



Penn

● Constraints on Old English Genitives variation

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“Other points of syntax might perhaps be ascribed to Scandinavian influence, such as the universal position of the genitive case before the noun (where Old English like German placed it very often after it)...”

Otto Jespersen, *The Growth and Structure of the English language*, (1912)



● CONSTRAINTS ON OLD ENGLISH GENITIVES VARIATION

1. Syntactic analysis
2. State of the art
3. Animacy and Weight constraints
4. Conclusions



1

SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS

Crisma (2012)

1. SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS

GEN + N

(like PDE 'the president's speech')

He is **ealra** **cyninga** cyning

He is in-all.GEN.PL king-GEN.PL king

"He is in all the king of the kings"

ACHom_I,1:178.8.8

Forgang ðu **anes** **treowes** wæstm

Forgo you one-GEN tree-GEN fruit

"Forgo the fruit of one tree"

ACHom_I,1:181.79.74

D + N + GEN

(like PDE 'the speech of the president')

þæt cyrographum **ure geniðerunge**

the writ_ our condemnation.GEN"

The writ of our condemnation"

ACHom_I,21:348.81.4163

þa digelnysse **þisre** **radinge**

the mystery this.GEN text.GEN

"The mystery of this text"

ACHom_I,23:366.29.4556

1. SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS

GEN + ADJ + N

(like PDE 'the president's great speech')

mid **þas** **folces** eorðlican ðeowote
with the-GEN people-GEN terrestrial slavery
"with the terrestrial slavery of the people"

CP:18.131.11.890

Godes ancennedan sunu
God-GEN only-begotten son
"God's only begotten son"

ACHom_1:427.220

D + ADJ + N + GEN

(like PDE 'the great speech of the president')

on þa frecnan tid **þære** **ehtnysse**
in the dangerous time the.GEN persecution.GEN
"In the dangerous time of the persecution"

Bede_1:8.42.3.345

se wolberenda stenc **þære** **lyfte**
the polluting stink the.GEN air.GEN
"The polluting stink of the air"

Bede_1:11.48.16.433

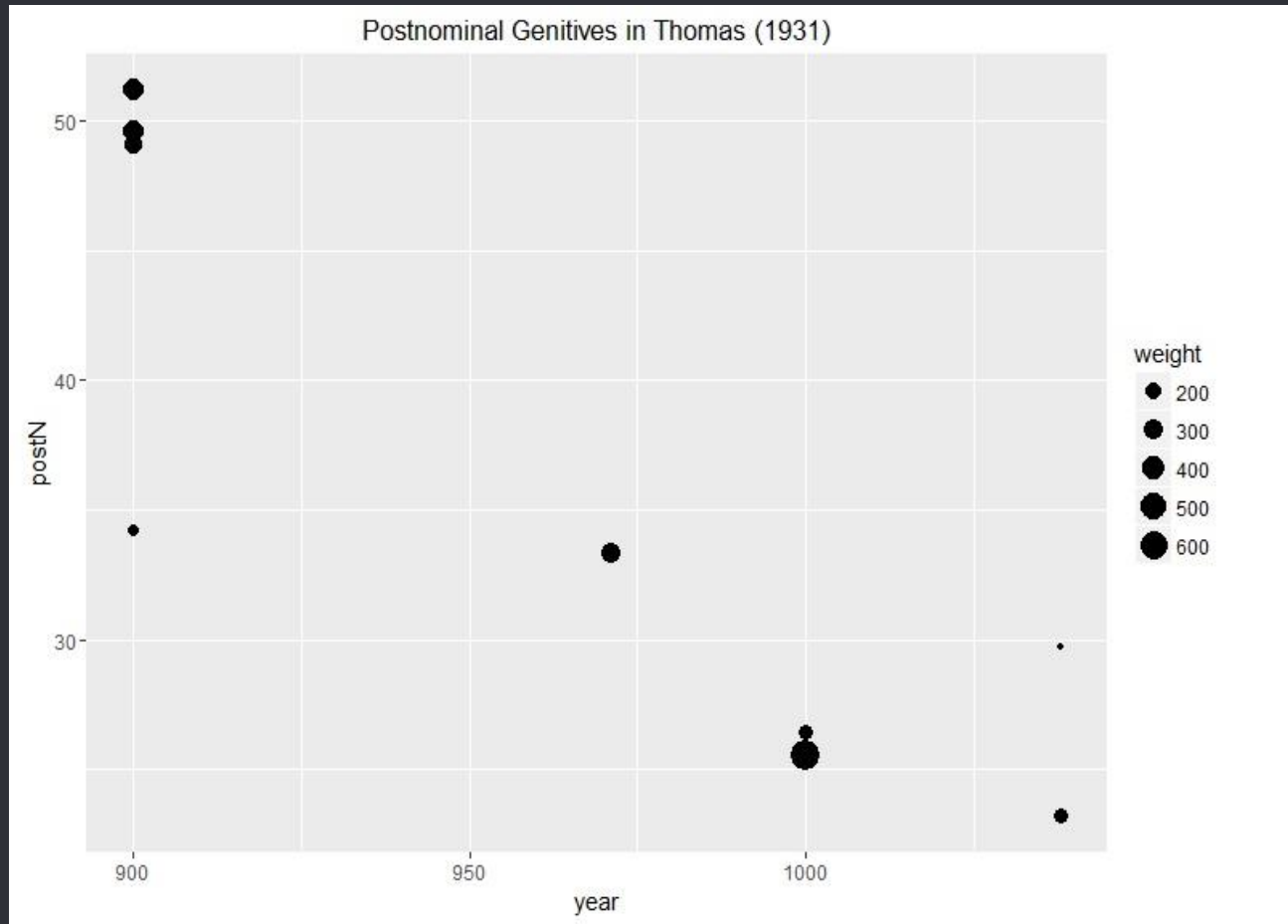


2

STATE OF THE ART

Thomas (1931), Mitchell (1985), Lightfoot (1999), Allen (2008),
Crisma (2012)

2. STATE OF THE ART



Thomas (1931): decline of postnominal genitives in OE

2. STATE OF THE ART

Loss of morphology

Allen (1998),
Lightfoot (1999)

Case-marking is no longer perceived by children in late OE

Grammar in competition

Jespersen (1912),
Crisma (2012)

Scandinavian influence and grammatical change

Information Structure (or Theory?)

McLagan (2004),
Allen (2008)

Syncretism reduces the amount of information associated to determiners and adjectives

3

ANIMACY AND WEIGHT CONSTRAINTS

Mitchell (1985), McLagan (2004), Rosenbach (2005), Samson (2010)

“When the phrase consists of two nouns only [...] the genitive is regularly in pre-position”

Mitchell (1985:550)

“When there are items present which have the effect of adding length of weight to the genitive phrase, the genitive phrase tends to be placed after the head”

McLagan (2004:38)

“When a genitive consisted of a human referent with high topicality and light weight, prenominal positioning was nearly 100% predictable”.

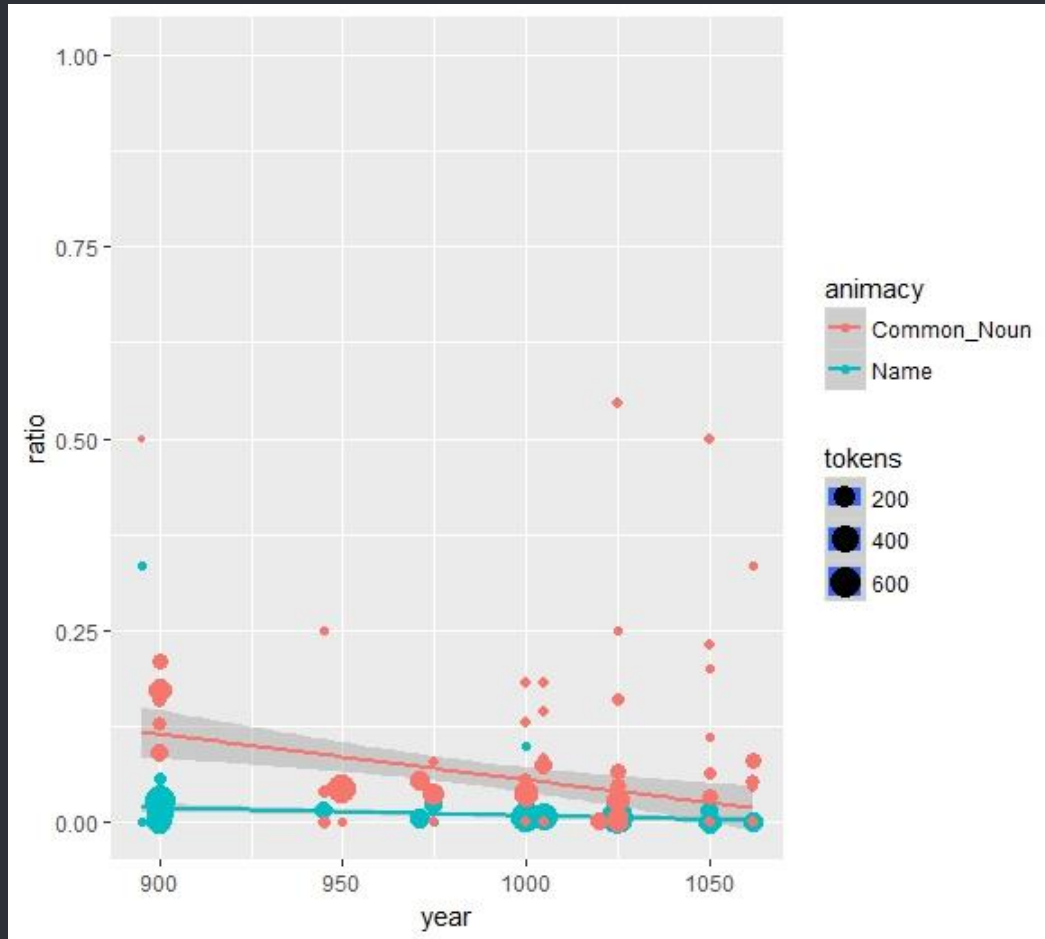
Allen (2008:96)



3.1

LIGHT NOUN PHRASES

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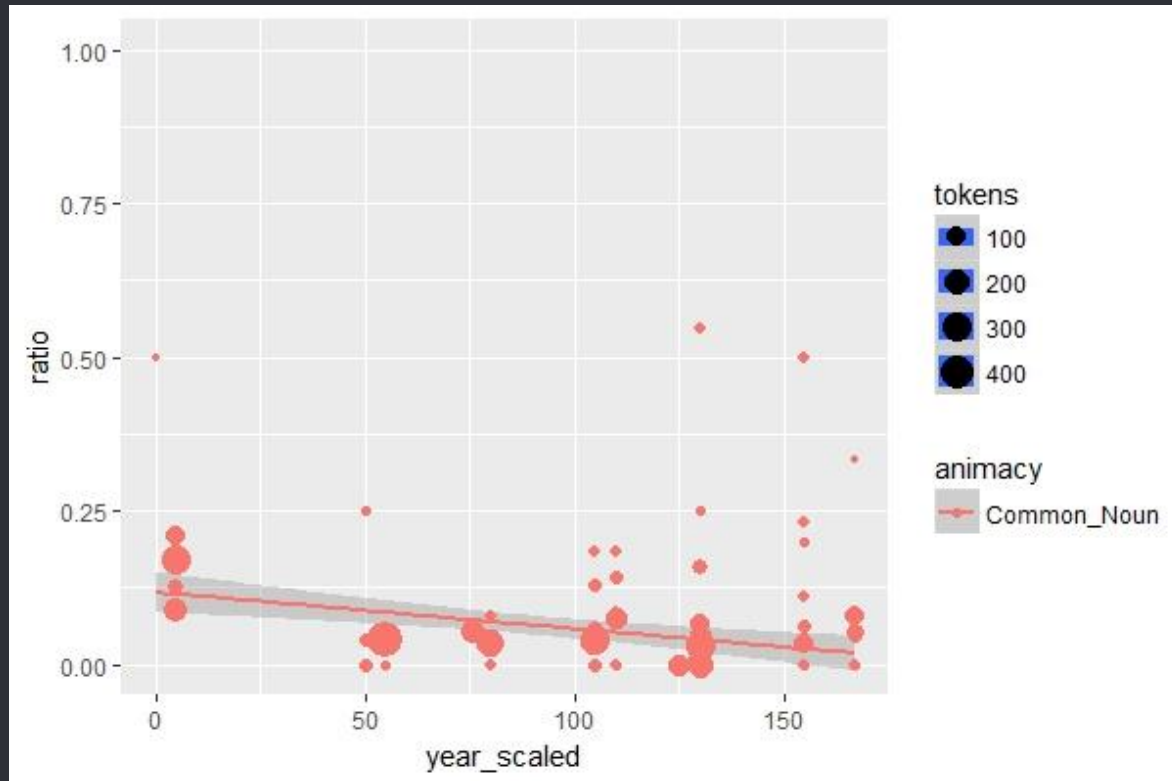
Godes lufu

(‘God’s love’)

Þære fóreteohunge **Godes**

(‘The predestination of God’)

3.1 LIGHT NOUN PHRASES



Linear Regression Coefficients:

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t)
(Intercept)	0.1174578	0.0166076	7.073	2.04e-09 ***
year	-0.0005944	0.0001603	-3.709	0.000462 ***

● 3.1 LIGHT NOUN PHRASES

○ ***(Matthew, 4:19)***

A. Grk. *αλιείς ανθρώπων*

Lat. PISCATORES HOMINUM

Got. Nutans manne

● 3.1 LIGHT NOUN PHRASES

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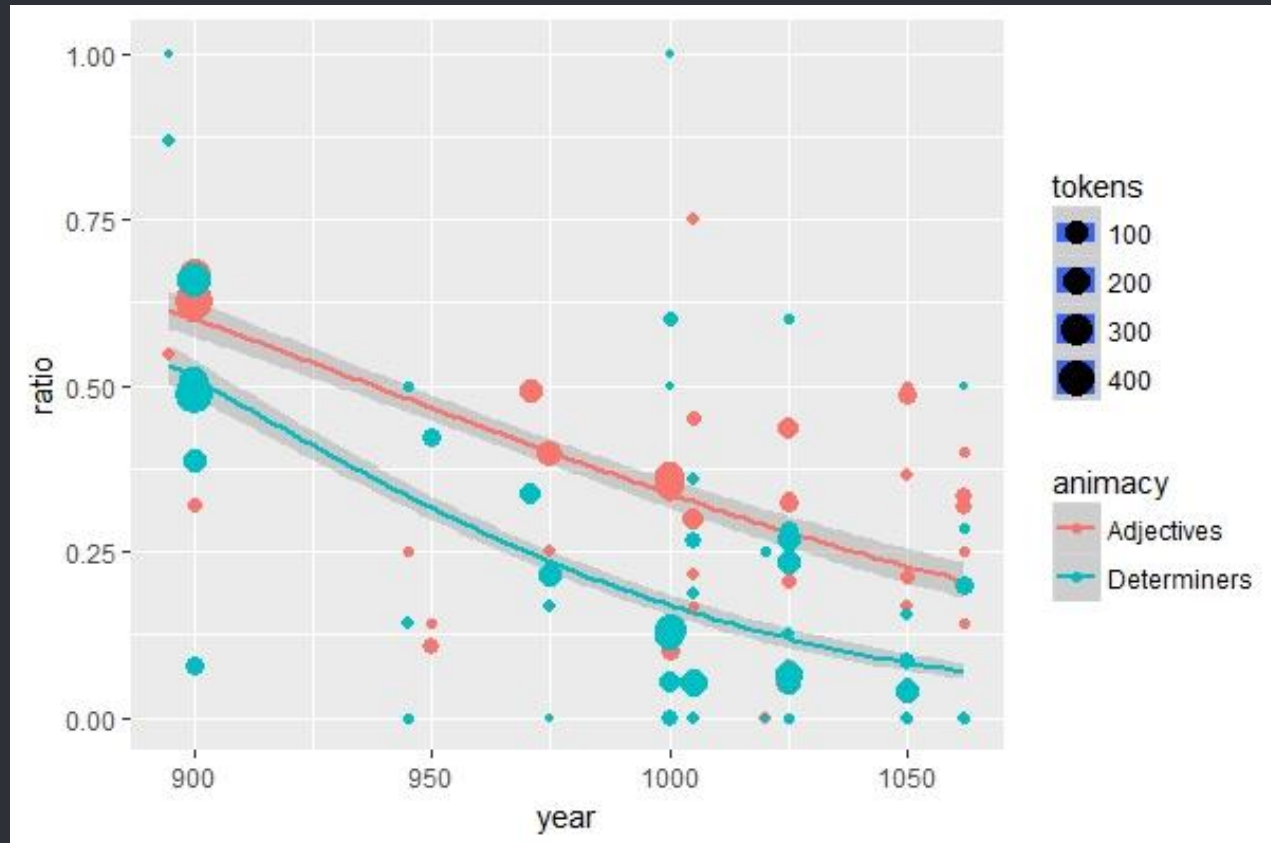
OE. Manna fisceras



3.2

HEAVY GENITIVES

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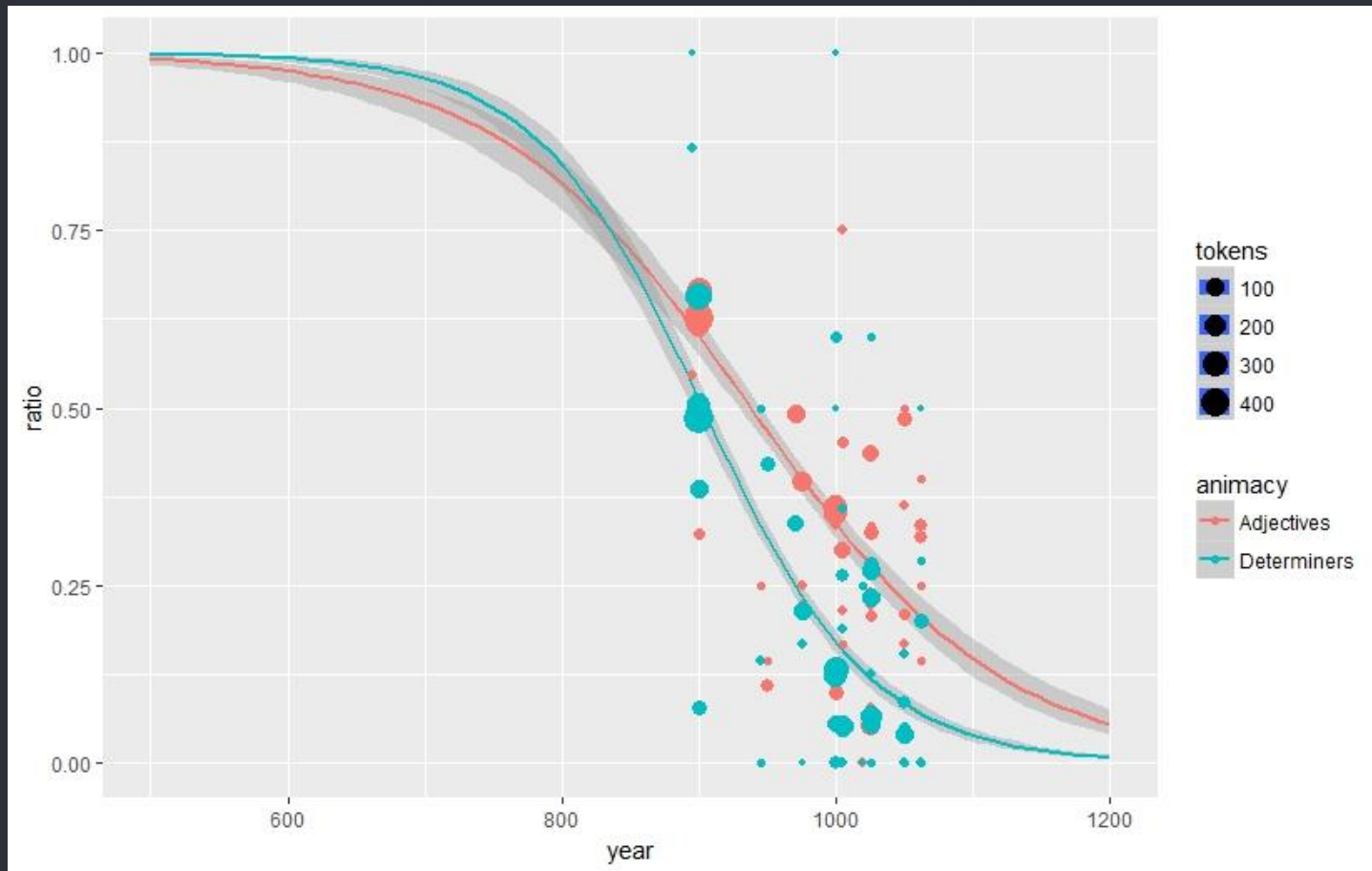
þæra cyninga gewinne

(‘The king’s conquest’)

þam deorlingum **þara cyninga**

(‘The favorite-daughter of the king’)

3.2 HEAVY GENITIVES



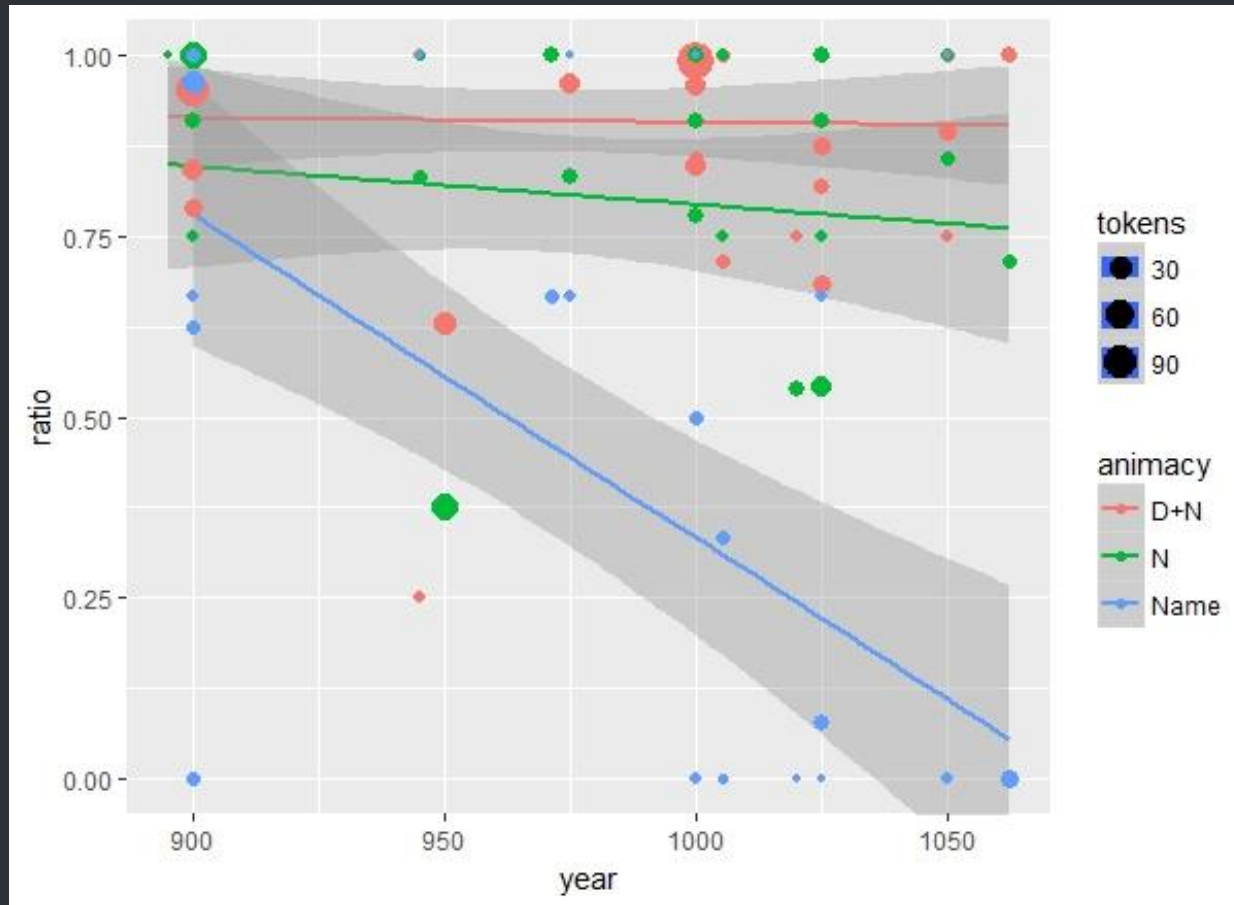
No **Constant Rate Effect** (Kroch 1989) detectable through AIC applied to logistic regression.
AIC Full model=789, AIC Reduced model=814



3.3

MODIFIED NOUN PHRASES

3.3 MODIFIED NOUN PHRASES



Godes ancennedan Suna
 bære wynsuman suetness **Godes**

("God's only-begotten son")
 ("The winsom sweetness of God«)

1. SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS

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3. ANIMACY AND WEIGHT CONSTRAINTS

Loss of morphology

It should be independent from animacy/weight considerations.

Wrong prediction for the behaviour of modified noun phrases.

Grammar in competition

It predicts that the rate of change is constant across contexts, but here we have many contexts that behave differently.

Information Structure (or Theory?)

This theory makes a prediction about the behaviour of modified noun phrases that turns out to be false.



4

CONCLUSIONS

4. CONCLUSIONS

- 1) Children are sensible to Weight and Animacy constraints. In a period of relative instability, most of the constraints are diachronically consistent
- 2) The prenominal position of genitives in OE seems to be the default one in absence of modifiers, contradicting the claims of genitives in OE being heavily postnominal (Nunnally 1985)

4. CONCLUSIONS

3) Scandinavian influence seems weaker than suggested by Jespersen (1912). On the other hand, variation in early texts (Allen 2008:117) can be explained by OE internal forces, e.g. dialectal variation (also Lightfoot 2006:116).

4) Information Structure/Theory does not look like a plausible explanation.

5) Proponents of Morphological reanalysis need to solve the problem with the stability of contexts marked for Weight

Thanks!

QUESTIONS?

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