

Pragmatic perspective(s) on Old English wills and charters: analysing 12th-century forged documents

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The study described in this abstract constitutes a part of a research grant funded by the National Science Centre, concerned with twelfth century English document forgeries as a source for the reconstruction of some of the elements and features of Early Middle English. Around 300 of these forgeries survived until now, yet, they have not been researched comprehensively from a linguistic perspective, as until recently, unoriginal and edited texts were not valued as data sources in historical linguistics. One of the stages of the research grant is to compare the documents identified as forgeries with original Old English documents from the pre-Conquest period. To do that, a research framework has to be devised and tested on a smaller sample, therefore, the pilot study that, in this case, is conducted on wills and charters from the tenth (original) and twelfth (forged) century.

The tenth century is of particular interest here, as it was a period of change in the Church throughout Western Europe, not without impact on the English monastic and secular life. The influence of the Benedictine Reform can be seen in the changes that occurred in the language and form of wills and charters. A substantial amount of these documents (around sixty wills) survived from the period, constituting a good base for comparison with the forged documents from the twelfth century.

Researchers (Drout 2000, Tollerton 2011) agree that the Benedictine Reform changed the form and language of Anglo-Saxon, wills, tying them closely to religion and God, resulting in a set of characteristic properties embedded in these texts. From these features emerges a defined set of (socio)pragmatic mechanisms that were at work. The goal of the abovementioned pilot study is to test the present pragmatic frameworks (Jucker and Taavitsainen 2013, Labov 2001) against samples from the tenth and twelfth century, allowing for their further re-adjustment. The poster will present the methodology, theoretical framework and aims of the pilot study conducted on the said sample.

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