How them could have been his

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Introduction

• Developments in ME include:
  — borrowing of 3 pl forms from ON
  — transition from OE nīs heo > ME she
• Studies tend to focus on history of PDE forms
• ME she
  — just one of many variants for ‘she’
  — no better a contender than its competitors

Pl object pronoun forms in eME

• Three ‘regular’ form types:
  hi-type (< OE 3 acc pl)
  him-type (< OE 3 dat pl)
  þeim-type (< ON)

An eME innovation

3. þet is þe felliste best þet me clepþ þyane / þet underþ þe bodies of dyade men and þis eþe
   ‘That is the most savage beast that one calls “hyena” / which digs up the bodies of dead men and eats them’
   (ayenbitet.tag)

4. And zelfa two sunes he be \ Lia cable is gud and asser
   ‘And Zelfa two sons to him bore \ Leah called them Gad and Asher’
   (genexodt.tag)

5. al sauo he de þes eþe iscop
   ‘as he who created them all’
   (vvat.tag)
his-type pl object pronouns

• Earliest examples date to c.1200
• Distinguished by ’s’
  — his, hys, hies, hise, hes, es, is, ys, os, -s
• 153 tokens in A Linguistic Atlas of Early ME (LAEME) corpus
• Found only in direct object contexts, i.e. where we might expect a reflex of OE acc. pl. hi

Fulk (2012: 65) on origin

• ’Accusative forms with <s> first appear in the later twelfth century, apparently representing hi with addition of the commonest plural marker in nouns’

Fulk (2012: 65) on origin

• pl his-type < OE acc pl hi + plural –s
  ✓ Explains why pl his-type appears only in DO contexts
  ✓ Pl –s increasingly the norm in ME nominal system
  ✓ Parallel development in non-standard ModE pl you(n)
  ✓ Explains why unattested in North (with its new pem-type)

his-type pl object pronouns

• A minor variant type overall
• Favoured over hi- and him-types in DO contexts in just 3 texts:
  — ayenbite (Kent): 62x his, 22x him
  — vwa (SW Essex): 24x his, 14x him, 2x hi
  — vb (SW Essex): 5x his, 2x him

Problem ...

• LAEME also has 82 sg his-type tokens
  — all in DO contexts (like pl)
  — earliest examples date to c.1200 (like pl)
• Appear only in contexts where we might expect a reflex of OE acc. fem. sg. hi
Grammatically fem. antecedent  

6. he de godes milce suelde, iwis he mou his finde 
   'He who seeks god’s mercy, surely he may find it’ 
   milce < OE milt fem. (egpm1t.tag)  

7. þe þet echte wilhalden wele þe he muge æs wældan 
   'He that intends to hold property well while he can wield it’ 
   echte < OE Æhte fem. (læmpm.tag)  

8. and nime þe tresor of þe herte and he hisuel ðæg mid 
   'And (they will) take the treasure from the heart and fill it again 
   with idleness’ 
   herte < OE heorte fem. (ayenbit.tag)  

... or human female referent  

9. On of þe holie writes [...] bringen us blisfullæ 
   tånges of an edie meiden þe was iferen 
   bespoused þe heuenliche kinge & seid þe hes 
   fette hom 
   'One of the holy writes [...] bring to us blissful tidings of a blessed maiden who was 
   bespoused to the heavenly king as his wife, 
   and says that he fetched her home’ 
   (meiden < OE mægden neut.) (trholit.tag)  

his-type DO pronouns (sg & pl)  

- Persisted into late ME and with same regional distribution  
- Not attested after c.1500  

- The sg his-type tokens argue against Fulk’s analysis  
  - especially as they first appear at the same time as pl tokens  
  - especially as several texts have both sg and pl tokens  

Existing commentary  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>sg use</th>
<th>origin</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fulk  (2012: 65)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>✓ (for pl only)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mossé (1952: 865)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fistiak (1968: 88)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wright &amp; Wright (1928: §376)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>Mustamoa (1960: 135)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morsbach (1897: 331)</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>Nielsen (1981: 165)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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Morsbach (1897), Nielsen (1981)  

- Both point to other WGmc s-ful forms, eg:  
  - OFr: n/asf., n/ap s(te)  
  - MDu: sf. & pl si (full), -se (clitic)  
  - OS: nsf. siu, asf. sia, n/apf sia  
  - OHG: nsf. siu, asf. sia, n/ap si
Morsbach (1897: 331) on his-type

- A native development based on survival of an older 3 person s- stem (which corresponds to the ’s’ of other WGmc s-ful forms)
- English forms developed initially as enclitic pronouns, and later expanded to non-clitic forms es, is, hes, his, etc.
- Problem: given such an ancient provenance, why is the his-type not attested until 1200? (Howe 1996: 140)

Nielsen (1981: 165)

- The his-type ’is not seen in OE, but is attested in the SE dialect of ME, perhaps as a result of contacts with the Continent’
  - what sort of contact? Other evidence?
  - why are English forms s-final when Continental forms are s-initial?
  - attested across the Midlands too

Acc. pronoun ambiguities

- Nom pl, acc pl & acc fem sg share identical forms already in OE
- The distinction between nom fem sg and acc fem sg is usually maintained in WS; elsewhere there is some evidence for a merger of forms already in OE (OED hoo, pron.)

- Addition of -s to acc pl & fem sg to distinguish direct objects from subjects?
- Unlikely:
  - the ambiguities are long-standing, why wait until 1200 to resolve them?
  - word order changes increasingly resolve any formal ambiguities
DO pronoun ambiguities

• Adoption of his to maintain a DO/IO contrast?
  ✓ explains why his-type appears only in DO contexts
  ✓ explains why earliest forms appear when they do
  (pace Morsbach 1897 & Fulk 2012)
• But why his?
• And why not also maintain contrast for masc & neut sg?

Why his?

• Attested by 24 different eME text witnesses right across the Midlands:
  can’t have been plucked from the air
• Exaptation of masc & neut sg poss. his
  — maximally contrastive with pl & fem sg DO, so ambiguity in context unlikely

Why only pl & fem sg?

• DO/IO distinction increasingly lost in masc & neut sg too:
  — ans hine gave way to dms him (> ModE him)
  — dms him gave way to ans hir (> ModE it)
• DO his would clash with possessive
• English personal pronoun paradigm has always been highly complex

Conclusions

• DO pronoun his was an ME innovation
• Minor variant in most texts but lasted to 1500
• Origins:
  — ruled out suggestions by Fulk (2012), Morsbach (1897) and Nielsen (1981)
  — propose paradigm-internal borrowing instead
• Motivation: resistance to loss of DO/IO contrast

References