

SQUIB

Dialect evidence for the loss of genitive inflection in English¹

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In an article published in the first issue of *English Language and Linguistics*, Cynthia Allen (1997) discusses the loss of case-marking distinctions in English, arguing that the process of case loss was much more gradual than has often been assumed and thus presenting evidence against the ‘creolization’ hypothesis put forward by Domingue (1977), Bailey & Maroldt (1977), Poussa (1982), and Milroy (1984). According to the creolization hypothesis many of the rapid changes that took place in Middle English are typical of language contact situations that lead to creolization. Against the creolization hypothesis, Allen (1997: 64) argues that ‘although language contact probably accelerated the reduction of case marking, the changes proceeded in too orderly a fashion to be the result of any sort of creolization process which involved the rapid stripping away of inflections, a characteristic of indisputable creoles’.

The main body of Allen’s article consists of a detailed analysis of the reduction in the number of inflectional classes and case syncretism in a number of early Middle English documents, with emphasis on case-marking in the nominative, accusative, and dative. In her conclusion Allen, however, discusses the supposed universal retention of the genitive inflection in English dialects in a manner that deserves a comment. She refers to work in creole language typology, and argues that ‘while genitive pronouns are found in some creoles, I am not aware that any creole has a possessive case for nouns’ (1997: 86). She argues further that ‘*there is not a shred of evidence that the genitive inflection was ever endangered in any dialect*’ (1997: 86–7, my emphasis), and that this ‘particularly striking noncreole feature of ME’ offers strong evidence against the creolization hypothesis.

In the light of Allen’s categorical statement about the retention of the genitive inflection in English dialects, it is interesting to look at data from the *Survey of English Dialects* (SED) (Orton et al., 1962–71). *The Linguistic Atlas of England* (LAE) offers a good point of entry to the SED data. LAE maps M65 and M66 deal with the loss of the genitive inflection in English dialects. LAE map M65 (figure 1) displays the geographical distribution of the loss of the genitive inflection in the answers to the SED questionnaire item IX.8.6 (*If these boots belong to your father, then you could say: These are my . . . father’s boots*). The map indicates that the

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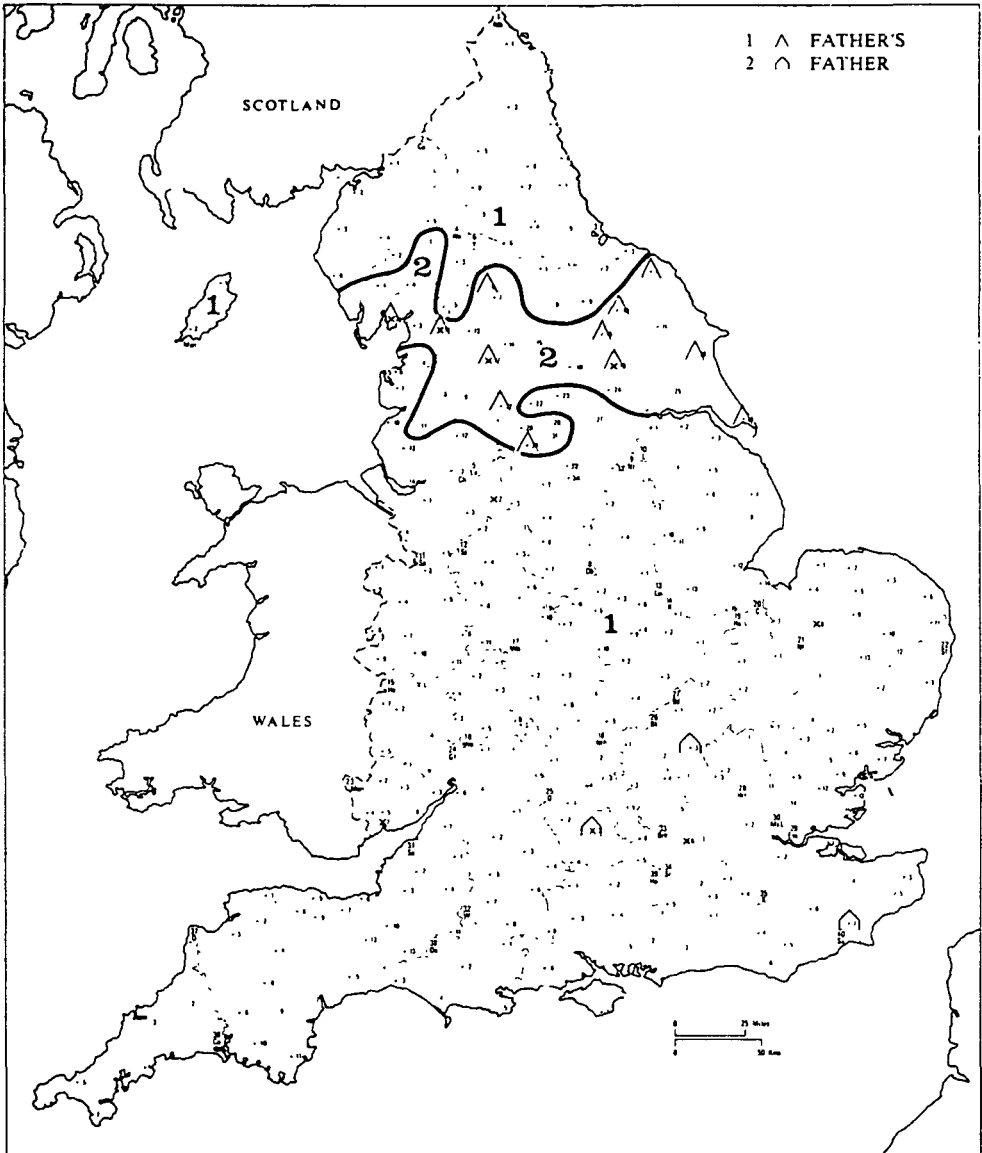


Figure 1 The geographical distribution of the loss of the genitive marker *-s* in *father's boots* in the SED data (LAEM65)

uninflected form is found in a clearly defined geographical area which covers most of Yorkshire, and parts of Westmorland and Lancashire. The responses to the other *SED* questionnaire item (IX.8.7) that deals with the genitive (*These are the legs of this cow. So you can say, in a shorter way: These are this . . . cow's legs*) indicate a similar geographical pattern (see *LAE* M66). Bearing in mind the historical orientation of the *SED*, it is not surprising that the genitive constructions chosen for the questionnaire (*father's boots, cow's legs*) should involve nouns that go back to Old English stem classes which do not show the *-es* ending in the genitive. However, the incidental material listed in the responses to the *SED* questionnaire item IX.8.6 makes it abundantly clear that the loss of the genitive marker is not restricted to nouns that go back to those OE stem classes: [ə lad tɹəl] *a lad's tale*, 6 Y 4; [t_puək mʊn] *the poke's mun* (= *mouth*), 6 Y 6; [nɪəbʊdɪ gɑ:dɪn] *nobody's garden*, 6 Y 11; [tʃaɪld ɪəd] *child's head*, 6 Y 26; [pɪg bæk] *pig's back*, 6 Y 26; [ðæt mæn nɛəm] *that man's name*, 6 Y 27; etc. (for more examples, see the answers to IX.8.6 in the *SED Basic Material* for Yorkshire, Westmorland, and Lancashire).²

Given what we know about the time-depth and stability of many other features of traditional dialects (see e.g. Ihalainen, 1994; Klemola, 1996; Lass, 1976; Samuels, 1985) it is not unreasonable to assume that the loss of the genitive marker in these Northern dialects, as documented in the *SED*, is a feature of some antiquity, probably reaching as far back in time as the early Middle English period. Indeed, there is evidence to indicate that the loss of the genitive marker in Northern dialects is not a recent phenomenon. Joseph Wright mentions this feature both in his *English Dialect Grammar* (1905),³ and in his *Grammar of the Dialect of Windhill* (1892: 109–10).⁴ Evidence for the loss of the genitive marker during the early Modern English period is discussed by Ekwall (1913), who explicitly excludes texts originating from the North of England from his discussion, as he takes the loss of the possessive marker *-s* to be a feature typical of the Northern dialects:

Early Modern texts written in the North of England or by Northerners have been left out of consideration. In Middle English time the *s*-less genitive was particularly common in Northern dialects. It is very often found in Northern texts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries . . . (Ekwall, 1913: 61)

Ekwall (1913: 61) concludes that in sixteenth-century 'Standard literary language', however, the *s*-less genitive is rare, with some exceptions, notably the diary of Henry Machyn (Nichols, 1848).⁵ To continue with the backwards projection of the dialectal

² The *SED* data for the loss of the possessive marker are also mentioned in Wakelin (1977: 111).

³ '§ 387. The sign of the genitive, both singular and plural, is generally omitted when one noun qualifies another in all the north Country dialects and occasionally in the north Midlands, as *the Queen cousin, my father boots, the lad father stick*' (Wright, 1905: 265).

⁴ Wright also points out the interesting feature that the possessive marker in these Northern dialects is only lost in what Quirk et al. (1985: § 5.10, 5.121) call determinative functions, e.g. Wright's *demz mi faðə buits, those are my father's boots*. In independent and post-genitive ('double genitive') constructions the inflectional marker *-s* is used, e.g. Wright's (1892: 109–10) examples *dem buits ə mi faðəz, those boots are my father's; t'buits ə tlad faðəz, the boots of the boy's father*.

⁵ The majority of Ekwall's examples of the *s*-less genitive during the early Modern English period come

distribution of the uninflected genitive, evidence for this feature in Northern varieties of Middle English is mentioned in Brunner (1963: 47), who gives examples of Northern *s*-less genitives such as *meidene crowne, the wife rede, his herte wille, his fader care*. Mustanoja (1960: 72) also mentions the *s*-less genitive as mainly a Northern feature in Middle English.⁶

In conclusion, there is ample and well-documented evidence for the loss of the genitive inflection in twentieth-century traditional Northern dialect data as well as in early Modern English and Middle English documents representing Northern dialects. Furthermore, there is a very close fit between the geographical distribution of the loss of the genitive marker *-s* in the *SED* data and what is known about both the modern distribution of Scandinavian influence in English dialects and the history of Scandinavian invasions and settlements (cf. Samuels, 1985). The purpose of this short note, however, is not to take sides on the thorny issue of the role that language contact phenomena have played in the history of English.⁷ Rather, I hope the above discussion has shown that nonstandard varieties of English are a surprisingly rich source of data – also for historical argumentation – and that they deserve as careful consideration as all the other available facts.

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from the diary of Henry Machyn (Nichols, 1848). Ekwall (1913: 66) explains this fact in the following terms: 'Machyn, by trade a merchant tailor, was evidently a man of little book-learning, though he was doubtless just as well educated as the generality of middle class people in his time . . . We may assume that Machyn wrote much as he spoke, so that his diary is as faithful a specimen of the colloquial language used in London middle-class circles about the time of the accession of Queen Elizabeth as we can expect to find.' Wijk (1937), however, presents a detailed analysis of the language of Machyn's diary, and argues convincingly (though one of the anonymous *ELL* reviewers remains unconvinced) that Machyn came from south-east Yorkshire: 'M.[achyn] came, I believe, from the western part of se. Yks, from the marshland between Holderness and the Ouse, Ellis's district number 30^d' (Wijk, 1937: 15). In other words, Wijk argues that Machyn came from an area in the North which still at the time when the *SED* data was collected in the 1950s showed evidence of the loss of the genitive marker *-s*.

⁶ Both Mustanoja (1960) and Ekwall (1913) mention Knapp (1902) as their main source for dialectal distribution of uninflected genitives in Middle English. Knapp (1902: 46–58) contains a detailed discussion of the different types of *s*-less genitives in Middle English.

⁷ Although, in keeping with the logic of Allen's argumentation, the evidence about the loss of the genitive inflection in Northern dialects of English could be construed as pointing towards the possibility of some sort of creolization process having taken place in the history of these Northern vernacular varieties of English.

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