As is well known, one of the most salient features of northern Middle English dialects, including Middle Scots, is its verbal morphology and more concretely, a grammatical phenomenon generally referred to as the Northern Subject Rule (NSR). The NSR was a syntactic constraint that governed present-indicative plural verbal morphology in these dialects according to the type and position of the subject: the present-indicative plural marker was -s, unless the verb had an immediately adjacent pronoun subject in which case the marker was the reduced or zero ending (-e/ø). Thus, pai tel versus pai tel and sias, pai yat tells and storis tells.

The subject and adjacency effects found to condition the distribution of present verbal morphology in northern Middle English are generally regarded to be an early Middle English development that did not exist in northern varieties of Old English. Using data taken from the tenth-century interlinear gloss to the Lindisfarne Gospels, this paper reconsiders variation between suffixal -ð and -s in late Old Northumbrian. In addition to phonetic and lexical conditioning, present tense marking is found to be determined by subject type and adjacency effects which indicates that the syntactic NSR system already operated in Old Northumbrian dialect with different morphological material.

The results of the study challenge the established view that the subject and adjacency effects at the crux of the NSR constraint emerged during the early Middle English period and that it necessarily involved a syntactically conditioned opposition between an inflected -s form and an uninflected form.