

## *The use of “thanks” and “to thank” in Old Saxon and Old High German*

Modern German counts on different nouns, verbs, adjectives, and prepositions to express gratitude. Many of these elements, such as the noun *Danke* (thanks) and the verb *danken* (to thank) were already common as early as in the 8th century (Pfeifer 1993). However, the use of these nouns and verbs in expressions of thankfulness have been studied only synchronically and in comparative studies (Zborowski 2005; Siebold 2021). The goal here is to provide a qualitative analysis of the expression of thanking with *Danke* and *danken* at the earlier stage of the history of German, filling a long-standing gap in the literature. More specifically, this investigation seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How were *Danke* and *danken* used in Old Saxon and Old High German?
2. What can the use of *Danke* and *danken* tell us about historical expressions of thanking in Old Saxon and Old High German?

To answer these questions, I examined all the instances of *Danke* and *danken* in a corpus of religious and secular Old Saxon and Old High German texts taken from the *Referenzkorpus Altdeutsch* (Reference corpus Old German). The targeted structures of this investigations are as showed in (1), (2), (3), and (4):

- (1) *ôlat sagde themu the these uuerold giscôp*  
thank said to the one that this world created  
'He said thank to the one who created this world'  
(Hêliand, XLIX, 4091)
- (2) *endi gode thancode, sagde them ôlat*  
and god thanking, said (he) to him thank  
'He was thanking god and said thank to him'  
(Hêliand, LVI, 4633)
- (3) *er nú ana wânc hábet fora góte thanc*  
he now without doubt has before god thanc  
'He has to say thanks to god now without doubts'  
(Evangelienbuch, 20, 6)
- (4) *thir thánkon mit wórtan joh mit wérkon*  
you I thank with words and with deeds  
'I thank you with words and deeds'  
(Evangelienbuch, 24, 91)

The data were extracted using the lemma search function offered by the online corpus. The frequency of the instances and the addressers and addressees involved in the expressions of thanking with *Danke* and *danken* were analyzed.

Regarding the first question, a total of 76 instances of *Danke* and *danken* were found, and most of them were in religious texts (71 in total). The data show that the words *Danke* and *danken* were mostly used to express gratitude, but there were instances in which they were found with the meanings of “reward/to reward” and “praise/to praise.” These results show how, Old Saxon and Old High German

speakers relied on the same linguistic elements to carry out different speech acts and how, probably, these speech acts may have been perceived similar to each other.

Turning now to the second research question, the analysis of the addressers and addressees involved in these instance shows how, in the texts selected, and independently of their genre (religious vs. secular), the expression of thanking (but also praising, and reward) with *Danke* and *danken* could only be found when the addresser was in lower social position than the addressee. These results seem to suggest that, in Old Saxon and Old High German, these types of expression could be carried out only when addressees and addressers had an asymmetrical relationship.

In conclusion, these results suggest that use of *Danke* and *danken* in expressions of thanking (but also in praising and rewarding) were restricted to specific communicative settings in which the social status of the speakers played a major role.

### **Selected references**

- Pfeifer, Wolfgang. 1993. *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen. Digitalisierte und von Wolfgang Pfeifer überarbeitete Version im Digitalen Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache.*  
<https://www.dwds.de/d/wb-etymwb>.
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