

## Linguistic identities in Anglo-Scandinavian England: revisiting the place-name evidence

### Abstract

It is now nearly twenty years since Matthew Townend argued that there was ‘adequate mutual intelligibility’ for day-to-day communication between speakers of Old Norse and Old English (Townend 2002, 182–83). Accurate substitution of English and Norse cognates in place-names was an important part of Townend’s evidence, establishing that speakers of Old Norse and Old English understood correspondences in sound-systems and vocabulary between the two languages. Townend’s findings have important implications for how we approach the contact situation that obtained in Viking-Age England: they suggest that our understanding of the contact situation should be informed not only by language-contact studies (e.g. Thomason and Kaufman 1988), but also by studies of contact between closely related linguistic varieties. In contact between closely related linguistic varieties, the development of a compromise variety entails different phenomena from those in contact between unrelated, or more distantly related, varieties (Trudgill 1986; Kerswill 2013).

A handful of recent linguistic studies of Norse-English contact take the relatedness of Old Norse and Old English into account (e.g. Miller 2012, 91–147; Millar 2016, 152–70). However, despite the importance of place-name evidence in Townend’s establishment of Old Norse and Old English as mutually intelligible to a significant extent, there has been little or no consideration of the implications of these findings in studies of place-names from areas of Norse-English contact. This paper will argue that viewing Norse-English contact as contact between closely related varieties is a useful perspective to take, which may explain otherwise puzzling aspects of the place-names of Anglo-Scandinavian and later medieval northern England. Much of the evidence will be drawn from two case-studies of place-names from north-west England, the Wirral and part of Cumbria.

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### References

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