On Interpreting a Type of Ambiguity in an Old English Text

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Ambiguity in some historical texts can be interpreted in the framework of the entire text. A case of ambiguous reference in the Parker Chronicle is examined and interpreted on the basis of patterns of text segments that are found to be characteristic of the Chronicle. Suggestions are given for presuppositions concerning historiographic style.

It is not always easy to understand what is being said, not even in one’s mother tongue, nor is it always easy to understand the written word, even when one has received considerable education. Understanding can be seriously aggravated if the listener’s or reader’s experience does not match that of the speaker or writer. In spoken discourse, the difference in experience is one of space, so to say, in that it has been acquired in different localities (including the internal worlds of the communicating individuals) though largely during the same period of time. In discourse that is written and read, there is not only the spatial difference, but there is also a temporal difference which can be very pronounced, since it is very common to read texts produced at a time that is years or centuries removed from the reader’s own time. Generations of students of history or of dead languages and language varieties have faced such problems.

In this paper, I wish to examine some hermeneutic procedures that may have to be followed in order to understand a passage of a medieval text. The text taken here as an example is from the Parker Chronicle (832—900), edited by
A.H. Smith, after Corpus Christi College Cambridge, MS 173, fo. 12a—20a (Smith, 1951).

The modern reader is likely to approach the text of the Chronicle with the assumption that it is a historiographic text, composed in a technical register,¹ which is distinguished by the use of language (according to Kenneavy, 1971/39) "to designate or reproduce reality". Since the Chronicle is also a type of written discourse, the degree of style formality² can be rather high.

According to a dictionary definition (Collins, 1979), a chronicle is "a record or register of events in chronological order", so the modern reader expects a chronological sequence of events as the logical arrangement of the information in the text. Since he may be better acquainted with other types of records such as histories, memoirs, diaries etc., he may even be prepared to encounter some new forms in the genre.

It may be taken for granted that the Chronicle intends to be informative, true (or believed to be true by the author), relevant and perspicuous (avoiding obscurity, ambiguity, unnecessary prolixity, and maintaining orderliness).³ Accordingly, one can exclude mechanisms of perception and cognition such as imagination and emotion from the process of interpretation, and employ only reasoning and reliance on the knowledge of i. the OE (Old English) language system, ii. discourse rules in general, or relating to OE in particular, and iii. history. This knowledge can only be fragmentary, since the data available is fragmentary, with the result that understanding a historical text may require reliance on interpretation.

The "art" of interpretation is of long standing in literary criticism and philology, while in linguistics it has been abandoned for more exact methods. Recently, it has been argued (Hirsch, 1976/32f) that the process of linguistic understanding does not differ from the process of general cognition, which is based on (Piaget's model of) "corrigible schemata".

¹ In the definition given by Halliday — McIntosh — Strevens (1964/67) register is "the name given to a variety of a language distinguished according to use", which is how we understand the term as well.

² Halliday — McIntosh — Strevens (1964/ 87—94) use the term politeness for what we have termed formality. There is difference in terminology between various authors (e.g. Kenneavy 1971, Lyons 1977, Crystal — Davy 1969 etc.), though they all agree on the basic determinants of discourse variation.

³ See the "maxims" for "conversational implicature", i.e. rules guiding discourse, as proposed by Grice (quoted in Lyons 1977/593 and Kempson 1977/173).
It is a process of trial and error in which the schemata are matched with the world, e.g. linguistic forms are matched with sense. Anttila (1976/219) says that “history is clear hermeneutics, i.e. interpretation”. He also argues that “to know or understand history one needs a cognizer... one’s own Sprachgefühl4 as sharpened through study” (ibid./222).

Kinneavy (1971) treats the “arts of discourse”, i.e. the traditional four: speaking, listening, writing and reading, but he also includes thinking, provided that “there are different kinds of thinking relevant to different uses of language, not under the dangerous assumption that one kind of thinking can blanket all modes and aims of discourse” (ibid./31).

We would like to take the position that, for the understanding of a text which is spatially and temporally remote from our experience, we have to employ the art of interpretation, directing our thinking, Sprachgefühl, and the fragmentary knowledge we possess, toward the whole text and the “context of situation” (Firth, 1957/225).

Having established the above presuppositions, the reader can approach the particular text, in our example the Chronicle, reading it5 with an ease dependent on his competence in OE. While doing so he gathers new information and reinforces or modifies his knowledge of not only the historical events described in the text, but also of the text itself. One can compare it with other texts that one is familiar with, and notice similarities and differences between them. By doing so, one becomes acquainted with the vocabulary, the grammar and the style of the text, fitting them into one’s scheme of written discourse.

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4 Anttila understands Sprachgefühl as being based on “imaginative boldness”, but I would prefer to consider it based on the innate language matrix in the Chomsky’s sense.

5 We use the technique that has become automatic through our education: the page is scanned by eye without lip movement or voice. It is a facilitating technique, since our knowledge of the actual pronunciation is largely conjectural, and our ability to exactly reproduce it inadequate. On the other hand, this technique may obscure some information that could be gained from hearing the text, since much of the medieval discourse was written to be read aloud. From our own experience we may notice that there are two kinds of written discourse: written to be spoken (e.g. dramatic texts, speeches), and written to be read: a) aloud (lectures, poetry), b) silently (most modern written discourse).

6 We use the term text both in the pre-theoretic sense “the main body of a printed or written work” (Collins, 1979), and as defined by Halliday — Hasan (1976/1) as “any passage spoken or written, of whatever length, that does form a unified whole”. 

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The relatively automatic technique employed so far may become inefficient when a place in the text does not agree with our experience of the world and the language, and therefore appears meaningless or illogical. At this moment we shall have to not only resort to our starting knowledge, but also activate the newly acquired experience gained from reading the text in question.

The first step in this procedure requires elimination of the editor's punctuation marks which represent his subjective interpretation. Since medieval orthographic traditions do not seem to use punctuation for syntactical and semantic distinction, but rather for rhetorical purposes, i.e. to mark voice inflexion, pause etc., the use of periods and commas, which suggest segmentation into sentences and clauses, is inappropriate.

By careful observation, we shall notice that the text is very clearly segmented into units which are graphically and linguistically marked. The units are introduced by the formula An dccxxxii, An dccxxxiii etc., indicating the entries for successive years, and they can be interpreted as the largest sense units linked by the same time frame, following each other in temporal sequence.

Another feature immediately noticeable in each segment is the first word after the initial formula. From An dccxxxii to An dccxcxii, it is followed by the adverbial her, substituting for "that year" and referring to the year in the formula. There is no such regularity in the latter part of the Chronicle, but the first statement includes, nevertheless, some reference to the year given in the initial formula, e.g. on pys 3eare, ond pa sona after pam on pys 3eare, da uæs on sumera on ðysum 3ere (this year, and then soone afterwards this year, then after it in the summer of this year) etc. This part of the MS is written in a different hand, which is a good reason to expect other differences as well.

The text segments that we propose to examine were written by the first hand and conform to the pattern described above.

There is no unequivocal way to divide the segment further into sentences (from the capital letter to the full stop); it is more feasible to subdivide it into a series of syntactic units that we propose to term clauses. They are

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7 We cannot analyze the graphic/graphemic side of the text in detail, because our study is based on a printed edition, not on a MS. We can only rely on the editor's information about it.
mostly co-ordinate and introduced by the ampersand (7) alone or accompanied by an adverbial referring to temporal sequence (ba, pæs, ymb 21 monæp etc.), locality (pær), or by an adverbial alone. Occasionally there are also clauses without any introductory sign which give the impression of parenthetical explanations of the preceding text. The clauses introduced by the ampersand (meaning ond, and) seem to be more closely linked to each other than the ones beginning with an adverbial only, since these allow for a short break in thought and, accordingly, for a pause when read aloud. This distinction may be very slight, but it is suggested on the basis of our experience with spoken discourse where the conjunction and demands the constant attention of the hearer, and on the basis of our experience with the present text where the ampersand, due to its great frequency, resembles a comma in modern orthography.

At this point we have to consider two features of the text i.e. the segment of the text introduced by the formula AB xy: a) its logical structure or coherence (Widdowson, 1978), b) its cohesion,8 c) its syntactic structure. These three features are realized by the logical sequence of the clauses, elements employed to link them to each other, and syntactic rules respectively.

Most clauses are statements, following each other in temporal sequence. There are also statements referring to simultaneous events, pointing out either a time or place previously mentioned (pæs 3eares, pær). The third type consists of existential clauses (e.g. hie værun on tuæm 3efylcium).

As already mentioned, the clauses are coordinate or correlative, but there are some subordinate structures, mostly of the relative clause type. The criteria for deciding on parataxis or hypotaxis are rather semantic than structural since there are no definite markers of subordination (e.g. position of existential clauses (e.g. hie værun on tuæm 3efylcium). simple clauses as well.

Following Halliday — Hasan (1976/4ff) we understand cohesion as occurring “where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another”.

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8 Such clauses are more frequent in the part of the Chronicle written in the second hand.

9 Halliday — Hasan (1976/7) use the term cohesion as referring to “certain specifically text-forming relations which cannot be accounted for in terms of constituent structure; they are properties of the text as such, and not of any structural unit such as a clause or sentence”.

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but we shall not exclude cohesion “as a structural feature” since it is very difficult to distinguish between purely structural (inter clausal) and semantic (super clausal) relations. The clauses, which we have defined as units forming a text segment, are linked by such relations as reference and conjunction, operating upon syntactic units in the same way as across them. I would like to argue that the same process of conjunction and ellipsis occurs when two underlying clauses: epered cyning 3eafeht 7 elfred his broþur 3eafeht combine into one 3eafeht epered cyning 7 elfred his broþur, as when such clauses combine into text segments by the means examined later.

The following are examples of cohesive relations that occur in the Chronicle:

1. reference: 855/14-16\(^{10}\) hie þæron cenredes suna (i.e. ðin3ld and ine from an earlier clause);

871/1 Her ouom se here to ðeadingum on ðuest seaxe (i.e. Ân dccclxxi)

871/17 7 þæ ṭearþ sidroc earl ofslaȝen se alda (i.e. exophonic reference to the battlefield, not explicitely mentioned in the text, or to the battle, also indirectly indicated through the verb 3eafeht)

2. substitution: 853/1-4 Her bed bur3red miercna cyning3 7 his þiotan eþelþulf cyning þæt he him 3efultumade = phrase substitution

Nominal substitution does not occur. Repetition without substitution is common:

833/4-5 7 hereferp ðiȝþen tueȝen biscepas forþferdon 7 Ḟudda 7 osmod tueȝen aldormen forþferdon

3. ellipsis: 853/1-4 Her ouom se here (i.e. se denisce here as mentioned at the beginning of the Chronicle)

\(^{10}\) The numbers refer to “entry for the year 871” and “lines 21—28”.

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Ellipsis is extremely common whenever clauses share a subject, which is deleted in the second clause:

872/2 Her for se here to lundenbyrĩʒ from readingum 7 þær (se here) wintersetl nam

In a chain: 877/9

7 hie him þær foreʒišlas saldon...
7 (hie) þa ʒodne friþ heoldon 7 (hie) micle apas ʒiǥon

When a word occurs in different functions in two successive clauses, it may be deleted if ellipsis is accompanied by reference:

893/83 7 hæfdon micelne dæl þara horsa freten 7 þa opre (horsa) hungre acỳolen

Verbal ellipsis:

875/4 7 se here þæt lond ʒeode 7 oft herʒeade on peohtas 7 (herʒeade) on stręoled palas

4. conjunction: There seem to be only two types of conjunction (Halliday-Hasan 1976/242f), additive and temporal, and Ƅa being the most frequent connectives. Ond (mostly realized by the ampersand) serves to add new information about the events described in the Chronicle. Occasionally, however, it may be ambiguous as we shall see later. In addition to the simple ond, there is also the expanded connective 7 eac, and the correlative ʒe... ʒe:

894/75  þa ʒeʒaderode æþered ealdormon...
7 þa cinȝes ʒeʒnas þe þa æt ham æt þæ ʒeʒeорcum ðæron of ælcre byríg be eastan pedreðan ʒe be ʒeștan sealuʒuda 3e be eastan ʒe eac be norþan temese 7 be ʒeștan sefern ʒe eac sum dæl þs nor ðeal cynnæ

It can be noticed even from the above examples that conjunction may be combined with ellipsis, which can sometimes extend over several words e.g.
5. lexical cohesion: There are several nouns in the text of the Chronicle with a more general meaning than the word they usually refer to (see "general nouns" Halliday-Hasan, 1976/274), so they resemble pronouns in their referring function. They are different because of greater lexical content. These nouns usually refer to ethnic designations: English (Wesx Saxoñ) and Danish (Scandinavian) respectively: 


It could be argued that some of them, e.g. *here* and *fierd* represent a case of ellipsis of the adjectives English and Danish (*se denisca here*, *se ſeſt seaxa fierd*).

Repetition of a word is a common means of lexical cohesion:

865/1 Her set *heþen* *here* on tente 7
3enamon friþ uþp cantúarum 7

cantúare him feoh 3ehton pip þam friþe 7 under þam friþe 7 þam
feohþehte se here hiene on niht up
bestel 7 oferherþead e alle cent
estuþearde

A word can be repeated in the same form, or with different inflexional endings (depending on its function); *cantúarum* — *cantuare*, or combined with an element of reference, *friþ* — *þam friþe*; the word can be repeated as part of a compound, *feoh* — *feohþehte*, or as a related term or synonym, *cantuare* — *cent*, where the geographical name Kent, may be interpreted also as referring to the inhabitants of Kent (cantuare).

The vocabulary of the Chronicle as a whole is specific to the subject it treats, i.e. a succession of events during a century marked by Viking invasions. Among the basic vocabulary, including such common words as the nouns *fæder*, *broþur*, *corn*, *hungor*,

verbs: *ergan*, *biddan*, *ceosan*, and relatively infrequent adjectives: *ald*, *3eonþ*, *god*, *micel*, *bræd*, *feor*, *niwe* noticeable
are terms denoting temporal designations: *rear, dæg, niht, monap*,
geographical designations: *ea, flood, munt, muþa, suþ, qest*
administrative divisions: *lond, middelrice, biscoprice, cynerice*
buildings: *burþ, ceaster, cirice, moorfæsten*
military equipment: *æsc, bat, ar, langscip* (it is significant
that no weapons are mentioned, unlike the elaborate descriptions of them found in epic poetry),
military groups: *here, scipher, fierd, geþylce, hloþ, floc,*
leaders and officers: *cyning, biscep, aldorman, gerefa, curen,*
ethnic names: *bretta, angelcynn, francan, þealas, mierie,*
place-names: *qintanceastre, temese, hamtunscre,* ...
names: *ælfred, æþered, æþelpulf, dudda, osric, macþep,*
verbs of movement: *faran, gan, cuman, berouþan,*
verbs connected with warfare: *gefohtan, fleon, abrecan,*
adrencan, forbernan, slean etc.,
very frequent collocations: *feng to rice, stige nam, ahton qæl-
stoue, ȝeþald*

Smith (1951/3) has pointed out several lines that are
"clumsy and ambiguous in style", judging that the meaning
of the lines was not clearly and definitely expressed. One of
them is included in the following segment:

871/21-28  7 þæs ymb iþ monap ȝeþeaht æþered
cyning 7 æþred his borþur uþ þone
here æt meretune 7 hlæ ȝærun on
tuan ȝefylcyum 7 hlæ butu ȝefyliem-
don 7 lonȝe on dæg siȝe ahton 7
þær ȝearþ micel ȝelsliht on ȝehuq-
ȝere hond 7 þa deniscan ahton
qælstoue ȝeþald

It is not clear who is referred to by *hlæ*, the Danes or the
English (Athered and Alfred). The editor gives a tentative
explanation (ibid./27) which can be better judged if the
difficult place is viewed as an integral part of the whole text.

There is also ambiguous ellipsis in *7 lonȝe on dæg siȝe ahton*, i.e. either Athered and Alfred *siȝe ahton*, or the Danish

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11 The literal rather than idiomatic, translation is as follows: and
after about two months fought Athered the king and Alfred his brother
with the army at Meretune and they were in two divisions and they
were both put to flight and long had the upper hand that day and
there occurred a great slaughter on both sides and the Danes had
control over the battlefield.
army. Moreover, the conjunction may be regarded as ambiguous, since **ond** (7) can be interpreted either as addition (and, also, next) or "contrary to expectation" (but, however), with a possibility of disambiguation through intonation and stress in reading aloud: (the English) had the upper hand for a long time that
day but there occurred great slaughter on both sides after which the Danes were victorious.

Ambiguity has often been discussed in literary interpretation (e.g. Empson, 1956) and in linguistics (particularly in the generative transformational approach\(^\text{12}\)). Let us here note only three definitions:

i. ambiguity = "vagueness or uncertainty of meaning" (Collins, 1979)

ii. "When a sentence can represent either of two conceptual structures, we recognize it as being ambiguous, as having alternate semantic interpretations" (Langacker, 1967/115).

iii. "many of the acceptable utterances of English and other languages are ambiguous: they can be interpreted in two or more different ways" (Lyons, 1977/396).

The reader has to decide on one of the possible interpretations and accept it as the meaning most likely to have been intended by the author. In literary texts, all possible meanings may have been intended at the same time (Empson, 1956), but since we are dealing with a factual report, we can assume that only one meaning is appropriate.

We shall also assume (see Lyons above) that the ambiguity is one of utterance, not of sentence, the latter being no unit of our text. Disambiguation will be sought from the entire text, the procedure serving the same purpose as asking for repetition or paraphrase in spoken discourse.

It will soon be noticed that the text is structured in parallel patterns, a feature typical of oral epic poetry.\(^\text{13}\) This feature may be taken as a lead in the interpretation of the ambiguous pronoun **hie**, and the ambiguous connective **7**.

\(^{12}\) For an extensive account see R. Đorđević, 1979.

\(^{13}\) Best known are the theses by Lord and Parry (Lord, 1960) that have been further elaborated and developed by students of various oral and written popular literatures.
Earlier in segment 871, there is a parallel text, expanded by a clause explicating the pronoun:

871/9-14 7 þæs ymb iði niht zeþæult eþeræd cyming 7 Ælfred his brorðor uþ þæne þæne here on þescísþæne 7 hie þæræn on þuæm zeþæltum on ðæþæm þæs bæhsecg 7 halþdæne þæ heþþæn cymingas 7 on ðæþæm þæron þæ eorlæs

Here it is made clear that the Danes were in two divisions (on þuæm zeþæltum), since one division was headed by the “heathen” kings Bachsecg and Halþdæne and the other one by the eorlæs. It is to be expected that in the ambiguous passage it is again the Danes who were divided, since that seems to have been part of their military strategy.

The second hie in 871/21-28 is also ambiguous, and so is butu (both, accusative). They may refer a) hie to the Danes, butu to Aþhered and Ælfred, b) vice versa.

If b) is correct, then the text says that the English (hie) put the Danes (butu) to flight (zeþældæon) and had the upper hand (sþææ ahton) for a long time that day (lônþ æþon dæþæg) “and there occurred great slaughter on both sides and the Danes were victorious”.

If a) is correct, then the Danes (hie) put Aþhered and Ælfred (butu) to flight and had the upper hand for a long time that day, “and there occurred great slaughter on both sides and the Danes were victorious”, which is logical enough, except that it is unusual that the hie in the second clause was not deleted when it is coreferent with the subject in the preceding clause: 7 hie þæræn on þuæm zeþæltum 7 hie (Ø) butu zeþældæon (and they were in two divisions and they put both to flight). This could, however, also be ambiguous, (they were in two divisions and put both to flight) while, with the pronoun repeated after a breath pause in reading, the clause can be understood as a new sequence. In this case the comma of the present edition, i.e. before 7 hie þæræn on þuæm zeþæltum instead of after it, is inappropriate.

If b) is the intended meaning, then two conjunctions (7) have to be differently interpreted, since if we understand ond as additive, it appears illogical that the English had the upper hand and the Danes were victorious. We propose that ond could mean so and but respectively: the Danes were in two divisions so the English put both to flight and had the
upper hand for a long time that day, but there occurred a
great slaughter on both sides and (eventually) the Danes were
victorious.

This interpretation could be supported by another parallel
text pattern further in the segment 871/34-37:

7 þæs ymb ane monaþ þegfaþ þelfred cynmæþ uþþ
alne þone herel lyfle þerede ðæt þultune 7 hine longe
on dæþ þegfæþæþ þe þa deniscan ahþon þgelþþeþe þeþæþl
The pronoun (3rd ps. masc. acc. sing.) is ambiguous since it
can refer both to Alfred and to here (noun masc., agreeing
with sing. and pl. of verb). The subject of the second clause is
deleted, but it could be understood as Alfred who put the
Danes to flight, in which case 7 again means nevertheless, but.
If the subject is the Danes, then it is a rather rare case of
cataphoric ellipsis, demanding a pause in reading before the
last two clauses, which would have to be read in one breath.
If this is the case, the editor’s comma between the last two
clauses is wrongly placed.

However, another close parallel can be found at the
beginning of the Chronicle in segment 837/4-7:

7 þþlcan þære þegfaþ þelhelm dux uþþ þeliscne
here on port mid dormæþæþ 7 þodæ þelieþ þone here
þegfæþæþ þe þa deniscan ahþon þgelþþeþe þeþæþl 7 þone
aldormon ofsþæþon
The passage makes it explicit who is being put to flight,
i.e. the Danes. The subject — agent, Athelhelm, is deleted in
the second clause, after it has been stated in the first. The
connective again means but, nevertheless (the Danes were
victorious and killed the alderman). The editor remarks,
however, that in other MSS (British Museum, Cotton MS
Tiberius B IV and Bodleian MS, Laud 636), there is a different
arrangement:

7 þþlcan þære þegfaþ þelhelm dux uþþ þeliscne
here on port mid dormæþæþ 7 se aldorman þæþð
ofsþæþen þa deniscan ahþon þgelþþeþe þeþæþl
The temporal sequence of the alderman having been killed
first and his troop defeated next is also a logical one, because
the death of their leader could bring about the defeat of the
English. The Corpus Christi College MS is also coherent if the
connectives are interpreted as suggested above. The scribes
of the MSS, probably copies of earlier versions (Smith, ibid./4f),
must have understood the text in the same way, but used a
slightly different arrangement. It is not only the first and
that is to be interpreted as but; the second and possibly means
something like while, when, after: but the Danes were victorious when the alderman was killed.\(^\text{14}\)

From scrutiny of passages with the same patterning, it seems that we might now draw some conclusions about the interpretation nearest to the intended meaning:

a) the Danes have a military strategy of dividing into two troops for battle; ambiguous references may be considered in this light;

b) it is usual for a clause to be linked to the preceding one by means of ellipsis, not to the clause that follows;

c) 7 need not be interpreted only as an additive conjunction, but also as aversive, and possibly containing other meanings as well (e.g. in 837).

We have tried to suggest that most of the ambiguities would be less noticeable if the text were read aloud with an appropriate paralinguistic apparatus. The other point to be made is that the audience of the author of the Chronicle may have been used to a particular style habitual to him, his school or the period, and would always expect a certain set of patterns. On the other hand, we are in the position to get acquainted with the style of the Chronicle by trying to find the pattern recurring throughout the text.

Besides correcting our habit of looking for clarification only in the immediate context of an ambiguous word, we can also correct our presuppositions about the style of referential historiographic texts, which in the medieval period could include features common to some literary texts (e.g. repetition of formal patterns). Moreover, our notion of written language will also have to be modified by recognizing the possibility that some features, usually associated with spoken registers (e.g. a multitude of ellipses and anaphoric pronomina, co-ordination with and, sequencing of utterances rather than sentences, presence of paralinguistic markers), are unexceptional, unmarked features of the Old English Chronicles.

\(^{14}\) A similar construction is found in Irish English: "Is it me to go near him, and (while, when, because) he (is) the wickedest and worst with me?" (Synge Playboy of the Western World, quoted by Schlauch, 1959/174).
REFERENCES


O TUMAČENJU TIPA DVOSMISLENOSTI U JEDNOM STAROENGLESKOM TEKSTU

Dvomislenosti u povijesnim tekstovima mogu se tumačiti u okviru čitavog teksta. U članku se analizira jedan tip referencijske dvomislenosti u *Parker Chronicle* i pokušava ga se protumačiti na osnovu sličnosti uzoraka koji su tipični za ovaj tekst. Predloženo je i da se srednjovjekovnom historiografskom stilu pristupa s drugim pretpostavkama nego stilu takvih suvremenih tekstova.