The definite suffix: different origins – uniform outcome

One of the features that distinguishes the Scandinavian languages from the other Germanic languages is the inflection of nouns by means of a definite suffix. The suffix is commonly held to originate from a cliticized post-posed demonstrative. There are, however, different views on whether this demonstrative was hinn or rather an h-less inn – or possibly enn. Also the dating of the development is debated and suggestions from “before 800” (Skrzypek 2009) to the 13th century (Delsing 2002) have been presented. The very different views on the matter (despite much attention from scholars for over a century) are of course due to the fact that the details of the development are hard to follow in written sources.

Nevertheless, I believe it possible to get further in the discussion. In addition to the questions already mentioned, concerning the origin of the suffix and the dating of the process, I also find it important to raise the question of whether this particular Nordic novation was spread from one particular novation centre or if it maybe arose spontaneously on different spots all over Scandinavia.

My investigation is founded on etymological considerations and studies of the earliest sources of the Nordic languages, i.e. mainly runic inscriptions and early medieval law texts from Sweden and Denmark and different early manuscripts from Iceland and Norway. I have also benefitted from the wordlist of Ludvig Larsson (1891), accounting for every single instance of the words in the earliest Icelandic manuscripts and the corresponding wordlist by Anne Holtsmark (1955) for the oldest Norwegian manuscripts.

Electronic normalized editions of West Nordic mediaeval texts may be used for searching, but the importance of consulting also diplomatic editions (or facsimiles) must be stressed. The phrases in (1) illustrate what differences one may find between a normalized edition (Einarsson, Kvaran & Ingólfsson 1993:177) and the original manuscript (see de Leeuw van Weenen 1993). The words in boldface are of particular interest in this context.

(1) normalized version: original manuscript:

inn efsti fulltrúi lifsins
the highest guarantee of-the-life

enn efste fulltrue lifs ens

hinir tveir kostri [...] er ...
the two good-things [...] that ...

hiner tuéir coster [...] es ...

A further study of the earliest Icelandic texts actually reveals that enn was the dominating pre-adjectival article (not inn or hinn), whereas hinn is the prevailing form of determinative pronouns before relative clauses. Furthermore, the definite marker does not always appear as a suffix cliticized to the noun, but sometimes as a separate word, homonymous with the pre-adjectival article.

The form of the definite marker in early Icelandic, whereas free or cliticized, points to an origin in a lost demonstrative based on a Proto-Scandinavian stem *en(a)- (< PIE eno-). Interestingly this does not seem to be the case in Mainland Scandinavian, where hinn, a fusion of hi- (< PIE ki-) and *en(a)-, is a more plausible candidate.
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