What Gothic can tell us about the origins of the NWGmc reinforced demonstrative

Kayne (2008) crucially postulates that the proximal demonstrative *this* has (first) person features, thus somehow aligning it with verbal properties. Exploring the diachronic emergence of the proximal demonstrative in Germanic, this talk provides etymological support for this hypothesis.

An innovation common to the North and West Germanic languages is the so-called ‘reinforced’ (proximal) demonstrative, reconstructed as the neutral/distal demonstrative pronoun *sa, s!, "at + a ‘reinforcing’ element *si(:), as in Runic ON sasi (DR 189), ]at:si (Sö 47), ]aimsi (Ol 1), etc. > ON sjá!essi, jetta, OHG dëseldës"r, OE !"s. The origins of the ‘reinforcer’ *si(:) are unclear, being analyzed as either a locative or a verbal (imperative) morpheme (contrast (1) vs. (2)).

Evidence will be given that, in line with (2), a verbal, ‘see’-based interjection is common to all three branches of Germanic, including Gothic (EGmc). Specifically, the Gothic cognate saí can even be shown to be undergoing a development parallel to the development reconstructed for the NWGmc reinforcer in (2).

The Gothic available to us does not itself have a (*si-based1) proximal demonstrative, but it does have the right ingredients for its composition, viz. the demonstrative, sa, so, !ata and the items sai# (imperative, < *sek") and sai (interjection, < *si#/s$). There is debate about the etymology of the form sai (with 96 instances), which actually occurs much more frequently than sai# (5 instances). Among the three possible etymologies listed in Feist (1939) I will provide evidence that the most convincing is Grimm’s verbal, sai#an-based etymology. The relevant evidence for the verbal nature of sai includes: (i) Derolez & Simon-Vandenbergen’s (1988) observation that sai’s most common usage is as a translation for Greek l&’ ( / )&3 ‘see!/look!’; (ii) D&SV’s example (3), where Gothic sai clearly takes an accusative object, meaning saí is a verb selecting accusative case; (iii) Examples like (4) with sai nu, cognate with OHG s”nu, ON sé nu, which are uncontroversially verbal. (4) is especially interesting because in the Greek source text there is neither a ‘now’ nor a ‘lo’, suggesting that Wulfila has inserted something idiomatic.

Gothic actually has evidence for all stages in the development in (2), except the final clitic stage; see (5). The idea is that the (clause-initial) examples in (5c) show sai in Wackernagel’s (1892) position, with sai as a prosodically (and semantically) weak particle inserted to the right of first-constituent adverbs. There is also suggestive evidence for the association of sai with proximal semantics, in that proximal elements are far more likely to be associated with sai than distal ones; see (6). The most convincing piece of evidence for sai’s association with proximal semantics is (7), where sai alone is used to render Gk. +,+ ‘now’.

Time permitting I will discuss contemporary evidence for hypothesis (2) (Haegeman 2010, Haegeman & Hill 2011 on West Flemish; also D&SV 1988 on verbal interjections in general).