

The development of Old English. By Don Ringe & Ann Taylor. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 632.

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1. Introduction and overview

This volume is the second in Ringe's *Linguistic history of English*, picking up where the previous book, *From Proto-Indo-European to Proto-Germanic* (Ringe 2006), left off. It covers the time period from the break-up of Proto-Germanic until c. 900 CE, thus ending roughly in the middle of the Old English (OE) period as traditionally conceived. The scope of this monumental project will be apparent from the fact that, two volumes in, the series has reached roughly the point where most conventional histories of the English language begin: Old English.

Unlike the first volume in the series, this book contains a section on syntax, written by Ann Taylor. The inclusion of syntax is welcome, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this volume is really two books bound together: the chapter on syntax is by far the book's longest at 118 pages, and could easily be expanded into a book-length work in its own right. There are also many structural differences between the two parts of the book, the most obvious being the time period covered: while the phonology and morphology chapters cover the period from the breakup of the Germanic language family to 900 CE, the syntax chapter contains only a few paragraphs here and there on prehistory, and covers the whole OE period up to 1100 CE.¹ The phonology and morphology chapters are primarily diachronic and atheoretical. By contrast, the syntax chapter is primarily synchronic and couched in a Government & Binding-style descriptive metalanguage, which, however, is presented in an accessible way and eschews unnecessary technicalia. The syntax chapter also has its own index.

1. Unlike some historical linguists (e.g., Lightfoot 2002), the authors do not dismiss syntactic reconstruction out of hand, instead stating (p. 2) that they avoid discussion of prehistoric syntax due to "lack of space"; given that we are dealing with a 632-page volume, this is somewhat disappointing. A comprehensive treatment of Proto-Germanic, Northwest and West Germanic syntax to complement this volume is a desideratum for future work.

The authors briefly justify these differences in approach in the introduction. For the most part, they are justified by the nature of the different research traditions whose results are being summarized, historically and methodologically. Still, it would have been useful for the two parts to be integrated more thoroughly. Missing, for instance, is a discussion of the relationship between metre and syntax in the earliest Old English poetry, an area in which it has long been recognized at least that phonological and syntactic understanding can inform one another (e.g., Kuhn 1933). Occasionally syntactic evidence is used in the first part of the book: this is the case on pp. 353–354, where the OE present indicative *-st* is argued not to have originated in cliticization of a following *þū* on the grounds that subject pronouns do not often follow present indicative verbs in OE. However – strikingly – no reference is made to the corresponding section in Taylor’s chapter (pp. 400–401), which discusses the placement of subject pronouns in detail.

In the rest of this review I will mirror the structure of the book by discussing the phonology/morphology and syntax sections in turn.

2. Phonology and morphology

The treatment of phonology and morphology in Chapters 2–7 is essentially Neogrammarian in structure: it presents, in chronological order (to the extent that this can be established), the sequence of changes that led from Proto-Germanic to OE, pausing in Chapter 4 to give an overview of the synchronic state of Proto-West Germanic. The collation of all this material in one place makes for a fantastically useful resource. In particular, no English-language work exists that is comparable to Chapters 2–5, which deal comprehensively with the Germanic prehistory of OE; up to now, readers interested in these changes were usually required to pore through general philological treatments of Indo-European, or to infer details from the sketchy treatments in traditional histories of the West Germanic languages. It is particularly satisfying that the oft-overlooked Old Frisian and Old Saxon are frequently used as sources of comparative evidence.

Chapters 6 and 7 deal with changes in the early OE period itself, and here, to some extent, the work overlaps with earlier treatments such as Campbell (1962) and Hogg (1992). Ringe justifies this by stating that these works “retain an old-fashioned philological focus on explaining the forms which the student encounters rather than writing an internal history of the language” (p. 167). The extent to which this is true is debatable, but these chapters certainly add value nonetheless, because Ringe’s aim throughout is not just to collect butterflies by summarizing existing literature: each change is discussed in detail and integrated into the bigger

picture, and at a number of points Ringe takes issue with existing treatments and presents a new view.

Though the work is monumental, it is not without its faults. For one thing, though the treatment of segmental phonology is extensive, suprasegmental phonology gets very little discussion in this volume. In particular, at no point is there an overview of stress assignment rules and metrical structure for OE or its predecessors. Secondly, though the volume often draws upon aspects of more recent theorizing – such as synchronically ordered rules (p. 69), native learner reanalysis (e.g., p. 189), and sound change in progress (p. 276) – for explanations in individual cases, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this is done opportunistically, and only in cases for which the traditional tools of regular sound change plus analogical levelling alone prove inadequate. A case study from the OE period illustrates both concerns.

Ringe argues that the consensus view that syncope and apocope of unchecked *ī and *ū after stressed heavy syllables apply at the same time (Campbell 1962; Hogg 1992; Fulk 2010) is incorrect, and that syncope in fact preceded shortening of word-internal unstressed long vowels, which preceded apocope (§6.8). This predicts that the outcomes of regular sound change applied to prehistoric *hēaβudu “heads” should be *hēafd*, *māriþu “fame” should be *mārþ*, etc. Ringe appeals to metrical structure to explain why *nīetīnu “domestic animals” does not become **nīeten: at the time that apocope applied, shortening had already taken place, and so the word could be footed as *[nīe][ti|nu], and since the final *-u falls within a foot it is preserved.

The problem here is that, by parity of reasoning, we would expect the medial vowels in *hēaβudu and *māriþu to be preserved as well, since these words could be fully footed: *[hēa][βu|du], *[māe][ri|þu]. But in that case the predicted regular outcomes would be *hēafudu* and *māriþu*.² Since the conditioning environments for syncope and apocope are essentially identical (both apply in open syllables after a stressed heavy syllable, but not after a stressed light syllable), appealing to the preserving effect of foot structure for apocope but not for syncope is ad hoc. If metrical structure is appealed to, as it is on p. 301 out of the blue, its effects should be considered across the board, and not only in specific cases where it rescues an otherwise unexpected development.

2. These predictions are in fact not undesirable, but widely viewed as correct (see the references in Fulk 2010: Note 7). Forms of the shape *hēafudu*, without syncope or apocope, are all that is attested in several early texts in several dialects, whereas NOM/ACC.PL ⟨heafd⟩, ⟨heabd⟩ and ⟨heaft⟩ are nowhere attested (Ricardo Bermúdez-Otero, p.c.). As for forms in *-iþu, their absence can be explained by analogical restructuring (Fulk 2010: 140–141); Ringe states that he is unconvinced (p. 291), but does not specify why.

If this volume had been written with more consistent reference to metrical structure, and more consistent consideration of the SYNCHRONIC phonological processes leading from underlying representations to surface forms at a given point in time, one wonders how many of the conclusions would have been different.

3. Syntax

Any work that aims for a broad coverage of OE syntax will inevitably stand in the long shadow of Mitchell's (1985) monumental two-volume treatment of the subject. Taylor's section is substantially shorter, and hence cannot replace Mitchell's magnum opus in terms of breadth and depth of coverage. Nevertheless, there are a number of ways in which the section may indeed prove more useful.

First, the theoretical framework that is adopted makes it easy to compare OE with other languages that have been described in this way. Mitchell (1985) is sceptical about syntactic theory, and hence describes OE syntax on its own terms, and in a rather idiosyncratic way. The reader seeking to compare certain aspects of OE syntax to the syntax of Modern English, or of the other Germanic languages and beyond, may find that Taylor's chapter makes for easier comparison: it is straightforward to compare OE syntax as described by Taylor with Old Norse syntax as described by Faarlund (2004), for example. There is no danger that the OE facts are being forced into a theoretical straitjacket, either: one of the hallmarks of the work of Taylor and her collaborators over the years has been its rigour and empirical responsibility, and Taylor cites a variety of sources which back up her points with quantitative data collected from a near-exhaustive parsed corpus of OE prose (Taylor et al. 2003). For instance, 'conjunct' clauses (syntactically complete main clauses introduced by a coordinating conjunction such as *and* or *ac*) have often been claimed to exhibit a higher rate of verb-late word order, but Taylor (p. 419) cites Pintzuk (1999: 224), who shows quantitatively that this is reducible to a parallelism effect and does not indicate that such clauses were syntactically subordinate. Quantitative argumentation is kept to a minimum in the chapter itself, to enhance readability, but is drawn on when required.

Secondly, in the three decades since Mitchell's work was written, a wealth of new facts about OE syntax have come to light, some uncovered through theoretically-oriented, hypothesis-driven research of a type that would have been alien to Mitchell. A case in point is the issue of verb-second. Van Kemenade's (1987) suggestion that OE was in essence an asymmetric V2 language like modern Dutch or German led to a wealth of research: in particular, it led to the prediction that V2 in embedded clauses should not occur. This prediction was later shown to be correct (see Van Kemenade 1997), though other parts of the V2 story had to be revised;

Taylor gives a good summary of this evidence (pp. 403–405). She also presents examples that show, *pace* Mitchell (1985: §2322), that the referent of free relative clauses introduced by *þe* in OE is not always non-specific (p. 474).

Though it is an accessible and thorough overview, on the whole, the balance of coverage of different syntactic topics is sometimes skewed. In part this reflects the fact that some topics have been the subject of less research in general, as Taylor notes is the case for nominal syntax (p. 447). In other cases there is less of an excuse. Negation, for instance, receives only a couple of paragraphs of discussion (pp. 410–411), despite being extensively studied: there is nothing, for instance, on the interesting dialectal asymmetries in negative contraction or in negative concord (Ingham 2006, Van Bergen 2008 and references cited there).

Another potential problem, again perhaps partially attributable to lack of space, is that alternative formal analyses of the data are not considered. In the section on nominal syntax, for example, the DP hypothesis is assumed throughout (p. 446). The universality of DP is far from unquestioned, however: Bošković (2005) mounts a forceful challenge on empirical grounds. Languages without DP are predicted to have a number of properties, e.g., lack of a dedicated definite determiner or a subject expletive, lack of structural nominative case and the possibility of syntactic discontinuity. As has been observed before (Yamamoto 1989, Osawa 2000), OE is a reasonable candidate for DP-less status on this basis; Wood (2007) provides an overview of the evidence, coming down in favour of a DP analysis. It would be too much to expect that Taylor's chapter would consider the ramifications of the two analyses in detail, but a mention of the possibility would not have gone amiss. Similarly, the existence of verb-third orders in main clauses is analysed by Taylor as involving movement of the verb to a position within the T-domain in most cases, but an alternative analysis with some empirical support has the verb moving to a position low in a split C-domain (Roberts 1996, Biberauer & Van Kemenade 2011: 22–23). Again, for ease of exposition it is preferable not to multiply analyses beyond necessity, but the possibility could have been hinted at on pp. 400–403.

4. Summary

Though the two sections of the book are different in structure and tone, both parts bring together and build on impressive research traditions in such a way that each is a major contribution to the literature, the criticisms above notwithstanding.

The book is for the most part well put together, with only a few typos and other errors (e.g., a reference to a non-existent §1.4 rather than §1.3 on p. 302 and p. 305; “Grohman” for “Grohmann” on p. 417; “the data itself do not often distin-

guish” on p. 447). One mildly irritating feature is the lack of a subject index for the phonological and morphological section of the book: there is no easy way, for instance, to find all references to i-mutation or Sievers’s Law. The only other formal criticism is that the diagrams of relative chronology on, e.g., p. 104 and p. 514 are not particularly clear or elegant; one might have expected OUP’s design wizzes to come up with something more visually appealing and effective.

Overall, though, this book is a rich resource that seems certain to become a standard reference work on the prehistory and early history of English. It is likely to be of great use for the teaching of advanced undergraduate and postgraduate courses on Old English and historical Germanic linguistics, and as a reference guide to supplement introductory textbooks in Old English classes, especially when detail or linguistic insight is required that goes beyond the standard provision.

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