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978-0-521-11246-8 - Analysing Older English

Edited by David Denison, Ricardo Bermúdez-Otero, Chris McCully and Emma Moore

Excerpt

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## General introduction

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THE EDITORS, WITH DONKA MINKOVA

### Is the past a foreign country?

At one stage in the planning of this book, our projected title was a question adapted from the famous opening of L. P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*: 'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.' Doing things differently is not supposed to be true of speakers (the uniformitarian principle asserts that the general properties of language do not vary over historical time),<sup>1</sup> but might it be true of linguists? Does a historical linguist need different methodological and theoretical tools from those employed by a general linguist? In the actual title we settled on, 'Older English' simply means the entire spectrum of historical English, though the balance is probably weighted away from the present day. This book is an exploration of problems in the analysis of past states of a language, the intricacies of handling complex but always incomplete data, the theoretical questions which must be posed in historical and diachronic linguistics, and in particular whether the synchronic analysis of an earlier state of English must be, or can be, or indeed must *not* be, different in kind from an analysis of present-day language.

To this end, in early 2007 we invited a number of authorities on different aspects of the history of English to contribute to a themed volume. We had an excuse for planning the book at that particular time. Our friend Richard Hogg, Smith Professor of English Language and Medieval Literature at the University of Manchester, was due to retire in September 2009. He had taken the post in 1980, and he and David Denison had been colleagues since then. Two of Richard's former PhD students (Chris McCully and Emma Moore) and a student's student (Ricardo Bermúdez-Otero) had gone on to hold lectureships for a time at Manchester and therefore knew him as both supervisor and colleague. The four of us thought the occasion of Richard's retirement would be a timely occasion for exploring questions which had recurred so often in Richard's own work. This is not a *Festschrift*. There was no general invitation to all Richard Hogg's many friends to contribute some little scholarly

<sup>1</sup> Although they may of course have varied over evolutionary time.

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## 2 The editors, with Donka Minkova

offering, there is no biography, no listing of his publications.<sup>2</sup> And in the event it could not have been a *Festschrift* even if we had meant it to be, because shockingly, cruelly, Richard died suddenly on 6 September 2007. Inevitably the book has turned into a commemoration. Accordingly, we invited a respected figure in the field of historical English linguistics, Donka Minkova (already one of our authors), to write an informal account of Richard's intellectual world-view, and we have drawn extensively on Donka's account in the following section. We have also spent time contemplating our own associations with Richard, and this has influenced the way in which we have edited and reflected upon the contents of this volume. For this reason, we felt it entirely appropriate to comment upon Richard's intellectual world-view in this introductory chapter.

After this more personal introduction, however, the book continues as planned, with no dilution of the original theme. Thirteen chapters on older English are grouped under five headings, namely metrics and onomastics, writing practices, dialects, sound change, and syntax. Each part is introduced in some detail by one or two of the editors. The problems tackled in each chapter are interesting ones in themselves, and we think that in addition to its methodological and theoretical contribution, the collection enhances our knowledge of the history of English.

### Richard Hogg's intellectual world-view and its relationship to this volume

Richard was a model of critically and wisely applied intelligence, combining rigorous philology with formal linguistic analysis, empirical precision with polemical liveliness. (Donka Minkova, March 2010)

Questions (and answers) about methodology run throughout Richard's published work. Whilst he is perhaps best known for his work on Old English, he was never constrained by abstract research paradigms or timescales. He valued rigorous scholarship irrespective of the domain in which it was constructed. Those of us who studied with Richard benefited from this liberal curiosity. Chris is able to recall the moment Richard handed him a copy of *Linguistic Inquiry* and directed him to read up on 'metrical phonology'. Emma remembers being lent a copy of Eckert (2000) and discovering the concept 'community of practice'. These discoveries were radical and exciting to us and, whilst Richard surely knew they would be, he allowed us to think we were discovering them for ourselves, with a typically understated, 'You should take a look at this, I think.'

<sup>2</sup> On the website of the International Society for the Linguistics of English ([www.isle-linguistics.org/prize/](http://www.isle-linguistics.org/prize/)) there is a full list of Richard Hogg's publications plus a link to an obituary.

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Richard invariably wore his immense learning lightly. However, admiration and respect for his peers and predecessors did not stop him from being sceptical of canonical traditions. Donka also notes his keen eye for distorted or theory-bound preferences, something aptly reflected in his fondness for titles with negatives and question marks: ‘On the IMpossibility of Old English dialectology’, ‘Tertiary stress in Old English? Some reflections on explanatory INadequacy’, ‘Was there ever a /ɔ:/-phoneme in Old English?’, ‘Old English dialectology?’, ‘On the (NON-) existence of High Vowel Deletion’. But Richard’s academic contributions were not just provocative; they were also informative and persuasive – a consequence of his meticulous attention to detail. By simultaneously paying attention to every piece of data, its formal linguistic detail and the social and cultural contexts of its production, he was able to successfully challenge philologists and generative linguists alike – most notably, by contesting claims about the regularity of certain phonological rules in Old English.

Some of Richard’s formidable intellectual achievements were undoubtedly facilitated by his compassionate and open-minded nature. One of the reasons that he was able to spot the problems and limitations of the standard histories of English was that he was acutely aware of present-day inequities. Why should similar disparities not have existed in the past? He was deeply proud of his Scots ancestry and this made him curious about other people and places too. The desire to understand the sociology behind language gave him the impetus to want to explain, rather than dismiss, ‘anomalies’ in datasets. This desire enabled him to reveal an Old English language that was far less standardised and monolithic than previously believed.

Earnest as this social consciousness sounds, Richard had a keen sense of the ridiculous: the terms for certain phonological concepts – ‘the head of the foot’, for example – could set him off and take others with him. We suspect that our attempt to distil his ‘world-view’ would also have struck him as slightly absurd. However, as we have worked on this volume and reflected on the ways in which the contributors have drawn upon his work, the significance of his research and, indeed, his positions, have become clear. His deep involvement in the shifting methodological and research paradigms of language study and his willingness to tackle and resolve the problems facing historical and diachronic scholars mean that this book reflects his world-view. The chapters that follow include work that speaks to philology, formal linguistics and sociolinguistics. Quantitative and qualitative forms of analysis are employed. Standard and non-standard English datasets are presented. Methods are borrowed from sociology, biology and geography, and the very best philological and linguistic thought is reflected upon. Richard Hogg’s intellectual legacy is alive and well.

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##### Acknowledgements

The editors wish to thank Helen Barton of Cambridge University Press for her encouragement and advice, Merja Kytö for accepting the book in the Studies in English Language series, Donka Minkova for her thoughts on Richard's world-view. We are grateful to the colleagues (some of them contributors themselves) who generously gave their time to comment on individual chapters: Anita Auer, Derek Britton, Susan Fitzmaurice, Robert Fulk, Dieter Kastovsky, Roger Lass, Geoffrey Russom, Philip Shaw, Jeremy Smith, Linda van Bergen and Wim van der Wurff. The contributors produced substantial pieces of work for this book, and we thank them too for their general good humour and willingness to look at their chapters again in the light of reviewers' and editors' comments. (Peter Kitson was not in a position to produce a revision of his chapter, which was undertaken on his behalf by David Denison with help from Ayumi Miura and Richard Coates.)

From January 2010, Ayumi Miura, a PhD student at Manchester, was employed as editorial assistant on the project, and she has suggested improvements throughout, as well as doing a marvellous job of checking references and bibliographic entries and editing the disparate contributions into a homogeneous house style.

This book was in press when we learned of the death of Derek Britton, a friend of many of the contributors. Despite his long illness, Derek completed his own chapter and reviewed another with typical forthrightness and cheer, as well as giving helpful advice concerning an unfinished project of his friend Richard Hogg. It is another sad loss.

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## Part I

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### Metrics and onomastics in older English

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## I Introduction to Part I

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CHRIS McCULLY AND DAVID DENISON

The survival or non-survival into Middle English (ME) of those metrical principles constraining the classical Old English (OE) alliterative verse-line has been a particularly problematic area both for metrics and (in its role as theoretical explanandum-provider for metrics) for historical linguistics. Given the appearance of English thirteenth- and fourteenth-century poetic texts which are alliteratively constructed, and particularly texts written in dialect areas which might very loosely be termed ‘westerly’ (see below), it would seem logical to seek for metrical *continuity* between those principles obtaining in the alliterative verse familiar from OE of the ninth and tenth centuries and those obtaining in later ME poetic texts from the twelfth century through to the end of the fourteenth. On the other hand, given the apparent structural dissimilarities between classical OE alliterative verse (particularly that familiar from e.g. *Beowulf*) and later ME alliterative verse (particularly that familiar from e.g. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (SGGK)), it also seems logical to seek an account of metrical *discontinuity*. Those working from the assumption or concept of ‘metrical continuity’ have included, for example, Oakden (1930) and Mossé (1968), while those working from the idea of at least partial discontinuity include Turville-Petre (1977) and Cable (1991). The latter scholars suggest, for example, that one source of ME alliterative verse might have been the prior existence of alliterative prose which in turn looked back to the influential aesthetic model provided by Ælfric. On this last view, the appearance of alliterative verse in later ME is not so much the continuity and modification of an old underlying Verse Design (to use Jakobson’s (1960) structuralist terminology) but the remodelling of a new Verse Design from an older prose tradition.

The matter is complicated in terms of verse history by the simultaneous appearance in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries of English verse which is (or becomes) more or less systematically rhymed; it is also complicated in terms of metrical dialectology by the persistence of alliterative forms of writing in parts of the south-west, the central-west and the north-west Midlands and in Scots (in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries) but vanishingly rarely elsewhere – a form of interesting diatopic variation (McIntosh 1989a, 1989b).

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## 8 Chris McCully and David Denison

It is precisely this set of problems which is addressed by McCully and Hogg (1994), who suggest that ‘westerly’ dialect areas allow for the presence of alliterative forms of writing because they retain the ‘left-strong’ underlying word-stress phonology of older English the longest, whereas more southerly, central and easterly areas admit more or less systematically rhymed verse because those dialect areas are during the same period showing the impress of ‘right-strong’ forms of underlying word-stress phonology. In other words, if the underlying phonology of English changes, those changes may enable new kinds of verse to be written and at the same time, may disprivilege older forms of verse composed and enjoyed under the former phonological dispensation (McCully and Hogg 1994: 30).

Be that as it may (and it is unlikely that either McCully or Hogg would now subscribe fully to all the linguistic details of that earlier analysis), the aesthetics of the ‘alliterative revival’ still remain tantalisingly unexplained: modified continuity of the old? Or the shock of the entirely new? It is this central question to which **Geoffrey Russom** supplies an important if partial answer based on the evolution of the alliterative long line as that is manifest in *SGGK*. The key question, posed more precisely, is the following: *to what extent* are Old English metrical principles ‘lost’ in Middle English, and *to what extent* do they survive? In his contribution to this volume, and working within those metrical principles first developed in Russom (1987), Russom suggests from what he dubs “‘smoking-gun’ evidence’ that English metre continuously evolved within what was a conservative poetic tradition. The evidence he adduces comes from a perhaps unlikely source: the placement of function words. As the alliterative line evolved, Russom suggests, the *number* of those function words deployed per (half-)line increased, but ‘constraints on their placement were strenuously maintained’. This underlying principle, in Russom’s view, helps to account for the typically ‘looser’ metrical structure of the later alliterative line. Russom’s contribution, therefore, to the problematics of English historical metrics comes down very persuasively – indeed, ‘conclusively’ – in favour of metrical persistence. In particular, the evidence Russom marshals so impressively is in one respect utterly convincing, and that is the following: comparing the behaviour of expanded dips as these are evident in *Beowulf* and *Maldon*, Russom finds that across the 3,000+ lines of *Beowulf* there are a mere seven b-verses with anacrusis (expanded initial dips), whereas in *Maldon* (a fragment of 325 lines) that number had risen to fourteen. ‘This striking change’, Russom writes, ‘provides clear evidence of a felt need for increased use of function words’.

Further, in his re-analyses of what have invariably been seen as ‘A-type verses with anacrusis’ and ‘hypermetrical patterns’ in for example *Beowulf*, Russom convincingly shows how the one variant (hypermetrical) is disfavoured in later (*SGGK*) b-verses, whereas the other (anacrusis) is redeployed as frequent in later (*SGGK*) a-verses. It is also noteworthy that Russom’s



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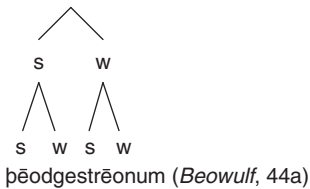
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analysis is also based on a range of texts which span later OE poems (some of them ostensibly similar, but containing wide and interesting metrical discrepancies) as well as Old Saxon (*Heliand*). Finally here, it is worth highlighting a further, strikingly testable linguistic claim as to the central nature of the metrical survival of alliterative verse in the early English tradition. In the classical OE half-line, he writes, the ideal, the prototypical realisation of the half-line was that of a single word organised maximally into a trochaic (strong-weak) pattern:



That is, OE half-lines behaved prototypically like single compound words. As Russom here suggests, however, in connection with the typically longer and (in a-verses) looser structure of the ME alliterative line as exemplified in *SGGK*, '[b]y the Middle English era, however, the old word-foot structure had been lost. At this point, constraints on trochaic word groups are most plausibly represented as constraints on placement of word boundaries within the verse pattern. The Old English foot boundaries have become Middle English caesuras.'

The analytical challenges faced by those working on onomastics seem at first blush to be relatively distant from those embedded in the problematics of historical metrics. Nevertheless, both branches of historical linguistics share entirely analogous concerns with the business of reconstruction, and both properly seek to interrogate afresh assumptions which are often simply taken for granted. For example, and within the field of historical metrics, to a literary scholar unacquainted with linguistics it might seem that the ostensible survival of 'the alliterative line', in however much modified a form, can be taken for granted (since metrical re-invention, and particularly, metrical re-invention from prose models, seems to occur relatively rarely in languages and their verse traditions). Similarly, an etymologist or historical linguist unacquainted with the demands of theoretical semantics might well fail adequately to theorise the passage of a lexical term or phrase from commonhood (occurring in common expressions) to properhood (occurring in proper names). Such a passage might again be taken for granted. As **Richard Coates** notes, '[t]he mechanism of passage from commonhood to properhood is, where it is referred to at all, simply called *becoming proper* (or some synonymous expression), is never explained, and is not adequately theorised'. It is this process of 'becoming proper' which Coates here refers to as *onymisation*.

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Focusing on the sources of the name *Fulflood*, today the name of a district in the city of Winchester, Coates suggests something of the complexity of onymisation in noting that for a user of the proper name *Fulflood* today the term has become uncoupled from whatever its historical origins may have been. If, for instance, the term has its origins in the phrase *fūle flōde*, ‘polluted watercourse’ or ‘foul channel’, then that etymology (of both lexical items in the original phrase) has been lost to the ‘average user’ of the name *Fulflood*. *Fulflood*, today, has nothing to do with pollution and nothing to do with watercourses: ‘[i]ts meaning is its denotation, and it has no sense. It is therefore unambiguously a proper name’. How and why it so became a proper name are the twin concerns of Coates’s paper.

Coates proceeds by drawing a distinction between *semantic* reference, where a term or phrase entails semantic relationships which are preserved in an utterance (including the utterance of writing) intact and presuppose that there is such a thing as a ‘foul channel’, and *onymic* reference, where semantic relationships in the original phrase are not preserved and presuppose that there is a place (or set of places) with the name ‘Fulflood’. Further, and axiomatically, the more a term is used or interpreted onymically, the more likely it is for onymisation – properhood – to take place.

One historically important detail emerges from Coates’s analysis here. The term *flood* (OE *flōde*, channel) has lost its original sense, though it survives in the familiar specialised meaning ‘overflowing of a large amount of water’:

It is particularly interesting that *Fulflood* has continued to contain the etymological reflex of a word *flōde* which has become obsolete in the relevant sense and vanished in that sense in the course of the history of English. (It remains, of course, as *flood*, i.e. in a distinct though related sense.) To explain this, we must clearly assume the hypothesised prior senseless use of the referring expression. That is the only way in which we can account for the continued use of a word which has vanished from the language. Its senselessness was a PRECONDITION for its survival.<sup>1</sup>

Further, Coates shows that the distinction between semantic and onymic forms of reference, grounded as they are in pragmatics, may translate into different forms of semantic cost-effectiveness. It is more cost-effective, on this view, for a language to contain expressions which are empty of semantic reference (but which do contain onymic reference) than for it to contain only those expressions which are interpretable solely by deducing the sum of their semantic entailments. ‘The evolutionary advantages’, writes Coates, ‘of a system allowing direct reference to individuals without needing to compute meaning in order to achieve reference, or simply to attract the addressee’s

<sup>1</sup> Capital letters here mean the term ‘precondition’ is used in an arbitrarily symbolic way which denotes absence of sense. See further Coates (this volume).