

Abstract

He *dived* or he *dove*. He *dreamed* or he *dreamt*. Most of us can probably come to think of a word that may be declined in more than one way or that used to be declined in one way but is now declined differently; undoubtedly many people also have an opinion about that phenomenon. But considerably fewer, one might assume, have ever considered that a decent portion of modern words following a very archaic-looking inflectional pattern, e.g. *man* - *men*, have once had the same status as *dove* and *dreamt* – they are neologisms, linguistic innovations. In the centuries around the birth of Christ, the plural form *men* replaced an older form which is no longer in use but which would probably have appeared as *mans* or something similar to that.

In his Ph.D. dissertation *Archaisms and innovations: four interconnected studies on Germanic historical phonology and morphology*, historical linguist Bjarne Simmelkjær Sandgaard Hansen advances a range of criteria as to how one can tell apart archaic word forms from more recent ones only by analysing the shape of different types of nouns; in other words, how one can distinguish between forms that can be traced more than 5,000 years back in time to the Indo-European proto-language, the common linguistic ancestor of the majority of languages in Europe and a wide array of languages in West and South Asia, and forms that may have arisen anytime between Proto-Germanic, a reconstructed language developed from Proto-Indo-European and spoken in the centuries prior to the birth of Christ, and the later attested Germanic languages including the Nordic languages, English, German, Dutch, Frisian and the long extinct Gothic language.

The identification of these criteria constitutes two of the separate, yet interconnected studies in the dissertation, the remaining two centring on the identification of two hitherto unknown patterns of regular sound change, i.e. soundlaws, that happened in the developmental process from Proto-Indo-European to Proto-Germanic and that support the methods mentioned above of evaluating the originality of certain types of nouns based on their shape and appearance.