

George Walkden

## Null subjects in the *Lindisfarne Gospels* as evidence for syntactic variation in Old English

---

*NB: This is a post-print version reflecting changes made in the peer review and editing process, but not the publisher's PDF. See <https://www.degruyter.com/view/product/458025> for further specifics.*

*This article appeared in Julia Fernández Cuesta & Sara M. Pons-Sanz (eds.), The Old English glosses to the Lindisfarne Gospels: language, author and context, 237–254 (Buchreihe der Anglia, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter). When citing, please use the page numbers given there. The publisher should be contacted for permission to re-use or reprint the material in any form.*

---

**Abstract:** This paper assesses the evidence for null subjects in Old English, demonstrating that in the Old English gloss to the Lindisfarne Gospels subjects are omitted in a way not found in classical West Saxon texts. The obvious hypothesis – that this difference is simply due to the nature of the text as a gloss of a Latin original, and thus tells us nothing about the syntax of Old English – is unlikely to be correct, since null subjects occur frequently only in the third person, not in the first and second persons. In Latin null subjects are permitted and occur in all of these contexts without restriction. The omitted subjects in the Lindisfarne gloss thus seem to represent a genuine (Northumbrian) Old English syntactic possibility; support for this conclusion is drawn from a new quantitative study of the Gospel of John. The results of the study therefore indicate that a text such as Aldred's gloss to the Lindisfarne Gospels, despite its glossal nature, can contribute to our understanding of the comparative syntax of Old English dialects if appropriate caution is employed.

### 1 Introduction: glosses and syntax

It would not be unreasonable to assume that studying the syntax of the Old English gloss to the Lindisfarne Gospels would be a complete waste of time. If the glossator's strategy was merely glossing in its simplest sense – proceeding on a word-by-word basis, considering and rendering each word only in isolation, without regard for its syntactic context – then one would not expect the Lindisfarne gloss to have any independent syntax at all. This is presumably what Callaway (1918: iii) had in mind when he referred to the text as “merely an interlinear gloss, and in many respects a faulty one”; Cole (2014: 87) also cautions against using the gloss as evidence for word order. Even if the glossing technique did take syntactic context into account, operating on the clausal level rather than solely on the word level, one might expect the syntax of the glosses to be heavily influenced by that of the Latin original.

The extent to which either of these expectations is met can only be assessed by investigating the text itself. Insofar as we can unearth syntactic generalizations about the glosses that have no obvious explanation in terms of the Latin original, we have evidence for an independent syntactic system that may well represent the competence of a native speaker of (a variety of) Old English – evidence that can then be supplemented by placing it in the context of the syntax of other Old English texts. Other studies which have demonstrated the validity of glosses of Latin for the study of Old English syntactic phenomena in this way are Ingham (2006), on negative concord, and Taylor (2008), on word order within prepositional phrases.

A few studies to date have provided evidence of this kind for the Lindisfarne Gospels. Nagucka (1997), for example, adduces a number of syntactic phenomena in the gloss of the

Gospel of Matthew that, she argues, demonstrate independence and a certain amount of creativity on the part of the glossator: these include word order discrepancies (e.g. *dauides sunu* ‘David’s son’ for *filiu david*, MtGl (Li) 1.1; see Rodríguez Ledesma, this volume), negative concord (‘double negation’, as in *þte nan nyte* ‘that no man see to it’ for *ne quis sciat*, MtGl (Li) 9.30), and the rendering of participial constructions with finite clauses. Nagucka therefore suggests that the practice of referring to the Old English Lindisfarne Gospels as a gloss should be abandoned, and some intermediate term such as ‘glossal translation’ adopted (1997: 180). Callaway (1918: 199–200), in his study of non-finite clauses in the text, concludes among other things that, though the absolute participle construction is likely a Latin borrowing, the choice between accusative and nominative case is conditioned by factors native to the Northumbrian dialect itself. More recently, Cole (2012a, 2012b, 2014) has shown on the basis of the Gospels of John and Mark that the choice of present indicative plural verbal inflection, *-s* vs. *-ð*, was conditioned to a large extent by subject type (pronominal vs. non-pronominal) and by subject-verb adjacency.

This short paper presents another instance of the Lindisfarne glossal translation displaying features that can only be due to a genuine Old English syntactic possibility. Building on Berndt (1956), I show that the glossator omitted pronominal subjects under certain conditions, and systematically inserted them in others: the data is laid out in section 2. Section 3 broadens the focus by situating this text in a comparative perspective, contrasting it with other Old English texts as well as texts in other early Germanic languages. Section 4 summarizes and concludes. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that, if used with care, the Old English Lindisfarne Gospels can indeed contribute to a better understanding of the diatopic morphosyntactic variation found within the language.

## 2 Null subjects in the Lindisfarne Gospels

In Present-Day English it is not possible to omit a referential pronominal subject under most conditions:

(1)

\*Speaks Italian. (Intended meaning: ‘He speaks Italian.’)

However, in many other languages of the world, such as Italian and Spanish, the pronominal subject is not required, as illustrated in (2) from Italian.

(2)

Parla	italiano
speak-3 sg.	Italian
‘He speaks	Italian’.

In such languages, pronominal subjects are only used in marked contexts, for instance when focused. The Latin of the Vulgate was this type of language, and personal pronouns in the text are correspondingly rare. In some languages, the richness of verbal agreement morphology appears to be relevant in ‘identifying’ the intended subject of subjectless sentences; in others, such as Chinese, subject pronouns can be omitted despite an almost complete lack of such morphology. For overviews of research on null subject languages, see Huang (2000) and Holmberg and Roberts (2010).

What about the Old English glossal translation of the Lindisfarne Gospels? The

glossator<sup>1</sup> can be seen to insert personal pronouns that correspond to nothing overt in the Latin, as in (3). In such cases, the pronoun is inserted along with the Old English verb, above the Latin verbal form.

(3)

JnGl (Li) 6.36: ah **ic** cuæð iuh ðaðe **gie** gesegon mec 7 negelefeð **gie**  
 but I said you.DAT who you saw me and NEG-believe you  
 ‘But I have said unto you, that you also have seen me,  
 and you believe not.’  
 Latin: *sed dixi uobis quae [sic] uidistis me et non creditis*

From a functionalist point of view in which rich verbal morphology enables pronominal subjects to be recoverably omitted, this is not surprising given that Latin verbal endings are so much richer than those of Northumbrian Old English. However, pronouns are also frequently omitted in the Old English glossal translation in a way that would not be possible in modern English, as in (4) and (5).

(4)

MkGl (Li) 9.21: 7 gefrægn fæder his  
 and asked father his  
 ‘And **he (Jesus)** asked his father’  
 Latin: *et interrogauit patrem eius*  
 Mk (WSCp) 9.21: *And þa ahsode **he** his fæder*

(5)

MkGl (Li) 10.1: 7 suæ þe he gewuna wæs eftersona lærde hia  
 and so that he used was after-soon taught them  
 ‘And as he was accustomed, he taught them again.’  
 Latin: *et sicut consueuerat iterum docebat illos*  
 Mk (WSCp) 10.1: *& swa swa he gewunode **he** hi lærde eft sona*

Example (5) illustrates both insertion of a pronoun counter to the source Latin, in the subordinate clause *suæ þe he gewuna wæs*, and omission of a subject pronoun in a context in which omission would not be possible in modern English: although (4) and (5) are conjoined clauses, the subject of the previous conjunct is not co-referential in either example. Notably, the West Saxon version of the Gospels contains a pronoun in all instances.

The aim of this section is to gain a better understanding of the linguistic factors conditioning when the subject pronoun is inserted and when it is omitted in the glossal translation.<sup>2</sup> Nagucka (1997: 187) comments on the variation, though does not undertake a detailed study. Steps in this direction were already taken by Berndt (1956: 65–68), in a study of pronominal subjects by person and number in the Lindisfarne and Rushworth texts.

<sup>1</sup> I refer to the glossator(s) throughout this paper as ‘the glossator’ or ‘Aldred’ in the singular for simplicity’s sake, recognizing that the actual question of authorship is by no means a settled or straightforward one, and that other Old English exemplars may have existed: see Ross et al. (1960), Brown (2003) and Cole (this volume). All translations of examples are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Kroch and Taylor (1997) investigate the placement of the pronoun when it is inserted adjacent to the verb, and find that clause type conditions whether it is postverbal or preverbal. I do not address these word order issues here. Kroch and Taylor (1997) investigate the placement of the pronoun when it is inserted adjacent to the verb, and find that clause type conditions whether it is postverbal or preverbal. I do not address these word order issues here. Berndt’s division of the Lindisfarne Gospels into parts is directly based on the division of the Rushworth here.

Berndt's data is presented in Table 1; cp. also van Gelderen's (2000: 133) Table 3.1.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1.** Pronominal subjects in finite indicative clauses in the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Rushworth Gospels, by person and number (based on Berndt 1956: 65–68)

Text	Person	N	Overt	Null	Total
Rushworth Gospels, part 1	1	sg.	191 (97.0%)	6 (3.0%)	197
		pl.	44 (97.8%)	1 (2.2%)	45
	2	sg.	90 (88.2%)	12 (11.8%)	102
		pl.	168 (89.4%)	20 (10.6%)	188
	3	sg.	246 (58.2%)	177 (41.8%)	423
		pl.	141 (58.0%)	102 (42.0%)	243
	Totals			880	318
Lindisfarne Gospels, part 1	1	sg.	212 (96.4%)	8 (3.6%)	220
		pl.	53 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	53
	2	sg.	103 (87.3%)	15 (12.7%)	118
		pl.	206 (95.8%)	9 (4.2%)	215
	3	sg.	116 (26.3%)	325 (73.7%)	441
		pl.	108 (36.9%)	185 (63.1%)	293
	Totals			798	542
Lindisfarne Gospels, part 2	1	sg.	656 (98.6%)	9 (1.4%)	665
		pl.	120 (99.2%)	1 (0.8%)	121
	2	sg.	308 (93.3%)	22 (6.7%)	330
		pl.	428 (95.7%)	19 (4.3%)	447
	3	sg.	225 (18.3%)	1003 (81.7%)	1228
		pl.	154 (24.5%)	475 (75.5%)	629
	Totals			1891	1529
Rushworth Gospels, part 2	1	sg.	528 (96.5%)	19 (3.5%)	547
		pl.	100 (98.0%)	2 (2.0%)	102
	2	sg.	226 (91.1%)	22 (8.9%)	248
		pl.	302 (83.7%)	59 (16.3%)	361
	3	sg.	186 (19.0%)	795 (81.0%)	981
		pl.	124 (22.8%)	420 (77.2%)	544
	Totals			1466	1317

Berndt's data reveal a striking asymmetry between the third person, in which (at least in the Lindisfarne Gospels) omission is the norm, and the first and second persons, in which insertion is the norm and omission very rare. Performing Fisher's (1922) exact tests reveals that this asymmetry is clearly statistically significant ( $p < 0.0001$ ) for both parts of each text.<sup>4</sup> The effect of number, on the other hand, is not significant for Rushworth part 1 ( $p = 0.6885$ ) or part 2 ( $p = 0.7520$ ), but is significant for Lindisfarne part 1 ( $p = 0.0002$ ) and part 2 ( $p = 0.0039$ ), with insertion being preferred in the plural.

I supplemented Berndt's data with an investigation of my own based on the Gospel of John. The aim was to replicate Berndt's findings with regard to person and number, and to discover whether other factors such as clause type also played a role in conditioning the alternation. The edition used was the standard one (Skeat 1871–1887: III), collated and checked against the manuscript images made available online by the British Library. This step

<sup>3</sup> Berndt's division of the Lindisfarne Gospels into two parts is directly based on the division of the Rushworth glosses according to which parts were written by Farman (MtG1 (Ru), MkG1 (Ru) 1–2.15, JnG1 (Ru) 18.1–3) and Owun (the rest), to ensure comparability.

<sup>4</sup> Fisher's exact tests are standard for small samples when dealing with a two-valued categorical dependent variable, as here – providing an exact p-value rather than an approximation. See, for instance, Stefanowitsch and Gries (2003) for discussion in a linguistic context.

is important because Skeat's edition contains numerous errors and questionable editorial decisions: see Fernández Cuesta (2009), Fernández Cuesta (this volume) and Cole (2014: 88–93).<sup>5</sup> While these problems are likely to be of more concern to those interested in phonological and morphological variables rather than syntactic and lexical ones, they are also relevant to the issue of null subjects. Cole (2012b: 99) notes that in his edition of Matthew, Skeat (1871–1887: IV) omits the pronoun *hia* from the manuscript sequences *ða ondueardas l hiaondsuerigað him* (JnGl (Li) 25.37) and *ða ðe ne suppas hia deað* (JnGl (Li)16.28). Skeat justifies this by noting in the margin that the pronouns have been under- or overlined by the glossator, which he interprets as deletion; however, as Cole notes (2012b: 99), there is no particular reason to believe that deletion was the glossator's intention, especially given the prevalence of subject doubling elsewhere in the text (see the discussion of (9) and (10) above, as well as Cole 2014: 201–202). Similarly, in my investigation I found that the first-person plural pronoun *we* is omitted by Skeat from the manuscript sequence *cuoeð him to we gemoetton* (1.41), for no discernible reason. A few other examples of this type were also uncovered.<sup>6</sup>

Tokens of both inserted and omitted subjects were collected manually in a spreadsheet, and marked for four factors: i) their grammatical person (1st, 2nd, 3rd); ii) their number (singular or plural); iii) their clause type (main, subordinate or conjunct); and iv) whether they corresponded to an overt or null subject in the Latin. Clause type was included as this has been shown to have an effect on subject expression in other early Germanic texts (see section 3); the effect of the Latin original was also included in order to see whether this interacted with other factors. Only finite clauses were considered. Contexts in which a null subject is possible in Present-Day English – for instance in conjunct clauses with a shared subject as in *I went to London and Ø attended the workshop*, and (arguably) in subject relative clauses such as *The man who Ø saw me* – were excluded.<sup>7</sup> Instances of non-referential arbitrary or expletive subjects, as in Present-Day English *It is raining* or *It is true that ...*, were also excluded, as they lie outside the focus of this investigation, which aims to determine whether omission of referential pronominal subjects was a possibility in the Lindisfarne Gospels and in what linguistic contexts. Examples of enclitic pronominal subjects, as in (6), and pronominal subjects included in only one of two glosses, as in (7), were treated as examples of insertion. The results by person and number are given in Table 2.

(6)

JnGl (Li) 1.22:	huæd	cuoeðestu	frō	ðe	seolfum
	what	say-you	from	you	self
		‘What sayest thou of thyself?’			
Latin:	<i>quid dicis de te ipso</i>				

(7)

JnGl (Li) 3.10:	ðas	<b>ðu</b>	nast	l	ðas	ðe	sint unncuðo
	those.ACC	you	NEG-know		those.NOM	you.DAT	are unknown
	‘and (you) knowest not these things’						
Latin:	<i>haec ignoras</i>						

<sup>5</sup> The problem is potentially widespread: Skeat's edition is the one included in the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* (DOEC), and is the one relied upon by Callaway (1918), Nagucka (1997) and Kroch and Taylor (1997).

<sup>6</sup> Other palaeographical facts may be of relevance to the issue at hand. For instance, in the manuscript sequence *þte<sup>hia</sup> gesea mæge<sup>o</sup>* (JnGl (Li) 17.24), the third-person pronoun *hia* is in superscript (not rendered by Skeat). Following the view of Ross and Squires (1980: 490) that forms in superscript were “alternatives”, this may indicate a perception on the part of the scribe that the pronoun was optional; however, as this is an isolated example, little can be concluded from it.

<sup>7</sup> The consensus in syntactic theory is that the relative pronoun *who* is not in subject position in the relative clause, but, like other relative pronouns, is a clause-introducer which combines with a gap in the relative clause.

**Table 2.** Pronominal subjects in the Gospel of John, by person and number

Person	N	Overt		Null		Total
1	sg.	428	96.8%	14	3.2%	442
	pl.	71	100.0%	0	0.0%	71
2	sg.	161	93.1%	12	6.9%	173
	pl.	226	95.8%	10	4.2%	236
3	sg.	76	18.4%	337	81.6%	413
	pl.	34	19.2%	143	80.8%	177
Totals		996		516		1512

In light of Berndt's (1956) findings as presented in Table 1, these figures are unsurprising. Once again, there is a significant effect of person (1st/2nd vs. 3<sup>rd</sup>;  $p < 0.0001$ ): whereas first and second person subjects are almost always inserted, third person subjects are inserted only around 19% of the time. Number is not significant either across the whole dataset ( $p = 0.1632$ ) or within the third person ( $p = 0.8183$ ).

Table 3 presents the results by clause type. Conjunct clauses are those introduced by a co-ordinating conjunction (mostly 7 'and', and sometimes *ah* 'but'); these were included because the behaviour of conjunct clauses demonstrably differs from that of other main clauses in other respects, for example with regard to verb position (Campbell 1970: 93 n. 4; Mitchell 1985: 694; Bech 2001: 86–93). As previously mentioned, conjunct clauses where the subject is coreferential with that of the first conjunct (main clause) have been discounted for the purposes of this study. Subordinate clauses in this text are not always easy to distinguish due to the dual use of words such as *miððy* and *forðon* as adverbials as well as subordinators; an ambiguous example is given in (8).

(8)

JnGl (Li) 4.40:    *miððy cuomon forðon to him ða samaritanisco gebedon hine*  
 when/then came    therefore to him the S.                      asked    him  
 'So when the Samaritans were come to him, they desired'  
 (Douay-Rheims)

OR

'Then the Samaritans were come to him, (and) they desired'

Latin:                      *cum uenissent ergo ad illum samaritani rogauerunt eum*

Jn (WSCp) 4.40:    *Ða þa samaritanisscen comon to hym. hyo ge-bæden hine*

As the two alternative translations illustrate, this example could be analysed as involving either subordination or co-ordination. Nevertheless, an attempt was made to distinguish subordinate clauses even in ambiguous cases, though this introduces a small element of subjectivity into the analysis. When in doubt, disambiguation was carried out on the basis of the parallel Latin and West Saxon versions in Skeat; in (8), the Latin original, introduced by the complementizer *cum*, suggests that a subordinate structure is likely to have been intended by Aldred.

**Table 3.** Pronominal subjects in the Gospel of John, by clause type

Clause type	Overt		Null		Total
Main	447	69.5%	196	30.5%	643
Subordinate	389	59.8%	262	40.2%	651
Conjunct	160	73.4%	58	26.6%	218
Totals	996		516		1512

As can be seen from Table 3, there is no significant difference between main and conjunct

clauses ( $p = 0.3029$ ), but subjects are more likely to be inserted in main clauses ( $p = 0.0002$ ) and conjunct clauses ( $p = 0.0003$ ) than in subordinate clauses. In a Germanic context this result is surprising; I will return to this in section 3.

The effect of the Latin original is essentially categorical: the subject is never omitted in the Old English unless it is omitted in the Latin. In 347 examples, an Old English personal pronoun was used to translate an element in the Latin, usually a nominative personal pronoun itself (*ego, nos, tu, uos, ille, ipse, illi*). Personal pronouns may be inserted in the Old English when there is no Latin model, but they may never be omitted when a Latin model is present.

In some instances, a first or second person pronoun is inserted even when another nominative pronoun (corresponding to the Latin) already exists in the same clause, as in (9) and (10). There are 36 such examples in John.

(9)

JnGl (Li) 8.46:     forhuon **gie** ne     gelefeð **gie** me  
                           why    you NEG   believe you me  
                           ‘Why do **you** not believe me?’

Latin:               *quare uos non creditis mihi*

(10)

JnGl (Li) 8.38:     **ic** þ       ic       gesæh æt     ðæm fæder **.ic.**   spreco  
                           I    what I       saw at       the    father I       speak  
                           ‘I speak that which I have seen with my father’

Latin:               *ego quod uidi apud patrem loquor*

These examples of ‘pronoun doubling’ are intriguing, and suggest that the glossator’s strategy sometimes involved rendering first- and second-person verb forms with the corresponding pronoun automatically, even if the clause already contained a pronominal subject on the model of the Latin. Rather than being a linguistic feature per se, this could simply reflect the glossator’s narrow scope of vision in rendering successive elements of the gloss (see Jolly, this volume), or potentially a concern to disambiguate certain verbal forms without person distinction. On the other hand, in most examples of clauses containing a pronominal subject corresponding to the Latin, there is no doubling, even when the Latin pronoun and verb are non-adjacent: see (11) and (12).<sup>8</sup> Of 347 examples of pronouns inserted following the Latin model, only 36 examples (less than 10%) also involve pronoun doubling.

(11)

JnGl (Li) 8.55:     **ic**        uutudlice    conn þ wat  
                           I        truly        know  
                           ‘I know him’

Latin:               *ego autem noui eum*

(12)

JnGl (Li) 1.19:     **ðu**    huelc þ huæd    arst þ arð  
                           you    which/what    are  
                           ‘Who art thou?’

Latin:               *tu quis es*

<sup>8</sup> Example (12) is unusual in that a word for ‘what’/‘which’ is used, rather than ‘who’. For some discussion of the variation in interrogatives in Old English and of the polysemy of *hwæt* ‘what’, see Walkden (2014: ch. 4).

Since the numbers are so small, whether pronoun doubling can be considered to be a native or a common feature of Northumbrian Old English cannot be conclusively established; Berndt (1956: 85–87) observes that it is found only rarely in the Rushworth and West Saxon Gospels. Pronoun doubling may well be an artefact of glossarial practice rather than a dialect feature.

Finally, in order to ascertain whether there were any significant interactions between the factors I considered above – for instance whether the effect of person was stronger in main clauses – I carried out a step-down logistic regression analysis on the data using Rbrul (Johnson 2009). All of the variables given above (person, number, clause type, presence vs. absence of Latin) were entered into the analysis, as well as all possible interactions between these variables. The results are given in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Results of multivariate analysis, effects in log odds

Variable	Factor	Log odds
Person	1st	2.384
	2nd	1.245
	3rd	-3.630
Number	Singular	-0.641
	Plural	0.641
Latin counterpart	Yes	10.688
	No	-10.688

The log odds values, if negative, indicate a disfavouring effect on pronominal subject insertion, and, if positive, indicate a favouring effect on pronominal subject insertion with respect to the mean. Thus, for instance, the presence of a Latin counterpart (e.g. a subject pronoun *ego* or *uos*) favours insertion, and the absence of such a counterpart favours omission. Similarly, first and (to a lesser extent) second person favours insertion, while third person favours omission.<sup>9</sup>

The best model, as can be seen from Table 4, incorporates no interactions and does not include the effect of clause type; removing these variables from the model does not make it significantly less effective at covering the data. Log odds values incorporate effect strength as well as likelihood of significance of effects; this explains why number is included as having a significant effect despite this not emerging from the Fisher's exact test, and why clause type is not included despite emerging as significant in the Fisher's exact test. Specifically, the step-down procedure has analysed the model that includes clause type and compared it to the model that does not, and found that the model that includes clause type is no more effective.

This analysis therefore demonstrates statistically what is intuitive from the results presented in Berndt (1956) and earlier in this section: the effect of grammatical person on pronoun expression in the Old English glossal translation is independent of the effect of the Latin. The preference for first- and second-person subject pronoun insertion in the text, then, is most likely to be ascribed to a genuine syntactic possibility in the grammar of Northumbrian Old English.

A caveat must be mentioned, however: I have not taken sequential dependencies – e.g. morphosyntactic priming or persistence effects – into consideration. This is important, as it has been demonstrated that priming can affect subject pronoun expression in languages such as Spanish (cp., for instance, Travis 2007). Future work could check whether there is an effect in this text.

<sup>9</sup> The Nagelkerke pseudo-R<sup>2</sup> value for the model is 0.832, roughly indicating that the factors included in the model explain 83% of the variation attested in the data.

### 3 Null subjects in early Germanic beyond the Lindisfarne Gospels

The most striking feature of null subjects in the text is the person split: insertion is heavily favoured in the first and second persons, but not in the third person. From the traditional functionalist perspective that identification of the null subject rests on the presence of rich verbal agreement, this presents a problem, since agreement in late Northumbrian was extremely limited. Table 5 illustrates this.

**Table 5.** Present indicative verbal agreement endings in Northumbrian Old English (from Cole 2014: 24; based on Ross 1960: 39)

Person and number		Strong, Weak I	Weak II
sg.	1	<i>-o, -a</i>	<i>-iga, -igo</i>
	2	<i>-as, -es</i>	<i>-(ig)as, -(ig)es</i>
	3	<i>-að, -as, -eð, -es</i>	<i>-(ig)að, -(ig)as, -(ig)eð, -(ig)es</i>
pl./pl. imp.		<i>-að, -as, -eð, -es</i>	<i>-(ig)að, -(ig)as, -(ig)eð, -(ig)es</i>

The paradox is this: distinctive verbal endings are only found in the first person singular, yet in this context (among others) null subjects are extremely rare. Instead null subjects are found primarily in the third person, which cannot be distinguished from first or second person plural, or sometimes even from second person singular.

The idea behind the rich agreement approach to identifying null subjects has a long pedigree: Householder (1981) traces it back to Apollonius Dyscolus in the second century AD. In some languages it may have a role to play; however, as the existence of languages such as Chinese demonstrates, null subjects may be present even in languages without rich verbal morphology. As we have seen, in the case of Northumbrian Old English it does not seem plausible to assume that verbal morphology played a role.

Berndt (1956: 82–85) offers a historical explanation for the person split found in Northumbrian Old English. Noting that in the West Saxon Gospels null subjects are not found, and that in the Rushworth gloss they are found to a lesser extent than in Lindisfarne, he considers the possibility that null subjects are a Northumbrian dialect feature, ultimately rejecting it for reasons that are unclear. Instead Berndt (1956: 82) hypothesizes that the relevant criterion is register (*Schriftsprache* vs. *Umgangssprache*), and that the West Saxon Gospels are the closest to the ‘standard’ of the time, with the Lindisfarne Gospels being the furthest from it. He further hypothesizes that in Proto-Germanic null subjects were the rule across the board, and that while the use of the first and second person pronouns in Old English is a colloquial innovation, the use of the third person pronoun is a prescriptive rule imposed by the standard. Building on Benveniste’s (1946) argument that the third person is logically and cross-linguistically distinct from the other two, he argues that first and second person pronouns were originally introduced for reasons of emphasis, and that in the third person this role could be fulfilled by demonstratives rather than personal pronouns. The consistent use of third person pronouns is then introduced as part of a conscious standardization effort for reasons of symmetry across the paradigm (Berndt 1956: 84).

Whether or not Berndt’s sociolinguistic scenario holds water, the use of first and second person pronouns cannot have been an Old English innovation. In work on other early Germanic texts (Walkden 2013; 2014: 157–195) I have found that the same asymmetry is found all across Northwest Germanic. Table 6 gives figures for a selection of texts.

**Table 6.** Pronominal subjects in Early Northwest Germanic texts, by person and number (based on Walkden 2014: ch. 5)

Text	Person	N	Overt	Null	Total		
Old Icelandic: <i>Morkinskinna</i> (Wallenberg et al. 2011)	1	sg.	269	99.3%	2	0.7%	271
		pl.	79	95.2%	4	4.8%	83
	2	sg.	185	99.5%	1	0.5%	186
		pl.	13	100.0%	0	0.0%	13
	3	sg.	562	90.1%	62	9.9%	624
		pl.	183	89.3%	22	10.7%	205
	Totals			1291		91	1382
Old English: <i>Beowulf</i> (Pintzuk and Plug 2001)	1	sg.	75	97.4%	2	2.6%	77
		pl.	21	100.0%	0	0.0%	21
	2	sg.	26	96.3%	1	3.7%	27
		pl.	10	100.0%	0	0.0%	10
	3	sg.	172	80.4%	42	19.6%	214
		pl.	49	71.0%	20	29.0%	69
	Totals			353		65	418
Old English: <i>Bald's Leechbook</i> (Taylor et al. 2003)	1	sg.	1	100.0%	0	0.0%	1
		pl.	11	100.0%	0	0.0%	11
	2	sg.	52	100.0%	0	0.0%	52
		pl.	0	–	0	–	0
	3	sg.	108	77.1%	32	22.9%	140
		pl.	35	71.4%	14	28.6%	49
	Totals			207		46	253
Old Saxon: <i>Heliand</i> (Behaghel and Taeger 1996)	1	sg.	262	100.0%	0	0.0%	262
		pl.	61	100.0%	0	0.0%	61
	2	sg.	247	99.2%	2	0.8%	249
		pl.	230	99.1%	2	0.9%	232
	3	sg.	1089	94.5%	63	5.5%	1152
		pl.	454	91.5%	42	8.5%	496
	Totals			2343		109	2452
Old High German: <i>Isidor</i> (based on Axel 2007: 315, Table 3; data from Eggenberger 1961; main and conjunct clauses only)	1	sg.	36	94.7%	2	5.3%	38
		pl.	2	40.0%	3	60.0%	5
	2	sg.	3	60.0%	2	40.0%	5
		pl.	1	100.0%	0	0.0%	1
	3	sg.	15	34.1%	29	65.9%	44
		pl.	4	25.0%	12	75.0%	16
	Totals			61		48	109

The overall percentages of null subjects vary from language to language and text to text, but in each case Fisher's exact tests show the difference between 3rd and non-3rd person to be statistically significant ( $p < 0.0001$ ). The person split is therefore almost certainly an innovation that predates the fission of North and West Germanic.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond Germanic, languages which permit null subjects only in certain persons are not unattested. In Finnish and Hebrew, for instance, null subjects are possible only in the first and second persons (Vainikka and Levy 1999): this is the mirror image of what we find in

<sup>10</sup> Gothic seems to behave differently: see Mossé (1956: 171), Abraham (1991), Fertig (2000), Ferraresi (2005: 47–49) and Walkden (2014: 158–164). The evidence from Runic Northwest Germanic, meanwhile, is not unequivocal: of 14 complete inscriptions containing first person singular verbs, two contain no corresponding pronoun (Antonsen 2002: 188–189), while, elsewhere, full pronouns are found, either *ek* or the enclitic *-eka/-ika*. This sort of distribution is to be expected if it was possible but rare for first person pronouns to be omitted in Northwest Germanic. Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, contexts for second and third person subject pronouns are entirely unattested in the corpus of early inscriptions.

Northumbrian Old English and elsewhere in early Northwest Germanic. Shipibo, an indigenous American language, is reported to allow null subjects only in the third person (Camacho and Elías-Ulloa 2010), essentially as in the Lindisfarne Gospels. How these patterns originate historically, and how to analyse them synchronically, is still a matter of debate: see Walkden (2014: 209–215) for one proposal, building on Holmberg (2010).

Within the context of Old English more generally, the Lindisfarne glossal translation occupies a special position, as null subjects are more common proportionally in this text than in any other. The effect of the Latin original likely favoured null subjects; nevertheless, the person split shows that this effect, if it existed, can only have served to amplify a natively existing pattern in Northumbrian Old English.<sup>11</sup> Previous studies of null subjects in Old English have reached different conclusions: Hulk and van Kemenade (1995), for instance, state that Old English is not a null subject language, while van Gelderen (2000) argues that null subjects can be found, partly based on Berndt's (1956) data. Mitchell (1985: 633), building on Pogatscher (1901), states that the possibility of null subjects “occurs (or survives) only spasmodically” in Old English. Walkden (2013; 2014: 171–184) presents the results of a new quantitative study based on the York-Toronto-Helsinki Corpus of Old English Prose (Taylor et al. 2003), which shows that the numbers of null subjects found vary dramatically between texts (cp. also Rusten 2013, 2015): in classical West Saxon prose such as the works of Ælfric and Wulfstan, and in the *Cura Pastoralis*, for instance, null subjects are essentially not found, but in the Old English *Bede*, in *Bald's Leechbook* and in the C, D and E manuscripts of the *Chronicle* they are found with some frequency. In addition, they are frequently found in *Beowulf*, as seen in Table 6.<sup>12</sup>

Walkden (2013; 2014: 183) argues that the correct generalization is that all those texts which robustly exhibit null subjects have been independently argued to be Anglian or Anglian-influenced rather than purely West Saxon. For instance, Fulk (2008: 96) observes that the Old English *Bede* and *Bald's Leechbook*, as well as the D and E *Chronicle* manuscripts, though traditionally classed as West Saxon, display Anglian features. Though it is agreed that *Bald's Leechbook* in its transmitted form was composed in Winchester (Meaney 1984: 236), Wensch (1979: 54) argues on a lexical basis that an Anglian (probably Mercian) original must have existed. As for *Beowulf*, Fulk (1992: 309–325; 2007) notes a number of Anglian lexical and morphological features.

Since West Saxon was the Old English standard (to the extent that such a standard existed; see Smith 2000 on issues of standardization in early English), it is difficult to disentangle my hypothesis of dialectal variation from Berndt's (1956: 82–85) hypothesis of register variation. However, there are a few indications that the Anglian hypothesis is the one that is on the right track. For instance, historical texts such as the *Chronicle* and *Bede's History of the English Church* might be expected to conform closely to any standard, yet these texts still exhibit null subjects. Furthermore, under the register variation hypothesis, versions of the same text in different dialects would not be expected to display substantial variation, yet this is exactly what we find: the D manuscript of the *Chronicle* displays the most null subjects, and the C manuscript displays the fewest. Finally, the register variation hypothesis must stipulate that the effect of the standard was felt in the Rushworth gloss by Farman but not by Owun.

<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to corroborate this using other texts, as the Lindisfarne Gospels are by far the most extensive text written in the Northumbrian dialect. However, Berndt's (1965: 69) data on the Durham Ritual – also a gloss by Aldred – show that this text also has a large majority of null subjects in the third person.

<sup>12</sup> Two reviewers object that the metrical requirements of poetry will affect the expression of pronominal subjects, and this is certainly true; see Rusten (2015) for a clear demonstration of this. However, the fact that the person asymmetry is found very strongly in *Beowulf* suggests that this cannot be the whole story: pronominal subjects are typically unstressed monosyllables regardless of person, and so there is no *metrical* reason to omit third person pronouns more than first and second person pronouns. As in the glosses, then, null subjects in *Beowulf* can only be a native phenomenon. See Walkden (2013) and Rusten (2015) for more detail.

Other comparative questions arise to which I have no firm answer. For instance, in all of the Old English texts investigated in Walkden (2013, 2014) that exhibited significant numbers of null subjects, these null subjects were also significantly more common in main clauses than in subordinate clauses; this also holds true for Old Saxon, Old High German and Old Swedish (Håkansson 2008). In the Lindisfarne glossal translation, on the other hand, null subjects were significantly more common in subordinate clauses than in main clauses (though this effect did not make it into the logistic regression model presented in section 2). Of the early Germanic texts investigated in Walkden (2014), only certain Old Icelandic texts behaved in this way. This might suggest that the distribution we see in the Lindisfarne Gospels is the result of syntactic transfer from Scandinavian; however, Thomason and Kaufman (1988: § 9.8.6.10) claim to find only lexical borrowings from Scandinavian in Old Northumbrian, and not structural transfer. Miller (2012: 134–145) presents several structural features of English for which a case for Norse influence can be made; these are mainly shared innovations rather than borrowings from earlier Scandinavian, and mainly surface during the Middle English period. Under a contact-based approach it also seems odd that null subjects in Old Northumbrian would pattern in terms of clause type with those in Old Icelandic rather than those we see in East Norse (at least on the basis of the Old Swedish evidence). The distribution across clause types we see in the Lindisfarne Gospels could just as well be an artefact of the glossing process, which may not have fully taken clause type into account – though, as mentioned earlier, the glossing process alone is not obviously able to account for the person split.

#### 4 Conclusion: new hope for Old English dialect syntax

In their work *The Syntax of Early English*, Fischer et al. (2000: 37) are pessimistic about the prospects for discovering anything about the dialectal distribution of syntactic variables in Old English:

There is little scope for work on dialect syntax in Old English; almost all the texts are in the West Saxon dialect, while those works of any length that were not written in West Saxon consist mostly of interlinear glosses on parts of the Vulgate bible, and are therefore of limited use for syntactic purposes.

However, recent work (Kroch and Taylor 1997 on pronoun position; Nagucka 1997 on various features; Ingham 2006 on negative concord; van Bergen 2008 on negative contraction; and Cole 2012a, 2012b, 2014 on the Northern Subject Rule) has shown that this position is in need of qualification: syntactic dialect differences within Old English can be identified, provided that the (admittedly limited) non-West Saxon material is used with care.

The present chapter adds another such study to the list: a new quantitative study shows that in all clause types in the Lindisfarne glossal translation, null subjects could be found, frequently in the third person but only rarely in the first and second. This distribution is not predictable on the basis of the Latin original. The study complements the findings of Berndt (1956), who already observed the person split, by demonstrating that clause type does not play a clear role in conditioning null subjects, and by assessing the strength of the effect of the presence or absence of a pronoun in the Latin original. The distribution found in the Lindisfarne Gospels also stands in stark contrast to that found in West Saxon Old English texts, in which null subjects are not robustly attested at all; from a wider perspective, however, it makes perfect sense, as the retention of a common Northwest Germanic syntactic feature.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> This work stems from a larger project on null subjects in early Germanic as part of my PhD, funded by AHRC grant AH/H026924/1. For comments and advice on this topic I am grateful to Elly van Gelderen, Susan Pintzuk,

## Works Cited

- Abraham, Werner. 1991. "Null Subjects: From Gothic, Old High German and Middle High German to Modern German – From Pro-Drop to Semi-Pro-Drop." *Groninger Arbeiten zur germanistischen Linguistik* 34: 1–28.
- Antonsen, Elmer H. 2002. *Runes and Germanic Linguistics*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Axel, Katrin. 2007. *Studies on Old High German Syntax: Left Sentence Periphery, Verb Placement and Verb-Second*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Bech, Kristin. 2001. "Word Order Patterns in Old and Middle English: A Syntactic and Pragmatic Study." Unpubl. PhD dissertation, University of Bergen.
- Behaghel, Otto and Burkhard Taeger. 1996. *Heliand und Genesis*. 10th ed. Halle: Niemeyer.
- Benveniste, Émile. 1946. "Structure des relations de personne dans le verbe". *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* 43: 1–12.
- van Bergen, Linda. 2008. "Negative Contraction and Old English Dialects: Evidence from Glosses and Prose. Part I". *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 109: 275–312.
- Berndt, Rolf. 1956. *Form und Funktion des Verbums im nördlichen Spätaltenglischen: Eine Untersuchung der grammatischen Formen und ihrer syntaktischen Beziehungsbedeutungen in der großen sprachlichen Umbruchperiode*. Halle: Niemeyer.
- Brown, Michelle P. 2003. *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe*. London: British Library/Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Callaway, Morgan, Jr. 1918. *Studies in the Syntax of the Lindisfarne Gospels, with Appendices on Some Idioms in the Germanic Languages*. Baltimore: Hopkins.
- Camacho, José and José Elías-Ulloa. 2010. "Null Subjects in Shipibo Switch-Reference Systems". In: José Camacho, Rodrigo Gutiérrez-Bravo and Liliana Sánchez (eds.). *Information Structure in Indigenous Languages of the Americas: Syntactic Approaches*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 65–85.
- Campbell, Alistair. 1970. "Verse Influences in Old English Prose." In: James L. Rosier (ed.). *Philological Essays: Studies in Old and Middle English Language and Literature in Honour of Herbert Dean Merritt*. The Hague: Mouton. 93–98.
- Cole, Marcelle. 2012a. "The Old English Origins of the Northern Subject Rule: Evidence from the Lindisfarne Gloss to the Gospels of John and Mark". In: Merja Stenroos, Martti Mäkinen and Inge Særheim (eds.). *Language Contact and Development around the North Sea*. Current Issues in Linguistic Theory 321. Amsterdam: Benjamins. 141–168.
- Cole, Marcelle. 2012b. "Old Northumbrian Verbal Morphology in the Glosses to the Lindisfarne Gospels". Unpubl. PhD dissertation, Universidad de Sevilla.
- Cole, Marcelle. 2014. *Old Northumbrian Verbal Morphosyntax and the (Northern) Subject Rule*. NOWELE Supplement Series 25. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- DOE = *Dictionary of Old English in Electronic Form, A–G*. 2007. Ed. Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. Toronto: University of Toronto. <<http://www.doe.utoronto.ca/>>.
- Eggenberger, Jakob. 1961. *Das Subjektpronomen im Althochdeutschen: Ein syntaktischer Beitrag zur Frühgeschichte des deutschen Schrifttums*. Grabs: self-published.
- Fernández Cuesta, Julia. 2009. "On the Importance of Being Faithful: Diplomatic Transcriptions of Historical Texts for Contemporary E-Corpora." Unpubl. MS, University of Seville.
- Ferraresi, Gisella. 2005. *Word Order and Phrase Structure in Gothic*. Leuven: Peeters.
- Fertig, David. 2000. "Null Subjects in Gothic." *American Journal of Germanic Linguistics & Literatures* 12: 3–21.
- Fischer, Olga, Ans van Kemenade, Willem Koopman and Wim van der Wurff. 2000. *The*

- Syntax of Early English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fisher, Ronald A. 1922. "On the Interpretation of  $\chi^2$  from Contingency Tables, and the Calculation of P". *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 85: 87–94.
- Fulk, Robert D. 1992. *A History of Old English Meter*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Fulk, Robert D. 2007. "Archaisms and Neologisms in the Language of Beowulf". In: Christopher M. Cain and Geoffrey Russom (eds.). *Studies in the History of the English Language*. Volume III: *Managing Chaos: Strategies for Identifying Change in English*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 267–287.
- Fulk, Robert D. 2008. "Anglian Dialect Features in Old English Anonymous Homiletic Literature: A Survey, with Preliminary Findings." In: Susan Fitzmaurice and Donka Minkova (eds.). *Studies in the History of the English Language*. Volume IV: *Empirical and Analytical Advances in the Study of English Language Change*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 81–100.
- van Gelderen, Elly. 2000. *A History of English Reflexive Pronouns: Person, Self, and Interpretability*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Håkansson, David. 2008. "Syntaktisk variation och förändring: En studie av subjektlösa satser i fornsvenska." Unpubl. PhD dissertation, University of Lund.
- Holmberg, Anders. 2010. "Null Subject Parameters." In: Theresa Biberauer, Anders Holmberg, Ian Roberts and Michelle Sheehan (eds.). *Parametric Variation: Null Subjects in Minimalist Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 88–124.
- Holmberg, Anders and Ian Roberts. 2010. "Introduction: Parameters in Minimalist Theory". In: Theresa Biberauer, Anders Holmberg, Ian Roberts and Michelle Sheehan (eds.). *Parametric Variation: Null Subjects in Minimalist Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1–57.
- Householder, Fred W. 1981. *Syntax of Apollonius Dyscolus*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Huang, Yan. 2000. *Anaphora: A Cross-Linguistic Study*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hulk, Aafke and Ans van Kemenade. 1995. "V2, Pro-Drop, Functional Projections and Language Change". In: Adrian Battye and Ian Roberts (eds.). *Clause Structure and Language Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 227–256.
- Ingham, Richard. 2006. "On Two Negative Concord Dialects in Early English." *Language Variation and Change* 18: 241–266.
- Johnson, Daniel E. 2009. "Getting Off the GoldVarb Standard: Introducing Rbrul for Mixed Effects Variable Rule Analysis". *Language and Linguistics Compass* 3: 359–383.
- Kendrick, T. D., T. J. Brown, R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, H. Roosen-Runge, A. S. C. Ross, E. G. Stanley and A. E. A. Werner (eds.). 1960. *Evangeliorum Quattuor Codex Lindisfarnensis, Musei Britannici Codex Nero D.IV*. Volume II: *Commentariorum libri duo, quorum unus de textu evangeliorum Latino et codicis oratione, alter de glossa Anglo-Saxonica*. Olten/Lausanne: Graf.
- Kroch, Anthony and Ann Taylor. 1997. "Verb Movement in Old and Middle English: Dialect Variation and Language Contact." In: Ans van Kemenade and Nigel Vincent (eds.). *Parameters of Morphosyntactic Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 297–325.
- Meaney, Audrey L. 1984. "Variant Versions of Old English Medical Remedies and the Compilation of Bald's *Leechbook*." *Anglo-Saxon England* 13: 235–268.
- Miller, D. Gary. 2012. *External Influences on English: From its Beginnings to the Renaissance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mitchell, Bruce. 1985. *Old English Syntax*. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Mossé, Ferdinand. 1956. *Manuel de la langue gotique*. 2nd ed. Paris: Aubier.
- Nagucka, Ruta. 1997. "Glossal Translation in the Lindisfarne Gospel according to Saint Matthew". In: Jacek Fisiak (ed.). *Festschrift for Roger Lass on His Sixtieth Birthday*. *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 31: 179–201.

- Pintzuk, Susan and Leendert Plug. 2001. *The York-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Poetry*. Department of Linguistics, University of York. <<http://www-users.york.ac.uk/~lang18/pcorpus.html>>.
- Pogatscher, Alois. 1901. "Unausgedrücktes Subjekt im Altenglischen." *Anglia* 23: 261–301.
- Ross, Alan S. C. 1960. "Standard Paradigms". In: Kendrick et al. (eds.). 1960. Book II. 37–42.
- Ross, Alan S. C. and Ann Squires. 1980. "The Multiple, Altered and Alternative Glosses of the Lindisfarne and Rushworth Gospels and the Durham Ritual". *Notes and Queries* 225: 489–495.
- Ross, Alan S. C., E. G. Stanley, and T. J. Brown. 1960. "Some Observations on the Gloss and the Glossator". In: Kendrick et al. (eds.). 1960. Book II. 5–33.
- Skeat, Walter W. (ed.). 1871–1887. *The Holy Gospels in Anglo-Saxon, Northumbrian, and Old Mercian Versions*. 4 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [Mark (1871), Luke (1874), John (1878), Matthew (1887)].
- Smith, Jeremy. 2000. "Standard Language in Early Middle English?" In: Irma Taavitsainen, Terttu Nevalainen, Päivi Pahta and Matti Rissanen (eds.). *Placing Middle English in Context*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 125–141.
- Stefanowitsch, Anatol and Stefan T. Gries. 2003. "Collostructions: Investigating the Interaction of Words and Constructions". *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 8: 209–243.
- Taylor, Ann. 2008. "Contact Effects of Translation: Distinguishing Two Types of Influence in Old English". *Language Variation and Change* 20: 341–365.
- Taylor, Ann, Anthony Warner, Susan Pintzuk and Frank Beths. 2003. *The York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose (YCOE)*. Department of Linguistics, University of York. <<http://www-users.york.ac.uk/~lang22/YcoeHome1.htm>>.
- Thomason, Sarah G. and Terrence Kaufman. 1988. *Language Contact, Creolization, and Genetic Linguistics*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Travis, Catherine E. 2007. "Genre Effects on Subject Expression in Spanish: Priming in Narrative and Conversation". *Language Variation and Change* 19: 101–135.
- Vainikka, Anne and Yonata Levy. 1999. "Empty Subjects in Finnish and Hebrew." *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 17: 613–671.
- Walkden, George. 2013. "Null subjects in Old English". *Language Variation and Change* 25: 155–178.
- Walkden, George. 2014. *Syntactic Reconstruction and Proto-Germanic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wallenberg, Joel, Anton Karl Ingason, Einar Freyr Sigurðsson and Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson. 2011. *Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePaHC)*. Department of Linguistics, University of Iceland. <[http://www.linguist.is/icelandic\\_treebank/](http://www.linguist.is/icelandic_treebank/)>.
- Wenisch, Franz. 1979. *Spezifisch anglisches Wortgut in den nordhumbrischen Interlinearglossierungen des Lukasevangeliums*. Anglistische Forschungen 132. Heidelberg: Winter.