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A study in the context of its modalisation

Bang Lauridsen, Freja

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PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00



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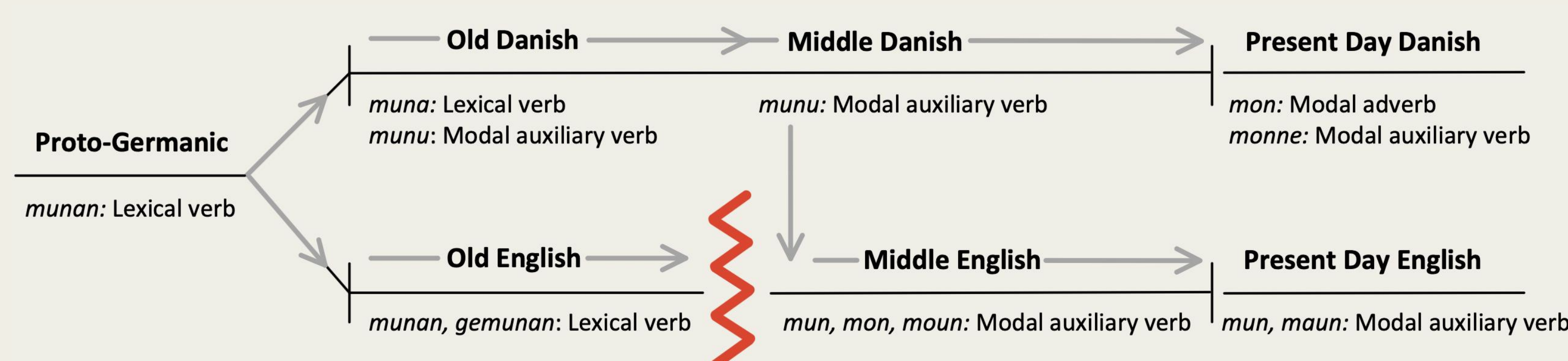
Lexical *(ge-)munan* in Old English: A study in the context of its modalisation

FREJA BANG LAURIDSEN

Centre for Languages and Literature, Division of English Linguistics, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

Background

- Words deriving from the Proto-Germanic verb *munan*, meaning ‘to remember’ or ‘to think’ are attested throughout the histories of both the North Germanic and West Germanic branches of the Germanic language family.
- Given the shared ancestry, the presence of *munan*-derivatives in both branches is unsurprising. Nor is it surprising that its derivatives have followed different paths of language change in the two daughter languages, Old English and Old Norse – after all, this is a natural consequence of their geographical separation.
- What is striking, however, is that despite the distinct trajectories, the development of *munan*-derivatives in English and Scandinavian appear to be interwoven, with Middle Danish influence seemingly contributing to the decline of lexical *(ge-)munan* and the rise of modal *mun* in English.



"It is (...) conjectured that the Middle English [modal] forms *mon*, *mun*, *moun*, *munde(n)* descend from the Old Norse perfect-present verb *monu*, *munu*, with 1st and 3rd singular *mon*, *mun*" (Visser 1969).

Research questions

Overarching research question of the project as a whole

What evidence supports the hypothesis that the Middle English modal *mun* was directly borrowed from the Scandinavian modal *munu* rather than developing from the Old English lexical *(ge-)munan*?

Local research question for this sub-study

What are the distribution and properties of the lexical *(ge-)munan* in Old English?

Investigative aims

In investigating the distribution and properties of lexical *(ge-)munan* in Old English, I aim to evaluate the following hypotheses:

1. Lexical *(ge-)munan* shows a clear decline in frequency over the Old English period before becoming completely obsolete by the middle of the 14th century.
2. Lexical *(ge-)munan*, including its inflectional and orthographic variants, exhibits strictly lexical behaviour in Old English.
3. Lexical *(ge-)munan* was equally frequent across all Old English dialects, including the southern varieties.

Methodology

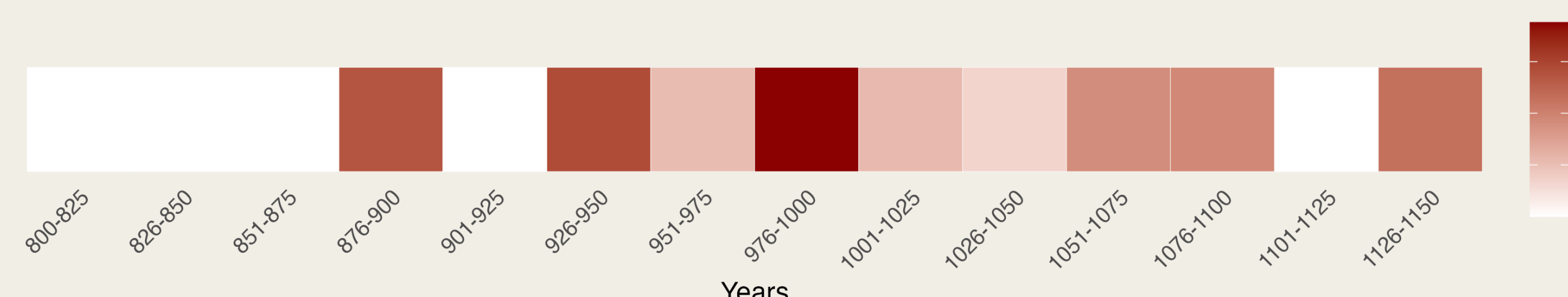
Conducted as a corpus study, the investigation of lexical *(ge-)munan* in Old English is based on a thorough examination of all the major Old English works as found in the following two corpora:

The York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose

The York-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Poetry

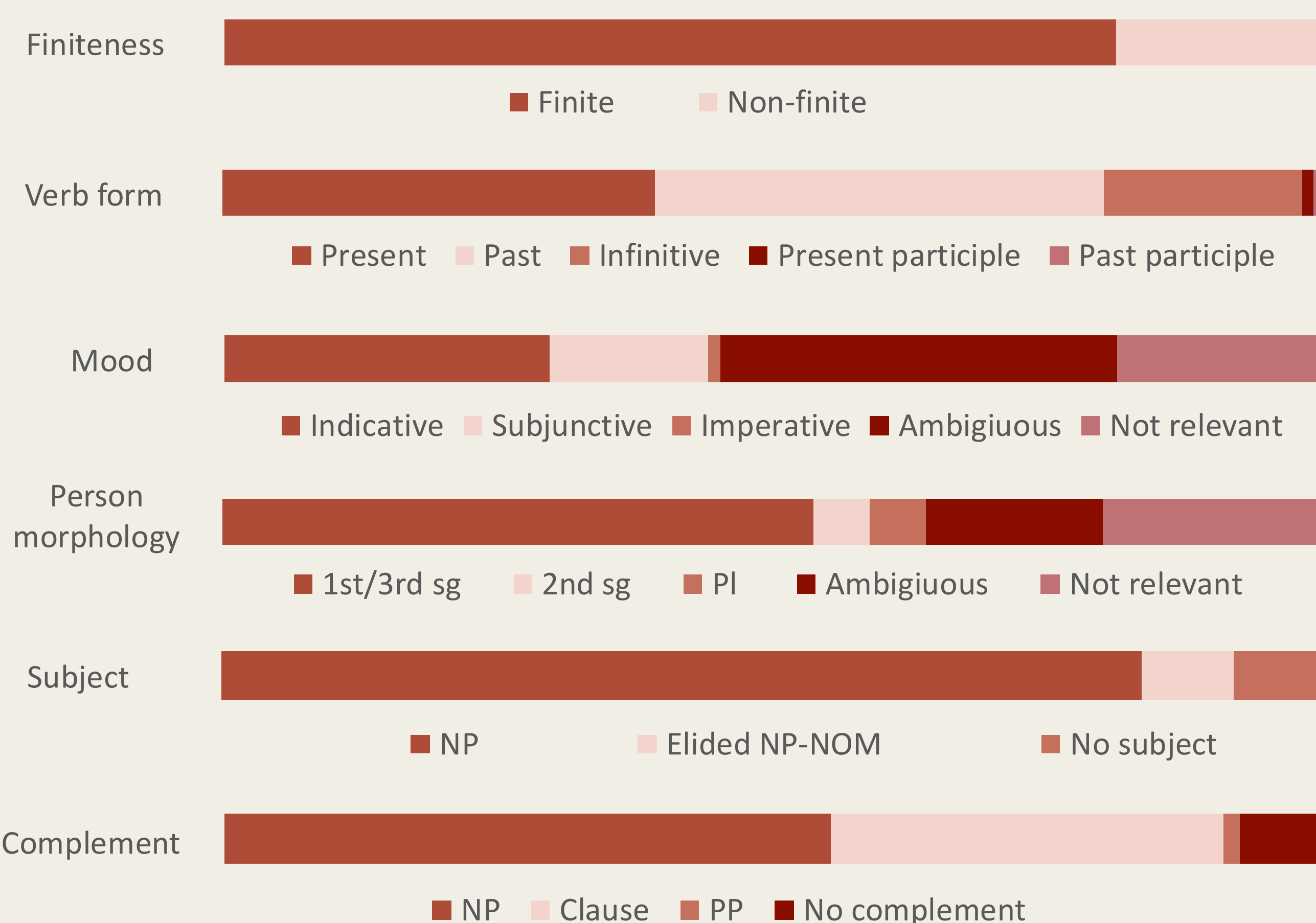
Results

Relative frequency of lexical *(ge-)munan* in all Old English texts (per 10,000 words)



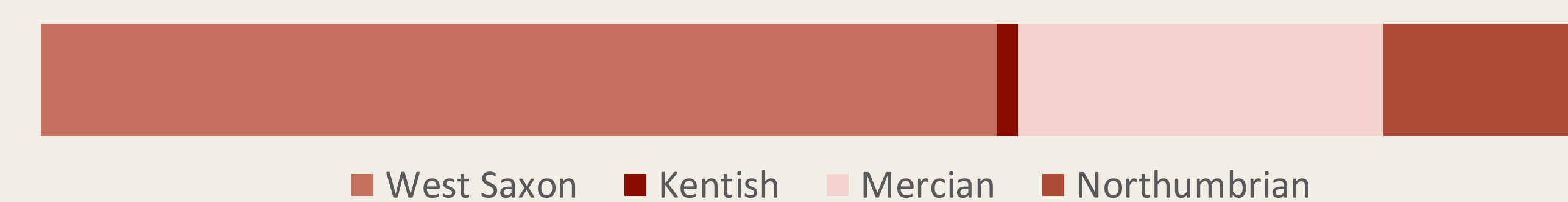
Take-away: There is no clear evidence of a decline in the frequency of the lexical *(ge-)munan* over the course of the Old English period.

Properties of the 278 instances of *(ge-)munan* in Old English



Take-away: While many of the subjunctive (and hortative) clauses carry an epistemic or deontic flavour, the verb *(ge-)munan* itself does not exhibit modal properties in any of the 278 Old English clauses examined.

Dialectal distribution of *(ge-)munan* in Old English



Take-away: The lexical verb *(ge-)munan* occurs in all four Old English dialects. However, since the majority of texts in the corpora are West Saxon, most instances of *(ge-)munan* are also found in that dialect.

Conclusion

Based on these findings, there is no indication that lexical *(ge-)munan* had begun to exhibit modal properties during the Old English period. While many subjunctive instances of *(ge-)munan* carry an epistemic or deontic flavour, the verb itself does not express true modality in any of the 278 Old English clauses analysed here.

Nor are there any significant geographical differences suggesting that the lexical *(ge-)munan* was influenced by Scandinavian at this stage.

The next step in this project is to use this new understanding to illuminate the early stages of Middle English, where modal *mun* rather abruptly developed.

Contact

Freja Bang Lauridsen
Ph.D. student in English Linguistics
Division of English Linguistics
Centre for Languages and Literature
Lund University

freja.lauridsen@englund.lu.se