruction from the archbishop and a few others to their envoys at a council in Copenhagen in 1534. The text is known in the original (called A here) and a transcript (B) which the archbishop ostensibly kept for his archive.<sup>7</sup> There were clearly two different scribes at work, as A shows a clear preference for word-initial <f> where B writes <ff>; both have mostly intervocalic <ffu> for /v/, but B mixes this with <ffw>; A often has <sz> for /s/ (e.g. the relative particle *szom*), which is hardly found in B. Apparently each scribe chose whether to write single or double *f* word-initially, so this variation is not free on an individual level, however, the difference was not marked and <f-/ff> must be regarded as equal variants on the group level.

A second example may be the five almost identical letters sent to notables in Denmark regarding the election of King Christian III in 1535.<sup>8</sup> 578 and 582 seem to be written by the same hand, and display some of the free variation. 578 twice has <y> where 582 has <i/ii> (*almyndelige* 'common, usual', *sydenn* 'later' vs. *alminde- ligt*, *siidenn*). Both texts use <u/w> interchangeably; 578 has *kunde* 'could', *skwlle* 'should', *kwnde*, 582 the opposite distribution.<sup>9</sup> Also, there seems to be variation between word-final <-d/-dt>, as in *budt*, *bekend* and the other way round.

6 Printed as *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* XI no. 621.

7 The original is printed as *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* XVI no. 566, the transcript as XII no. 548.

8 Printed as *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* XVI no. 578–582.

9 Including the two instances of *kunde*, which occur at different points in the text.

This kind of orthographic variation was probably unmarked and simply free allographs of the same grapheme; the letters *i* and *j* are often used interchangeably, similarly *w*, *v*, and *u*. Other variables seem to be more or less consistent for the writer, but vary on the group level, e.g. *ffw/ffu* intervocally, as in the frequent verb *hava* 'have'. This is a consequence of the sources, as briefly mentioned above: Even if each scribe stuck to one variant in his writings, different individual practices would show up as variation in a larger corpus. I think these two cases, individual and group variation, as far as they are possible to identify, should be treated as different principles. One reason for this is that the different individual norms may be signs of a norm change in progress, which will only become evident over a longer time span. Individual variation, on the other hand, should point to a flexible norm.

### 3.2 Cadastres

One text type where Norwegian traits surface in abundance is cadastres, registers of property and revenue. The cadastre book known as *Olav Engelbrektssons jordebog* (henceforth: OEJ) (published by Brinchmann and Agerholt 1926), made for the archdiocese in the early 1530s, is a late example of clearly Norwegian place names, as even names were adapted (more or less) to Danish spelling during the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Indrebø 1927). There are many names ending in *-wick(en)* 'wick, bay' with <ƿ> for Danish <g>, forms with diphthongs like *Geiitesøin* (p. 11) and many more. There are danified names and forms as well; most prominent is the almost consistent use of <e> for stressless vowels.

One might find the preservation of Norwegian in such books obvious, as they consist of lists of local place names, which were not easily transferred to Danish. However, as this was sometimes done even in OEJ and danification of place names became common later in the century, part of the explanation must also be the purely administrative function of the cadastre in a time when Danish was not as established as it later came to be.

Another notable feature of OEJ is that where there are differences between Old and Modern Norwegian, this book mostly has a modern form. I shall give an example witnessing the change from Old Norse initial /hv/ > Modern Norwegian /kv/, which has taken place in all Norwegian dialects except in the south-east. There are many names in OEJ with this consonant cluster, as *Quam*, written *Hwam* in similar cadastres from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. It has often been claimed that such lists were mostly copied from older, similar works. However, the Modern Norwegian name forms cannot have any other origin than speech. If we compare OEJ with the earlier known cadastres for the archdiocese, this becomes quite clear:

As shown with *Quam–Hwam* example, the books from the 15<sup>th</sup> century all show traditional spelling which can easily be explained as following the Norwegian tradition or copied from earlier writings, whereas OEJ clearly breaks the tradition; this shows that the older Norwegian writing tradition did not influence the spelling of place names as much as has previously been claimed, at least not in OEJ.

One of the scribes (as usual anonymous, known in the edition as “hand E”) in the cadastre book shows an interesting pattern: He wrote part of the land register itself, and also a short list of land that was purchased by the see under archbishop Erik, 1510–1522. This was some sort of preliminary work for the cadastre, and may have been written considerably earlier; the language is clearly more Danish than in the cadastre itself. This scribe was evidently capable of varying his orthography at will, which shows a very high scribal competence. The difference can be explained in two ways: a) Either the list of purchases was written earlier (perhaps as early as under the Danish archbishop), at a time when it was more important to conform to “normal” Danish; or b) the Norwegian forms were only allowed in the specific genre “land list” where they were mostly copied from older registers, whereas the list of purchases was based on new letters of transactions with more “modern” forms, in the sense that they were adapted to Danish spelling.

As the name forms in the register appear to be independent of the older Norwegian tradition and not copied from older similar works, I believe the former explanation is the correct one, and that the relationship to the new written code was more important than older registers. This is contrary to the traditional claim by Indrebø (1927, 147) that the list of purchases was written from scratch based on fresh information, whereas the cadastre itself was mainly based on older models (op. cit. 150). Furthermore, it may be possible to infer from this that some time after the introduction of Danish, the norm loosened up and allowed certain Norwegian features; it was not mandatory to write Danish exactly like the Danes did. I shall pursue this further in the next section.

### 3.3 A local norm

Although I have mentioned some variation between different text types the general impression is that the scope for variation was fairly limited. And in the material from the 1530s it was evidently acceptable to introduce certain non-Danish forms in the written language, even though, for instance, the spelling of the very frequent indefinite article must have been easy to change, had they cared. This Danish with a Norwegian touch to it became a relatively stable norm of the scribes in Trondheim, and later texts show many of the same features. One example is a note on the priests’ observation of mass, issued by the chapter in



1554.<sup>10</sup> The text shows the same traits we are becoming used to: diphthongs (only in the article *ein*), lack of lenition with <þ> for Danish <d> (*maatthe* ‘way’, *ytthermere* ‘furthermore’) and the phrase *honnom totthe* ‘seemed to him’, which was impossible in Danish. The use of such a local norm came to an end as the force of standardisation grew stronger and education improved, and even Norwegians learnt to spell correctly and write proper Danish.

The development, I believe, took the following route:

1. Archbishop Erik brought a new written code with him, probably together with Danish scribes. The cathedral chapter and probably the previously employed scribes took some time to accommodate to the new code.
2. During the following years, a loose norm evolved within the chancery in Trondheim, a norm which accepted certain Norwegian features and words, although it was basically Danish.
3. With improved education and the growing force of standardisation throughout early modern times, this gave way to a uniform written code with minimal geographical differences, based on the language in Copenhagen.

Although Danish was not formally codified for many centuries the variation became gradually more restricted, and norwegianisms are rather scarce after 1600, as shown by Iversen (1921).

## 4 Conclusions

I have here mostly disregarded the purely allographic variation and focused on the variation which is due to differences between Norwegian and Danish. Although the Norwegians learned to write Danish quite well, the use of diphthongs in particular mark their language as quite different from that written by Danes. This is relatively scarce in official letters – although always present, except in some of the first writings after the language shift – but very prominent in less formal administrative writings. It also seems that the initial difference between writings of the archbishop in “normal” Danish and the more Norwegian language of the cathedral chapter gave way to a local, loose norm. It incorporated some Norwegian elements, but these were not highly regarded, as they are most frequent in informal writings. A couple of conclusions may be drawn from this:

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<sup>10</sup> AM 332 fol. 7v; printed as *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* XII no. 654.

- The 16<sup>th</sup>-century scribes had a metalinguistic awareness of the differences between Norwegian and Danish, and Danish was the prestige variety used in the most formal contexts; Norwegian was more “suitable” in administrative matters.
- The example from the cadastre book shows that at least one scribe was able to adjust his spelling at will. This proves a very high scribal competence and a conscious willingness to adhere to orthographic norms.

The examples provided here also show how important it is to take the sociolinguistic circumstances of text production into account when we are dealing with written sources in language history, and I hope the outlined methodology may provide a way to access the language attitudes of past societies.

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# Scribes as Agents of Language Change

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