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DUAL PRONOUNS IN *GENESIS A* AND *B* *

In Old English dual personal pronouns constituted a small but significant pocket of its inflectional morphology. Their disappearance in Middle English is usually taken as evidence for their marginal and tenuous status already in the preceding centuries. They are seen as optional, poetic, and unpredictable. It is the argument of this paper on the basis of the evidence of the Old English *Genesis* that these claims warrant a careful revision as – at least in this one poem – there is nothing random or irregular about their use.

Keywords: *Old English; dual number; personal pronouns; Genesis*

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to initiate a discussion about the status of the dual pronoun system in Old English. So far it has been mostly dismissed as stylistic (Hall 1981; Bragg 1989; Biggs 1990), unpredictable (Baker 2003), poetic (Hall 1981; Sikora 2015), and competing with the plural (Mitchell 1985). It has been presented as already recessive in Old English and moribund by the 13th century (Mustanoja 2016 [1960]: 123, 125; see Howe 1995 for an overview of the loss of dual pronouns in Germanic languages), although isolated voices suggest the opposite¹.

* A very early version of this research was presented as part of “The place of the dual number in the pronominal system of Old English”, a paper delivered at the MESS 2005 conference in Poznań, Poland. I would like to thank everybody who commented on its various mutations, in particular, I express my thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for *Linguistica Silesiana*. Needless to say, I take full responsibility for its shortcomings.

¹ The only exception to this trend that I am aware of is Stanley (1985), who views Old English duals as robust and fully functional until the 13th century, when it met an unexpected and sudden end.

Either interpretation is however suspicious. If the dual paradigm was so marginal, why did it survive – in writing – until the 13th century², and if it was so robust until the 13th century, why did it disappear so quickly and fully? Most studies of the issue either analyse selected examples of dual use and its absence or focus on the reconstruction of dual paradigms in individual texts and dialects.

What emerges from these studies is a binary picture: Old English optionally used dual pronouns – in themselves remnants of an earlier dual number system comprising nominal and verbal paradigms (cf. Ringe 2006) – while Middle English after the 13th century was characterised by their total absence. The specific questions of stability of the dual pronouns in Old English and their Early Middle English collapse have not received much attention, and this paper aims at filling this gap to a little extent.

The specific purpose behind the research presented below is to look at the use of the dual in Old English verse to see if it truly was poetic and unpredictable as textbooks would like us to believe. It uses as the source of data the Old English poem *Genesis* in Krapp's edition (1931), compared when necessary with the on-line edition from Digital Bodleian³, attempting to answer the following questions:

- a. how robust was the dual system in Old English verse?
- b. are there any traces of the weakening of the dual system in *Genesis*?

In order for the above questions to be properly addressed the text under scrutiny was analysed in its entirety, and all instances of dual contexts were excerpted into a mini-corpus. This is in my opinion absolutely necessary to form a complete picture of the phenomenon – it is not enough to look at contexts in which dual pronouns appear but also at those in which they *should* appear. Otherwise it would not be possible to say anything about the stability of the dual system as such. Other information recorded included potential reinforcement devices (see Section 3) and dyads constituting the dual context.

2. The text

Genesis is the first and longest poem of MS. Junius 11, conventionally referred to as the Junius Manuscript (Lapidge *et al.* 2014: 206), now Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11, and containing much of the surviving Old English poetic corpus. While the manuscript itself is a work of at least three scribes,

² One possible explanation is proposed by Poussa (1988: 462), who views the late survivals of dual pronouns as facilitated by Old Norse and Old Frisian influence. While this could, and possibly should be accepted for the Middle English of the eastern counties, the language of which is the focus of Poussa's study, it does not account for the presence of the dual in such texts as the Caligula MS. of Laȝamon's *Brut* (cf. also Fisiak and Krygier 2002). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for *Linguistica Silesiana* for this reference.

³ <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/d5e3a9fc-abaa-4649-ac48-be207ce8da15/>

Genesis is written in a single careful hand of s. x/xi (Ker 1957: 408–409). Moreover, it is in fact a combination of two poems; while the main one, *Genesis A*, is based on the content of Ch. 1–22 of the book of Genesis, lines 235–851 (Ch 3: 1–7) are a translation of an Old Saxon poem on the same subject (Lapidge *et al.* 2014: 206). The fact that a small fragment of that poem survives as Vatican Library, Palatinus Latinus 1447, will become relevant in Section 5.

The choice of *Genesis* as the source of the data was motivated by two reasons. First of all, it is a poem, and poetic texts have been claimed by numerous authors to preserve the dual pronoun system to a greater extent than prose (cf. Hall 1981; Bragg 1989; Biggs 1990; Sikora 2015). Therefore its realisation of dual contexts can be informative with regard to the degree of stability of the dual pronouns in an environment putatively most conducive to its preservation. In other words, any systematic signs of confusion on that account would have to be interpreted as indicative of the collapse of the dual pronoun paradigm.

Moreover, the subject matter of the poem involves a substantial number of potentially dual contexts, which should result in a frequent use of dual pronouns and their putative replacements. These context include the following pairings, in the order of their first appearance in the text: light and darkness, Adam and Eve, Adam and the devil, the Trees of Good and Evil, Eve and the devil, Satan and the devil, Cain and Abel, Sem and Iapeth, Abraham and Lot, Sarah and Esther, God and Abraham, two angels (in Sodom), daughters of Lot, Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, servants of Abraham, and Abraham and Isaac.

3. Dual in OE

Most publications devoted to Old English are very dismissive of the dual pronoun system. Thus, the most recent comprehensive grammar of Old English by Hogg and Fulk (2011) does not include any discussion of their status, instead referencing Mitchell (1985) and merely presenting their inflectional forms as below:

Table 1. Old English dual pronouns (after Hogg and Fulk 2011)⁴

	1st dual	2nd dual
nom.	wit	git
gen.	uncer	incer
dat.	unc	inc
acc.	unc	inc

⁴ Anglian texts also preserve recessive accusative forms *incit* (1st person) and *uncet, uncit* (2nd person); cf. Stiles 1996; Shields 2001; Hogg and Fulk 2011: 206 and fn2).

Likewise, Ringe & Taylor only note the presence of dual pronouns, without any further discussion (2014: 6), while Campbell adds a dialectal dimension to his presentation by stating that “[o]f the Angl. glosses only Ru.1 has dual pronouns, but they are frequent in eW-S, IW-S, and verse” (Campbell 1959: §703).

The most comprehensive discussion to date remains that by Mitchell in his *Old English Syntax* (1985). There he presents syntactic contexts for the use of dual pronouns, observing that “[t]he dual pronouns *wit* 'we two' and *git* 'you two' (...) are found alone (...); or with the proper name of the second individual (...). But the plural may be used of two” (Mitchell 1985: §§257–259). Even though he does not go into much detail, Mitchell’s position seems to be that dual pronouns are optional throughout the Old English corpus. This position is repeated more or less faithfully by other authors (cf. Hogg 1992: 144, 2002: 20; Baker 2003: §5.2.1).

An issue which is frequently mentioned in the contexts of dual weakening is that of semantic reinforcement. As the salience of the dual pronouns decreased, other indicators of their duality were added to the nominal phrases. One natural choice would be the numeral ‘2’ (henceforth referred to as TWO), another the adjective/pronoun ‘both’ (henceforth referred to as BOTH), both in their various inflectional forms, or a combination of the two, cf. (1):

- (1) *[Se] hlaford is uncer beigra wealdend* (“of you and of him”) (*Solil* 25.15; after Mitchell 1985: §257)

Less often the pronoun ‘between’ (henceforth BETWEEN) was used in this function.

One point that has been frequently made is the association of the dual with poetry. Stanley (1985) builds its entire argument on the strongly emotive functions the dual might have played in Old English, which would lend itself more to poetic contexts; he concludes his paper with a sentiment that deserves to be repeated in its entirety: “the loss which the language has sustained comprehends close relationships of two, most often close human relationships” (1985: 27). Bragg also views the dual paradigm and in particular its gradual collapse as favourable to poetic use: “[w]hen a morphological feature such as a form of the personal pronoun is in a state of transition to disappearance, its use offer poets an opportunity for indicating subtle nuances in meaning”.⁵ Sikora points out that in *Beowulf* the interplay between dual and plural pronouns constitutes an integral part of the poet’s intent, being used to “contrast and compare characters, or subtly comment on situations” (2015: 20). Studies such as

⁵ It is worth observing that Stanley and Bragg arrive at their poetic connection from opposite directions, one of full functionality as opposed to gradual disappearance.

these (cf. in particular Hall 1981 and Biggs 1990) are one reason this paper also revolves around the language of Old English poetry, even though its main focus is linguistic rather than literary.

4. Analysis

The analytical part of the study consists of three sections, each of which is devoted to a presentation of the quantitative data for the respective contexts, including potential semantic reinforcement strategies through the use of BETWEEN, BOTH, TWO as well as any other device.

4.1. 1st person dual contexts

While from the purely quantitative perspective 3rd person dual contexts are expected to be most frequent, it is the 1st person that should be most informative about the status and function of dual pronouns in the corpus.

Table 2. 1st person pronominal forms in dual contexts

Form	Case	Tokens	Reinforcement
wit wyt	nom.	26 1	begra (1), bu (1), bu tu (2)
uncer uncre uncres	gen.	4 2 1	begra (1), twega (2)
unc	dat.	20	Adame (1), betweonan (1), twih (1)
unc us	acc.	1 1	

All in all, there are 56 instances of 1st person dual contexts. Of these 10 are reinforced semantically, which constitutes 17.8% of the total. The devices used are mostly BOTH (3 cases), TWO (3 cases) and a combination of the two (2 cases); cf. (2)–(4):

- (2) Nu slit me hunger and þurst bitre on breostum, þæs **wit begra** ær wæron orsorge on ealle tid. (l. 803⁶; Adam and Eve)

⁶ The line number refers to the instance of the dual form rather than the entire passage to facilitate its identification in the text.

*Now hunger cuts at me and thirst is bitter in my breast, both of which before we were free for all time.*⁷

- (3) Saga þu, Sarra, þæt þu sie sweostor min, lices mæge, þonne þe leodwearas fremde fricgen hwæt sie freondlufu ellðeodigra **uncer twega**, feorren cumenra. (l. 1835; Sarah and Esther)

Say therefore Sarah that you are my sister, kin of my body, when these strange country-men inquire what friend-love lies between us two strangers and foreign-comers.

- (4) Gif þu him to soðe sægst hwylce þu selfa hæfst bisne on breostum, þæs þu gebod godes lare læstes, he þone laðan strið, yfel andwyrde an forlæteð on breostcofan, swa **wit** him **bu tu** an sped sprecað. (l. 574; Eve and the devil)

If you spoke to him the truth of what command you have in your breast, that you keep God's bidding and teaching. Adam will forgo in his breast-coffer this hateful strife and evil reply, as both of us may speak to his advantage.

Interestingly, there are also two instances where the reinforcement is effected differently. In (5) the only case of BETWEEN in this role can be found⁸, while in (6) the name of the interlocutor is used inclusively to establish a closer relationship with the speaker in a construction that Stanley (1985: 5) calls the 'elliptical dual':

- (5) Ne sceolon **unc betweenan** teonan weaxan, wroht wriðian ne þæt wille god. (l. 1902; Abraham and Lot)

There must not be strife growing betwixt us, an increase of enmity—God does not will it!

- (6) Mid þy me god hafað gehæfted be þam healse, swa ic wat he minne hige cuðe; and þæt wiste eac weroda drihten, þæt sceolde **unc Adame** yfele gewurðan ymb þæt heofonrice, þær ic ahte minra handa geweald. (l. 387; Satan and Adam)

⁷ All PDE translations taken from the rendering of the poem by Aaron K. Hostetter, <https://oldenglishpoetry.camden.rutgers.edu/genesis-ab/> (accessed 30/03/2021).

⁸ The possibility has to be admitted, however, that *betweenan* here is governed by *weaxan* rather than *unc*. All the same, the close proximity of the two words must have a reinforcing effect on the dual reading on *unc*.

[W]ith them God has chained me by the neck, thus I know that he knows my mind and the Lord of Armies also knows that it must ill become us, Adam and me, regarding that heaven-realm — if only had I the power of my hands.

Finally, there is one instance of a 1st person dual context where the dual pronoun fails to make an appearance and its plural equivalent is used instead; cf. (7) below. It therefore requires particular attention as it may shed some light on the status of dual pronouns in the language of the text.

- (7) Forþon unc waldend wearð wrað on mode, on hyge hearde, and **us** on helle bedraf, on þæt fyr fylde folca mæste, and mid handum his eft on heofonrice rihte rodorstolas and þæt rice forgeaf monna cynne. (l. 746; Satan and a devil)

Therefore the Sovereign was angered in his mind, stern in his heart, and forced us into Hell, into that fire filled by our greatest people and with his hands set the heavenly thrones to right in the heaven-kingdom and gave that realm to mankind.

In this passage Satan commends one of his minions, the devil who successfully tempted Eve, for avenging the fate of the devilkind and leading to the repetition of the fall of God's once favoured folk. The context is set by the opening phrase, *unc waldend wearð wrað on mode*, which clearly specifies that particular devil as the other member of the pair with Satan himself. Consequently, in *us on helle bedraf* a dual pronoun should be expected to maintain the integrity of the pair. The switch to a plural pronoun, which is the correct reading of the manuscript (cf. Figure 1 below), is thus unusual. Nevertheless, as is frequently the case with single instances of a phenomenon, alternative explanations can be entertained. *Us* in the passage under discussion may be a rhetorical device, extending the frame of reference to all devilkind, before returning to a single referent in the following line (*Mæg þin mod wesan bliðe on breostum* "Your mind can be blithe in your breast"; l. 750). Moreover, a straightforward mistake on the part of the scribe can never be excluded. All in all, a single case of a plural pronoun in a dual context cannot be used as evidence for the weakening of the dual pronoun system as a whole.

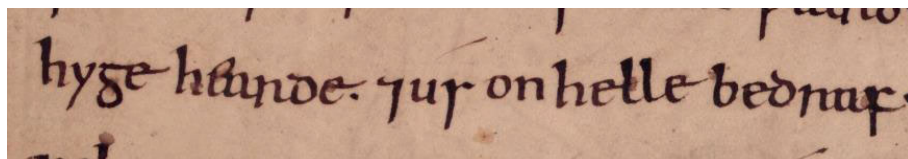


Figure 1. MS Junius 11, l. 746. © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford CC-BY-NC 4.0. Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Junius 11: <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/d5e3a9fc-abaa-4649-ac48-be207ce8da15/>

4.2. 2nd person dual contexts

2nd person dual contexts are typologically rarer, in particular for the use of the nominative form. Consequently it is unlikely that they would contribute much to the discussion already carried out in 4.1; nevertheless, they are analysed below for completeness' sake.

Table 3. 2nd person pronominal forms in dual contexts

Form	Case	Tokens	Reinforcement
git	nom.	2	
incre incrum	gen.	3 3	
inc	dat.	8	bam (1)
inc incit	acc.	1 2	

There are only 19 cases of dual contexts with 2nd person personal pronouns; all of them are expressed by the appropriate dual pronominal forms. As should be expected, most of them are in the genitive and the accusative; there are only two instances of nominative *git*; cf. (8) below.

- (8) Gif **git** þæt fæsten fyre willað steape forstandan, on þære stowe we gesunde magon sæles bidan, feorh generigan (l. 2523, two angels)

If you wish to ward that high fastness from the flame, in that place we could wait unharmed for a time and save our lives.

This is to a degree reflective of the narrative construction of the poem, with its in-built imbalance between Adam and Eve, who are addressed collectively as agents only once, cf. (9):

- (9) Ic wat, inc waldend god abolgen wyrð, swa ic him þisne bodscipe selfa secge, þonne ic of þys siðe cume ofer langne weg, þæt **git** ne læstan wel hwilc ærende swa he easten hider on þysne sið sendeð. (l. 554; Adam and Eve)

I know the Sovereign God will become angered at you both, if I should speak to him this very message, when I come before him from this journey across the distant way, that you will not attend to the messages that he sends eastwards to here at this time.

Another feature worth pointing out is the preservation of otherwise recessive accusative form *incit* (cf. Stiles 1996; Shields 2001); it might be relevant that both occur in the *Genesis A* part of the text (ll. 2733 and 2881), while the single *inc* is found at the beginning of the *Genesis B* interpolation (l. 236); cf. (10) vs (11):

- (10) Ne ceara **incit** duguða of ðisse eðyltyrf ellor secan, winas uncuðe, ac wuniað her. (l. 2733; Abraham and Sarah)

Do not trouble yourselves to go seeking prosperity elsewhere from this land's soil, or friends unknown, but dwell here.

- (11) ac niotað inc þæs oðres ealles, forlætað þone ænne beam, wariað **inc** wið þone wæstm (l. 236; Adam and Eve)

but you both may enjoy all of the others, leaving alone that one tree. Guard yourselves against that fruit.

Only one of these 19 instances is reinforced semantically by a combination of BOTH and TWO. It is used by the devil to convince Eve to partake of the forbidden fruit and as such it most likely has a strong rhetorical overtone, including absent Adam in his warning:

- (12) Gehyge on þinum breostum þæt þu **inc bam twam** meaht wite bewarigan, swa ic þe wisie. (l. 562; Adam and Eve)

Consider in your breast what you can do to ward yourselves from punishment, as I direct you.

4.3. 3rd person dual contexts

Even though Old English had no dedicated dual pronoun set in the 3rd person, looking at the contexts in which the regular plural forms are used with exactly two referents can be informative. In particular, they can provide evidence on the stability of the dual pronoun system in the presence or absence of semantic reinforcement strategies such as additional TWO numerals or BOTH pronouns.

Overall there are 76 instances of dual contexts with pronominal referents in the corpus, of which the clear majority are nominative forms. 11 of these are reinforced by BOTH (6 cases), TWO (1 case), or a combination of the two (4 cases), which constitutes 14.4% of the total; cf. (13)-(15).

- (13) **Hie** on geogoðe **bu** wlitebeorht wæron on woruld cenned meotodes mihtum. (l. 184; Adam and Eve)

They were both brightly beautiful in their youth, brought forth into the world by the might of the Maker.

Table 4. 3rd person pronominal forms in dual contexts

Form	Case	Tokens	Reinforcement
heo hie	nom.	3 40	— begen (2), bu (1), bu tu (2), twegin (1)
heora heorra	gen.	5 1	bega (1) ba twa (1)
him	dat.	22	bam (1), ba twa (1), bu (1)
heo hi hie	acc.	1 1 3	— — —

- (14) And him bi **twegin** beamas stodon þa wæron utan ofætēs gehlædene, gewered mid wæstmē, swa **hie** waldend god, heah heofoncýning handum gesette, þæt þær ylde bearn moste on ceosan godes and yfeles, gumena æghwīlc, welan and wawan. (l. 462; the Trees of Life and Death)

And between them stood two trees — they were laden with fruits at that time, covered with blossoms, just as the Sovereign God, the High Heaven’s King had set them there with his hands, so that the children of men were allowed to choose either good and evil. Each one, either prosperity or trouble.

- (15) Hwurfon **hie ba twa**, togengdon gnorngende on þone grenan weald, sæton onsundran, bidan selfes gesceapu heofoncýninges, þa hie þa habban ne moston þe him ær forgeaf ælmihtig god. (l. 843, Adam and Eve)

The two of them turned, going separately sorrowing into the green wood, sitting apart, to await the decree of the Heaven-King himself, because they then were no longer permitted to possess what Almighty God had once given them.

The reinforcement strategies identified above are mostly emphatic, indicating the participation of both members of a pair in an action ((13), (15), or merely stating their number ((14)), while the pronoun referring back to the reinforcing antecedent is situated at some distance in the sentence. Thus, it is unlikely that the use of BOTH and TWO in these contexts is connected directly with dual referents of the pronouns in question, as their appearance is called for by specific, content-related requirements.

5. Conclusions

There is no doubt that dual pronouns constitute an important, if not central, element of the Old English pronominal system. As evidenced by their use in *Genesis*, there is nothing random or optional in their use. While literary scholars may propose competing interpretations of their nuanced functions in the poem, it has been shown that they occur in the poem in all possible contexts, with one potential exception in line 746, provided its plural interpretation can be substantiated. Moreover, the number of instances where the dual pronoun is reinforced by another item expressing duality is fairly low. While more texts should be analysed in the same fashion before a baseline is established against which data from *Genesis A* and *B* could be compared, the fact that 3rd person dual contexts yield numbers similar to those for 1st and 2nd person ones can be taken as evidence against the weakening of the dual system in the language of the poem. Moreover, the fact that in the 3rd person plural pronouns could be used in dual contexts without causing any confusion – and they required contextual reinforcement relatively rarely – makes the nearly uniform use of dual form in other persons the more significant in this respect.

One aspect which requires more attention is the fact that *Genesis B* is a translation from Old Saxon, and any differences in use between it and *Genesis A* might be attributable to the influence of the Old Saxon text. The Old English poet does consistently translate Old Saxon dual pronouns as such, after all (cf. (16a-b)).

(16a) Te huī sculun **uuit** uuerðan nu? (*Old Saxon Genesis*, l. 24)

(16b) To hwon sculon **wit** weorðan nu? (*Genesis B*, l. 815)

To what shall we become now?

Stanley (1985: 11) notes about *Genesis B* that “thirty-two uses of the dual of the first person and ten uses of the dual of the second person in a poem of only 617 lines” is an instance of impressive density, though he allows for the dyads covered by the text (Adam and Eve, the Devil and Adam, the Devil and Eve) to favour dual constructions. In a corpus consisting of one poem any far-reaching generalisations are not warranted, however, there is evidence against Old Saxon influence to be of substantial value.

Moreover, the centrality of the topic rather than language for the use of the dual can be seen in the fact that it is only the fragment of the Old Saxon *Genesis* translated into Old English that contains dual pronouns; they are entirely absent in the remaining two, and attested only 17 times in the Old Saxon *Heliand* of almost 6000 lines. It stands to reason, therefore, that the hypothesis favouring Old Saxon influence on the linguistic system of *Genesis B* should be rejected.

In conclusion, the first research question, “how robust was the dual system in Old English verse?”, can be answered on the basis of the evidence from *Genesis* and with reference to this text alone to the effect that it appears to be a fully functional and formally distinctive paradigm, which contrasts as predicted with the plural one. With regard to the second research question, “are there any traces of the weakening of the dual system in *Genesis*?”, none have been found – the one use of a plural pronoun where a dual one would be expected can be explained contextually, while the frequency of semantic reinforcement of dual pronouns appears insignificant. More texts should be studied in the same fashion to find out whether these conclusions are local or generalisable.

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