The Pronoun System
-the Scandinavian Influence in Old and Early Middle English

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Contents

1 Introduction 3

2 Design of the Present Study 4

3 The Viking Influence in England 5

4 The Pronouns 7
   4.1 The Three Varieties ............................... 7
      4.1.1 The Native Type .............................. 7
      4.1.2 The Scandinavian Type ....................... 7
      4.1.3 The Mixed Type .............................. 8
   4.2 The Possessives ................................. 8
   4.3 A Comparison Between the Plural and the Singular 8

5 The Texts 10
   5.1 The Twelfth Century: ............................. 10
      5.1.1 The Peterborough Chronicle .................. 10
      5.1.2 The Ormulum ................................ 10
      5.1.3 Lawman: The Brut ............................ 11
   5.2 The Thirteenth Century ......................... 12
      5.2.1 Havelok the Dane ............................ 12
      5.2.2 Proclamation of Henry III ................... 12
   5.3 The Fourteenth Century ......................... 13
      5.3.1 Rolle of Hampole ............................ 13
      5.3.2 Chaucer - The Canterbury Tales ............... 13
      5.3.3 Gawain and the Green Knight ................. 13
      5.3.4 John of Trevisa ............................. 14

6 Conclusion 15

7 Sources 16

8 Appendix 17
1 Introduction

Old Norse was mixed with English during the Viking invasions of the ninth century, and it became especially influential when the invaders settled in the land they had conquered. The influence of Old Norse is noticed when looking at the many place names of Scandinavian origin, with endings like –by, -thorp, and -toft, as well as loanwords recognized as such by their phonetic structure, such as kid, egg, and sky. But it is however the English adoption of Scandinavian possessives and personal pronouns in the third person that show the great impact of Old Norse. Loanwords often occur in languages as words that have been borrowed for a special technical purpose or to describe a local geographical feature, but in general these words are members of the open lexical classes, such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives. The borrowing of central structural words like pronouns is however rare (Roger Lass, 1987, p 54), especially if the language the words are borrowed from is considered to be an inferior one or a language of no particular prestige, as Old Norse most likely was at that time. One of the reasons for the spread of the Scandinavian plurals is believed to be that it would solve the problems of ambiguity of Old English. The initial θ-sound came to be perceived as a plural marker, and the spread of þei in the fourteenth century was followed in fifteenth century London by their and them – with various spellings. This development regularized all forms of the plural pronouns, as well as characterized them (Görlach, 1997, p 66).

The limited literacy of the Vikings, however, led to the continued use of West Saxon as the literary standard language during the Old English period, also in the Danelaw – to what little extent the art of writing existed there. Even in the Early Middle English, the influence of West Saxon was so strong in the former Danelaw area, that it is hard to know for certain what the true form of the dialects of that area looked like (Poussa, 1982, p 79). That influence, together with the French influence of the Normans, most likely helped delaying the spread of the Scandinavian-originated pronoun system, which was not fully adopted into the London dialect until the fourteenth and fifteenth century.
2 Design of the Present Study

I will discuss how Old Norse, the language the Vikings brought with them during their conquest of England, has influenced English up till the fourteenth century. I have focused on the third person pronoun system of English and the possessive pronoun *their*, and how these pronouns gradually have changed from being of English origin to Scandinavian, as well as how that change has taken place, both geographically and diachronically.

I have looked at a number of texts from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, to establish which pronouns have been used. I have chosen these texts, which can be found in Mossé and Dickins & Wilson, from a geographical perspective, in order to get as great a spread as possible from all over England. The overall problem I have had with the thirteenth century, however, is that nearly all of the texts selected in Mossé are written in a Southern dialect. The two texts I have chosen from this century I found interesting since one is the first official text written in English since the Norman Invasion, and the other one is the only text originally from the northern parts of England.

The text by John of Trevisa from the fourteenth century, was accompanied by a copy of the same text made by Caxton in the late fifteenth century. I have used this latter version to show how the changes in the pronoun system have developed in an additional one hundred years.

The appended maps (Barber, 1997, pp 129, 137) show the border of the Danelaw and the limits of the five main dialect areas during the Middle English period. The towns I have marked out to make it easier to understand from approximately which areas the texts are originated.

All italics in the extracts from the various texts, whether they be from Mossé or Dickins & Wilson, are of my doing, to mark the pronouns I find important for this essay.

I will also give a brief account of the situation in England during the Viking invasions of the ninth century to provide a background as to how and why these changes could take place.
3 The Viking Influence in England

Old Norse influenced the English language during the Viking invasions of the ninth century, and more especially so, when the invaders settled in the land they had conquered. The conditions during which ON was brought to England may however have been somewhat untraditional. The first conquest took place in three steps: first by disorganized raids, starting with the burning of the monastery of Lindisfarne in 793; later, in the 850's, they started to stay in England during the winters; and during the late ninth century the Vikings finally settled in the north and east of England. In 878 the Viking expansion was stopped after the English king Alfred won the battle of Edington, and by a treaty the Danelaw was established in the north and west, stretching roughly from London to Chester, covering Northumbria, East Anglia, and a part of Mercia (Barber, 1952, p 128). During the first half of the tenth century the kings of Wessex took back parts of the Danelaw, and in 954 York, the Vikings' last stronghold, fell. But that did not make England free of the Danes – in 991 a new invasion took place, and in 1014 Knut, the son of the Danish king, was crowned king of England, and England had Scandinavian rulers up till 1042 (Lass, 1987, p 51).

The reason as to why ON had such an influence on the English language is mainly due to the fact that the English inhabitants of the occupied areas were not killed off, or even driven away, by the Scandinavian settlers, but rather formed part of a mixed population. It seems reasonable to assume that as Old English and ON still were quite similar, Englishmen and Danes probably could understand each other without too much difficulties (Barber, 1997, p 130), but still different enough to allow a mixing of languages and a simplification of structure to take place. Poussa's comparison between Old English and Early Modern English suggests that a creolization took place, as it shows that three major features of creolization can be found: loss of grammatical gender; extreme simplification of inflexions; and borrowing of common lexical words and form-words (Poussa, 1982, p 70).

Unlike the influence of French after the Norman conquest the Scandinavian-based linguistic changes within the English language spread from the north and the east to London and the south, not the other way around (ibid. p 71). One major factor for a change to take place is that of prestige. The French influenced English from above, as the major part of the nobility after 1066 was Normans. As French was the language used in court, the influence of French on the English language spread from London to the rest of the country. Many ecclesiastical positions were also given to Normans, which lead to a French-speaking domination of the church and educational system. In order to get an education the students thus had to speak French (Barber, 1997, p 135). This was not the case with the spread of the Scandinavian-mixed
English dialect of the north and the east. According to Poussa it appears as if at least initially it was a rather isolated dialect, connected to the Danelaw, as the treaty of king Alfred stated that “no slave or freeman was to cross the border without permission” (Poussa, 1982, p 73), and even after Wessex had reconquered eastern Mercia in 918 the social structure of the Danelaw apparently was undisturbed. Literacy and the use of writing were however not even remotely as high among the Scandinavian settlers in the Midlands, as in Wessex, where king Alfred’s capital was situated. In order to learn how to read and write, the speakers of Anglo-Danish thus had to learn a new dialect. This also accounts for the fact that almost all remaining written works from the Old English and Early Middle English periods are written in the West Saxon dialect (ibid. p 78). Still a high local prestige, and the remaining Scandinavian kingdom of York, kept the Scandinavian-influenced English dialect from dying out in the Midlands after 918 (ibid. p 74). During the reign of Knut in the first half of the eleventh century, the status of the Midland dialect was raised. Knut brought with him a large number of Scandinavians and “in order to govern England, a lingua franca was necessary, and the Midland dialect would have been the most natural choice” (ibid. p 76). Poussa continues by suggesting that a diaglossic situation appeared during the reign of Knut, where the literary and formal educated speech were of the Midlands (ibid. p 76). The Norman Conquest halted this development, as the Anglo-Danish nobility and the church leadership were replaced by Normans. Yet the Scandinavian-influenced Midland dialect finally was accepted as the literary standard of Middle English, and it is likely that this too was due to prestige. As the feelings of nationalism started rising against the French’s position of being the language of education and administration, it would be natural to consider the Midland dialect as being a purer kind of English than the French-influenced Southern-Midland accent of the French upper-class (ibid. p 80).
4 The Pronouns

4.1 The Three Varieties

There were three varieties of the plural pronoun system in the late Old and early Middle English, spreading from the northern parts of England, to the south. The Norse influence was strongest in the north, where the Scandinavian settlements lasted the longest, while the native Old English forms remained in the south long into the fifteenth century.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>North</th>
<th>Midlands</th>
<th>South</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scandinavian</strong></td>
<td>þai, þay, thai</td>
<td>þe, þe3</td>
<td>hy, heo, ho, he, ha, a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Native</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subj</strong></td>
<td>þaim, thaim, thame</td>
<td>heom, hem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Obj</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Mossé, 1952, p 54)

4.1.1 The Native Type

The purest versions of the native type were those of the dialects of the south. The Middle English *hy, hi*, and *hem* agree with the Old English forms *hie* and *him*. *His, hise*, and *hes* appear to be loans from Old Frisian, and according to Mossé they are rarely found north of the Thames (Mossé, 1952, p 58).

4.1.2 The Scandinavian Type

The purest versions of the Scandinavian type were the Northern and Scottish dialects (ibid. p 58). These pronouns were borrowed from the masculine form of third person plural of Old Norse, all in line with the lack of gender distinction in the Old English plural system (Lass, 1994, p 142):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Neuter</th>
<th>Feminine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nom.</td>
<td>þeir</td>
<td>þau</td>
<td>þær</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gen.</td>
<td>þeirra</td>
<td>þeirra</td>
<td>þeirra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dat.</td>
<td>þeim</td>
<td>þeim</td>
<td>þeim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>acc.</td>
<td>þai</td>
<td>þau</td>
<td>þær</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4 THE PRONOUNS

In Middle English the ON þeir and þeim became þai / þei and þaim, respectively (Mossé, 1952, p 58). By the end of the thirteenth century the North generally had the þ-forms in all cases (Dickins & Wilson, 1953, p 149).

4.1.3 The Mixed Type

In the Midlands a mixed type was used, where the subject form was the Scandinavian based þei – they, while the object was of the native type, hem, which has survived in Modern English as ‘em (Mossé, 1952, p 58). According to Dickins & Wilson (1951, p 149) þei appeared first in the East Midlands in the early thirteenth century. The London dialect was of the mixed type and thus it was the common language in the second half of the fourteenth century. The northern type gradually influenced the dialects of the Midlands and London, but the object form them was still not being used in the capital before the fifteenth century (Mossé, 1952, p 58). In the Midlands, however, according to Björkman, the native forms often occur in the same texts as the Scandinavian ones (Björkman, 1969, p 50).

4.2 The Possessives

The possessives have undergone a similar change as the third person plural pronouns. According to Mossé “the dialectal distribution of the types her(e) and þeir(e) is, on the whole, the same as that for the object case of the personal pronoun hem and þaim” (Mossé, 1952, p 59). The form þeir(e) was used in the Northern English dialect and in Scotland, and did not appear into the East Midland dialect until the fifteenth century. There her(e) was used consistently, except for in the twelfth century text the “Ormulum”, where the Scandinavian form þegre can be found throughout the text (ibid. p 59). Mossé shows this chart of the third person possessives:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Masculine - Neuter</th>
<th>Feminine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sing.</td>
<td>his, hise, hies, hys, hüs</td>
<td>hire, here, hir, her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plur. South</td>
<td>here, her, hör, heore, hare, hire, häre;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plur. North</td>
<td>þegre, þayr, thair, thar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Mossé, 1952, p 58)

4.3 A Comparison Between the Plural and the Singular

When looking at the Old/ Middle English singular pronouns, it is easy to understand why the Scandinavian third person plural pronouns eventually
came to dominate the English system. In Old English the risk of confusion between the plural and the singular was impending, which can be illustrated by this chart (Mossé, 1952, p 55):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Neuter</th>
<th>Feminine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subj.</td>
<td>he, hee, ha, a</td>
<td>hit, it, a</td>
<td>1. heo, hue, ho, he, ha, hi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. gho, cho, scho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. sehe, she</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obj.</td>
<td>Acc. hine, hin</td>
<td>hit, it</td>
<td>hire, bir, hure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dat. him</td>
<td>him</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The similarities between particularly the feminine subject forms and the native plural forms in subject positions (see the previous page), used later only in the south, are obvious, and made the language unnecessarily ambiguous and confusing.
5 The Texts

5.1 The Twelfth Century:

5.1.1 The Peterborough Chronicle

“The Peterborough Chronicle” is believed to be from 1137, and as a new literary language is beginning to form, this is thus one of the earliest examples of Middle English (Dickens & Wilson, 1951, p 3). The author is unknown, but according to Mossé (1952, p 133) “the scribe tried to reproduce [...] the language spoken in his time and in his region”. The text is written in the Northeast Midland dialect, although with a quite confused syntax. It is hard to make out the different varieties of the pronouns, but it is clear that no third person pronouns of Scandinavian origin are being used. Those used most frequently are her and here for their; heom for them; and hi, he and the impersonal me for they, all native forms.

Alle he waren forsworen and here treothes forloren (Dickins & Wilson, 1951, p 4, line 13).

Me henged up be the fet and smoked heom mid ful smoke. Me henged bi the jumbes other bi the heled, and hengen bryniges on her fet. Me dide knotted strenges abuton here hæued [...] Hi diden heom in quarterne [...] (ibid.p 5, lines 21-25).

The reason for the mixed syntax is probably that even though the author uses the new Middle English standards as a basis to his text, some of the West Saxon literary standard of Old English, in which the earlier parts of the Chronicles are written, still remains in the language. He also uses much of his own dialect in his text, and there are signs of Scandinavian influences in the Northeast Midland dialect that show, other than those of the pronoun system (Mossé, 1952, p 337-338).

5.1.2 The Orrmulum

The belief that Orrm, the author of the “Orrmulum”, is of Scandinavian origin is based on his name only. Other than that nothing is known of him, but the fact that he was an Augustinian canon. The “Orrmulum” has been dated c. 1210, but it may well be from the middle or late eleventh century as well. Not even the dialect that is used can be clearly identified. There is so little known about the northern dialect in Middle English before the fourteenth century, that it may be either a Northern or a Midland work. Most scholars would however place it somewhere in the northern part of the East Midland dialect area (Dickins & Wilson, 1951, p 81).
The third person pronouns used by Orrm seem to be a mix of ON and the native type. In one sentence of the “Ormulum” (ibid. p 85, lines 75-78) he uses þeȝȝ as they, but hemm as the object form them. In the beginning of the “Ormulum”, however, þeȝȝm is used as them (Mossé, 1952, p 164, line 49), so it appears as if Orrm is inconsequent concerning pronouns in the very same work. That he mixed the Scandinavian and native pronouns might have been a feature that was common in his society, but it is more likely that he tried to follow some West Saxon standards concerning hemm, and tried to reach a “compromise between the written form and the Midland creole” (Poussa, 1982, p 79). þeȝȝ is always used as the possessive their, which is exceptional: no other text in the East Midland dialect uses any other form than her(e) before the fifteenth century (Mossé, 1952, p 59).

Below follows two extracts from the “Ormulum”, where I have italicized the important pronouns:

All þess te bettre, lu þeȝȝm bîrþ (ibid. p 164, line 49).

Annd ȝif þeȝȝ all forwerpen itt, itt turneþþ þeȝȝm till sinne, Annd I shal halenm addelded me þe Laferrd Cristess are, þurrh þatt icc halþ hemm wrohh tiss boc to þeȝȝre sawle nede, þohh þatt þeȝȝ all forwerpenn itt þurrh þeȝȝre modignesse” (Dickins & Wilson, 1951, p 85, lines 75-78).

5.1.3 Lawman: The Brut

As is the case with Orrm, there are not many facts about Lawman (also called Lagman) other than what he himself writes in his work. He was a parish priest in Worcestershire, South West Midlands, and like Orrm, his name suggests that he was of Scandinavian descent. He lived in the end of the twelfth century (Dickins & Wilson, 1951, p 17) and there are two versions, two different copies, remaining of “The Brut”, one from c. 1225 and one from c.1250. The earlier one is written in just about the same dialect as is believed to have been used by Lawman himself, while the copyist of the later text seems to have made changes of his own (ibid. p 18). In Dickins & Wilson both texts are included (ibid. p 20-21) and compared with each other, looking especially at the pronouns, the very same sentence contains two different varieties of pronouns, although both are used in the South of England:

(1225) And heørw four wînes þe mid heorn wereon archen (ibid. p 21, line 13),

compared with:

(1250) And hīre four wifes þat mid ham þere weren (ibid. p 21, line 13),

and
Lawman (or the copyist writing in his dialect) uses the native *heore* for the possessive *their*, and the word *heo* for *they*, also that for the Southern dialects, and even though he also seems to prefer to use the word *heom* for *them*, a word used in the Midlands more preferably than the many other forms, but it was also used in the South. This may be explained by the fact that Worcestershire never was a part of the Danelaw and therefore perhaps acquired the Scandinavian pronoun loans later, whatever the origin of Lawman’s name. It could also, as in the earlier texts, once again be a case of West Saxon influence. The other copyist, however, uses solely Southern pronouns, none of which can be mistaken for being of the mixed form.

### 5.2 The Thirteenth Century

#### 5.2.1 Havelok the Dane

The original of this text is dated to c. 1270, and the dialect in which it was written is a Northeast Midland one, probably from Lincolnshire. At the southern border of the northern dialect area the influence from Old Norse was very strong, but as the dialect of this text is very mixed it is quite likely that scribes of Southern origin have had a hand in rewriting it (Mossé, 1952, p 366). The third person plural pronouns used in this text are of the Southern variety: *he* for *they*; *hem* for *them*; and the possessive *here* for *their*.

> Of al Denemark mihten *he* be. (ibid. p 192, line 516)
> And drof *hem* intil Engelond, (ibid. p 199, line 725)
> Of *here* herborn herbyrweđ *here*, (ibid. p 200, line 742).

The vocabulary, however, contains a large number of words of Scandinavian origin (ibid. p 367), which supports the notion of this being a text from the Northeast, and that the Southern influences have been added by copyists later.

#### 5.2.2 Proclamation of Henry III

This is an example of the first official text since William the Conqueror and as it is dated, it is easy to state that it is written in the London dialect of 1258 (Mossé, 1952, p 187). The third person pronouns in this text are the typical native ones of the South - *heo* for *they* and *heom* for *them*:

> [. . .] in þe treowpe þe þæt *heo* us ogen (ibid. p 188, line 11).

> [. . .] alle oþer þe moare dael of *heom* þæt boeþ i-chosen (ibid. p 188, line 6).

Thus it can be concluded that the pronouns of Scandinavian origin have not yet reached the dialect of London.
5.3 The Fourteenth Century

5.3.1 Rolle of Hampole

Rolle of Hampole studied at Oxford, but lived throughout his life in Yorkshire, where he was born around 1300. The texts are written in the Northern English dialect of Yorkshire (Mossé, 1952, pp 230, 377), and are good examples of the ON influence in the English pronoun system. He is not very consequent, however, as he seldom uses the same spelling of a pronoun more than once in the same sentence. For example they is spelt as pay, thay, and þey; them as þam, thaym, thayme, tham, and þaym; and the possessive their as þaire, þeire, thaire, and þeyre:

bot outhire þay lufe þaym over mekill, settand thaire thoughte unryght-wysely on þaym, [---I, yf þay doo noghte all as þey weldi till þam (ibid. p 231, lines 22-24).

[... ] for þay flye fra erthe to heven and rystes þayme tahre (ibid. p 232, line 36).

bot in þe waye late þeyre herte [...] (ibid. p 232, line 39)

and makes þeire saules oftesythes full bitter in angwys [...] (ibid. p 231, line 26).

[... ] that will drawe þaire hony fra þaym (ibid. p 231, lines 17-18).

[... ] bat afforres þam to rece fra us [...] (ibid. p 231, line 19).

5.3.2 Chaucer - The Canterbury Tales

The Canterbury Tales, one of England’s most famous texts, was written in the late fourteenth century, as one of Chaucer’s last works. He lived close to the Court, and his works were also written for the Court (Mossé, 1952, p 290). Chaucer thus gives a clear example of how only the nominative form thei, they had spread to London in the late fourteenth century, while hem is used instead of them, and hir instead of their (Lass, 1994, p 142):

They daunce and pleyen at dees bothe day and nyght,

[---I

Hir othes been so grete and so damnable
That it is grisly for to heere hem swere” (Mossé, 1952, p 304, lines 467, 462 – 463).

5.3.3 Gawain and the Green Knight

The author of this manuscript is unknown, but it has been dated to the end of the fourteenth century, and is written in a dialect of the Northwest Midlands. Even though the area of this dialect, Northwest of Derby, was not a part of the Danlaw, the influence of ON seems to have spread here to a greater extent concerning the pronouns. The nominative form of the third person plural pronoun they is pay and the object them is hem, as in Chaucer’s texts, but while most of the possessives consists of hor and her, the Scandinavian form þayr appears, although it is rare (Mossé, 1952, p 380).
5 THE TEXTS

Baldely pay blw orys, bayed payr radchez (ibid. p 247, line 362).

5.3.4 John of Trevisa

This text is a translation of a Latin text from the middle of the fourteenth century and it is interesting as two translations into English, made with a hundred-year interval, are shown. The earlier one was made by John of Trevisa in 1387 in a Southwestern dialect with some Midland features (Mossé, 1952, p 402); the older by Caxton in 1482. Thus a comparison of how the English language has changed in one century can be made.

In John of Trevisa's text the native possessive- and third person pronouns *by*, *ham*, and *here* are used, while Caxton, one hundred years later, uses only the Scandinavian influenced *they*, *them*, and *theyr*:

(1387) Also Englishmen, he3 hy hadde fram be begynnynge [...]
(ibid. p 286, line 9).

(1482) Also englysshmen though they had fro the begynnynge [...]
(ibid. p 286, lines 7-8).

(1387) [...] holdeþ wel ny3 here furste longage and speche, [...]
(ibid. p 286, line 4).

(1482) [...] kepe neygh yet theyr first langage and speche (ibid. p 286, lines 3-4).

(1387) [...] and hat ys harm for ham [...]
(ibid. p 288, line 39).

(1482) whiche is hurte for them [...]
(ibid. p 288, line 29).

The invention of the printing press was one of the reasons of the standardization of English. Caxton printed the first texts in England, and as the London dialect he wrote in was spread widely over the country, this was an important factor for the dialect of the East Midlands to be standardized as Middle English, and later developed into Present Day English (Barber, 1997, p 144).
6 Conclusion

The Scandinavian-based linguistic changes spread from the north and the east to London and the south, not the other way around, from the capital, as most other basic loans from other languages tend to do. Pronouns belong to the closed word-classes and it is unusual that any such loanwords are integrated at all into the language. In Old English, however, the conditions were such so that this was allowed, as the risk of confusion between the third person pronouns and the plural possessives, with especially the first person feminine pronouns, were great. Old Norse, brought to England by the Vikings, turned out to supply a suitable enough system to replace the old one, as it brought a continuity in the plural pronoun system with the plural marker of the $\theta$-sound, although it took many centuries for the change to spread all over the country.

It is hard to know for certain which the true forms of the dialects of the former Danelaw area in Early Middle English were, since the influence of West Saxon as a literary standard still was strong, and the texts often have been corrupted by scribes copying them into a Southern dialect. In many of the texts from the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth century, though, other loans from Old Norse into open word-classes, such as the noun, the verb, and the adjective, seems to have been integrated into most dialects almost immediately.

In the twelfth century the only text using Scandinavian-based pronouns is the “Ormulum”, from the Midlands, while the others, even “The Peterborough Chronicle” from the Northeast Midlands, in the midst of the old Danelaw area, uses the native forms. This is probably due to the West Saxon influence mentioned above, but also because the Northern/Midland forms was not yet prestigious enough. The texts of the thirteenth century do not say much, other than that the corruption of Southern scribes still was strong, and that the Scandinavian-influenced pronouns had not reached London yet. In the end of the fourteenth century the texts of Chaucer and John of Trevisa show how only the nominative form *thei*/*they* had a foothold in London. Caxton’s translation of the same text as John of Trevisa’s show, however, how the influence of the Scandinavian plural pronouns in the Midland dialect has spread to London in all forms by the end of the fifteenth century.
7 Sources

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Appendix