Language contact and competition in the periphrastic perfect in the history of English

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The paper seeks to explore and discuss the extent to which the variable usage pattern of competing English perfective auxiliaries was influenced by language contact with Old Norse in the Old English period, involving extensive adult second language acquisition and bilingualism. Informed by connectionist (Ellis 2002) and competition (Bates and MacWhinney 1981) models of second language acquisition, the quantitative study scrutinises the changes in the distribution of various perfective auxiliaries from a geographical and diachronic perspective. Drawn from the computerised and parsed versions of the Helsinki Corpus (including the PPCME, for Middle English) and from the Helsinki Corpus proper (for Old English), the data show that whereas the perfective auxiliaries BE and HAVE do not behave in a considerably different way with the transitive and the non-mutative intransitive verbs in the various early English (late Old English, Middle English, and early Modern English) periods, there is a salient competition of BE and HAVE with mutative verbs. The findings show that the extent of this variation differs across dialects in a statistically significant way. This variable patterning is easily attributable to a significant extent of Scandinavian influence and imperfect adult second language acquisition since the distribution of the perfective auxiliary verbs displays a marked dichotomy between Middle English dialect areas located within the former Danelaw and those which are not. The data also suggest that, irrespective of the auxiliary type, the diffusion of the periphrastic perfect was faster – though at the same time more nonlinear – in the language contact areas, with burst-like phases of overgeneralisation (to be explained resorting to complexity and restructuring models of acquisition), which then might have helped the Scandinavian-induced pattern percolate more easily into new grammatical contexts and registers.

References