

Pursuing an old “will-o’-the-wisp”: the nature of Old English *se*

It is a well-known fact that PIE grammar, as far as one can reconstruct it, did not have the equivalent of modern articles, which are found in many of its descendants.

How the various languages eventually developed definite and indefinite articles, following similar paths, remains to be explained, even for languages relatively well-known and well-studied.

In this paper, I discuss the nature of Old English (OE) *se seo þæt*: it was the OE distal demonstrative and it is certainly the ancestor of the modern definite article, but there is still no real consensus on what its exact nature was in OE. Some authors use the non-committal label of ‘démonstratif-article’ (Mossé 1945:81), observing that “y a-t-il des cas où il est encore difficile de dire s’il s’agit de l’article ou du démonstratif” (p.146). Other authors are more *tranchants*: “OE did not have a definite article” (Mitchell 1985:133, n.87) or “there are no articles as such in OE. The demonstrative *se* does duty for ‘the’ and ‘that’” (Mitchell & Robinson 1992:106). According to Mitchell the question is an “unreal problem”, not worth much attention: “there is little to be gained by pursuing this terminological will-o’-the-wisp” (p. 133). Labelling *se* ‘article’ or ‘demonstrative’, however, makes entirely different predictions on its distribution, in particular on its being obligatory in some contexts or not: languages without articles, in fact, insert a demonstrative whenever a deixis is appropriate, but a nominal can freely appear ‘bare’ otherwise; in languages with articles, on the other hand, it is always possible to predict whether the article will be present or not, depending on an intricate set of syntactic and interpretive conditions.

Recent work (Wood 2003) defends the idea that a real article appears only in Early Middle English, when the independent use of *se*, exemplified in (1) (Wood’s ex. 3), becomes impossible. Note that this line of reasoning would force one to conclude that modern German does not have a real definite article: independent uses of *der die das* are in fact widely attested, not only as relative pronouns but also as independent demonstratives (cf. (2)). However, one is fully justified in assuming that *der die das* are definite articles on the basis of their distribution, which is entirely predictable (with minor cases of optional uses, probably attributable to register variation).

In this paper, based on quantitative evidence collected on YCOE (Taylor *et al.* 2003 - 1,500,000 words), including prose texts composed between the 9th and the 11th century, I show that the OE situation is very similar to that of modern German, at least as far as the definite article is considered.

My argument begins with a scrutiny of the presence/absence of *se* with proper names when the latter are preceded by an adjective: in argument function, the presence of *se* is virtually obligatory (3a), the few exceptions being found as complements of prepositions (3b) (see below). On the other hand, in non-argument function (3c,d) *se* is absent in 75% of the cases. The obvious absence of a semantic motivation for the presence of the article in these constructions and the argument/non-argument asymmetry involving the presence of *se* both indicate that the latter is a functional category which has some characteristic properties of modern articles and not of demonstratives. These data sharply contrast with an analogous search made on Beowulf (8th century), where in no case is a proper name preceded by an adjective introduced by *se*, independently of the argument status.

I will then argue that the illusion of relative freedom in the use of *se* is mainly due to two syntactic characteristics of OE: the role of prepositions as licensors of an empty D position (a property found in other languages, such as Rumanian (cf. 4)), and the possibility for singular count nouns to appear ‘bare’ (i.e. without an indefinite article, cf. (5)). Under conditions predictable on a comparative Germanic basis and under a formal theory of feature spread, they can in fact even receive a definite interpretation.

Finally, I will discuss the significance of the strong/weak declension of the adjectives, showing that the traditional idea that this opposition is the precursor of the definite/indefinite opposition is untenable: rather, I will suggest that strong inflection originally served as an identifier of an empty D position for arguments.

- (1) Hi habbaþ mid him awyriedne engel, mancynnes feond and **se** hæfþ andweald ...
They have with them corrupt angel, mankind's enemy and that-one has power ...
(ÆCHom II 38,283,113)
- (2) a. Wir haben **das** forausgesehen.
b. Kennst du diese Bücher? Nein, **die** habe ich nie gesehen.
- (3) a. and þa hæðenan genealæhton to þam halgan Oswolde.
and the pagans drew near to the holy Oswald (ÆLS_[Oswald]:155.5466)
b. Se muþa is on eastewardre Cent.
the mouth [of the river] is in eastern Kent (ChronA_[Plummer]:893.5.1012)
c. Ða cwæd se kyning to þan abbode. La leof Sæxulf ...
then said the king to the abbot: 'Oh, dear Saxulf ...
(INTERPOLATION,ChronE_[Plummer]:656.12.39)
d. & worhte hine arfæstne Paulum.
And made him pious Paul (ÆCHom_I,_27:403.90.5316)
- (4) a. o cană pe masă
a jug on [the] table
b. din cladire
from [the/a] building
c. *din cladirea
from building-the (Joseph 1999)
- (5) a. ge gemetað þærrihte **getigedne assan**
you meet right-away tied donkey ([AE]CHom i,206)
b. gif he **broður** læfe
if he brother leave (CP, 42:13)

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