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Old English and Old Frisian[1]

Frederik Kortlandt

Rebecca Colleran's dissertation (2016) is an important contribution to our understanding of the earliest relations between Old English and Old Frisian. She points out that "Frisia's original population deserted Frisia almost entirely in the 4th century A.D. When Frisia was repopulated in the 5th century, it was settled by the same wave of Angles who were establishing a Germanic presence in Britain" (2016: 12). "The perfect similarity of the material culture and DNA in both places indicates that the same Germanic tribes settled both Britain and Frisia in the 5th century, proving that Anglo-Frisian existed both on the figurative level (the linguistic family tree) and the literal (the genetic family tree). […] Just as Frisia became depopulated in the 4th century, archaeology suggests that Angeln (now East Schleswig, Germany) experienced some level of depopulation in the 5th to 9th centuries, as Germanic people settled in England and Frisia. The archaeological remains in this part of northern Germany are similar to the ones found in Britain for the same time period" (Colleran 2016: 21). Moreover, "the Y-chromosome DNA in modern Frisia and from five locations across central England is statistically identical" (Colleran 2016: 23). Thus, the archaeological and genetic evidence supports the idea that English and Frisian have a common ancestor, appropriately called Anglo-Frisian, that was spoken in the northern part of Germany and spread westwards along the coast in the 5th century.

The large majority of historical linguists nowadays deny the existence of an Anglo-Frisian proto-language as a historical reality and maintain that there only was a linguistic continuum along the North Sea coast with gradual transitions between "Ingvaeonic" or "North Sea Germanic" dialects from which English, Frisian, Saxon and Dutch developed simultaneously in the course of time (e.g. Bremmer, Dal, Hogg, Markey, Stiles, Århammar, cf. Colleran 2016: 41f.; see Nielsen 1994 for earlier views). Colleran unequivocally supports the idea of an Anglo-Frisian proto-language. Her own contribution is the demonstration that the two languages shared the syntactic and semantic development of the verb *aga(n)* 'have' > 'have a right to' > 'have

1. On the occasion of Rebecca A.B. Colleran's dissertation *Keeping it in the family: Disentangling contact and inheritance in closely related languages* (University of Edinburgh, 2016). Link: https://www.academia.edu/33885956/Keeping_it_in_the_family_Disentangling_contact_and_inheritance_in_closely_related_languages.

as compensation' > 'have to pay' > 'have to'. Moreover, she has demonstrated that the Old Frisian "third infinitive", which is distinct from both the bare infinitive and the *to*-infinitive, shared the distribution of the Old English present participle, appearing in the complement of the same classes of matrix verbs, and that the two may have had the same form at an early stage. This is all very convincing.

According to Colleran, the main objection to Anglo-Frisian is "that no one has yet worked out a list of ordered sound changes for OE and OFris that everyone can agree on, in which all shared changes occur before any independent change" (2016: 43). The cause of this unfortunate state of affairs is that most scholars start from the wrong assumptions (cf. Kortlandt 2008). In my view, Anglo-Frisian can be defined as the variety of West Germanic where the reflex of **ē₁* is front in comparison with the reflex of **ai* whereas the converse holds for the German and Scandinavian languages (cf. also de Vaan 2011). This is because the retraction of Proto-Germanic **ē₁* [ǣ] to [ā] came to a halt by the monophthongization of **ai* to [ā] in Anglo-Frisian, but not in the other languages, where **ai* was fronted. It provided the motivation for the fronting of **a* to [æ] in Anglo-Frisian in accordance with Krupatkin's observation that "every time the initial shifts in the field of the long vowels raised similar transformations in the field of the short vowels" (1970: 63). The mistaken assumption that **ē₁* was retracted to **ā* in West Germanic and subsequently fronted to *ǣ* in Anglo-Frisian and again retracted to *ā* under certain conditions has confused many scholars. The correct establishment of a relative chronology requires a detailed examination of the separate developments and their interrelations. Both lumping geographically and chronologically distinct developments together and separating interconnected changes in a single linguistic system must be avoided.

There is no universal procedure that is generally applicable here. As Repanšek has pointed out (2012: 77f.), a common development must be called into question in the following instances:

- sporadicalness (vs. regularity) […],
- differences in the conditioning environment and/or the input,
- lack of occurrence in the same set of lexemes,
- absence of dialectal uniformity,
- occurrence in non-contiguous linguistic areas.

Some of these criteria may be applicable at the beginning and the end of a period of shared developments while few should apply in the middle.

An example of how not to proceed is Ringe's treatment (2013). The author gives two lists of changes allegedly in chronological order without supplying the necessary evidence. The listed items are largely underspecified and chronologically ambiguous and disconnected from the context of other developments. The text is full of speculations without references to the pertinent scholarly literature. Evidence from Celtic (e.g. on settlements) and other Indo-European languages (e.g. on case endings) is ignored. The conclusion of this sloppy and superficial article is that "an OE dialect is any dialect spoken by a member of the Germanic speaking community (in the broadest sense) in Britain − that is, any *native* speaker of a WGmc. dialect in Britain − *after* the period of initial settlement" (Ringe 2013: 138). Well, yes. OK.

In earlier studies I have argued that the early divergences between the Old English dialects are the result of a chronological difference between two waves of migration from the same dialectal area in northern Germany (cf. Kortlandt 2010: 259-284). I have argued that West Saxon has preserved two structural archaisms, viz. the nom.pl. ending of the *ō*-stems *-a* and the reflex *ǣ* of PIE **ē*, whereas Anglian has retained five accidental irregularities which are also found in Old Norse, Gothic or Old High German. Besides, Anglian differs from West Saxon as a result of seven innovations shared with continental West Germanic languages: the substitution of the acc.pl. ending of the *ō*-stems *-e* for the nom.pl. ending, the creation of a distinct accusative of the 1st and 2nd sg. personal pronouns, the creation of the 1st pl. possessive pronoun *ūsa*, the introduction of *e*-vocalism in the acc.sg. form of the masc. demonstrative pronoun, the creation of 1st sg. *beom* 'am', the spread of **waljan* to the paradigm of the verb 'will', and the raising of *ǣ* to *ē*. I therefore distinguished between an earlier, "Saxon" invasion which resulted in the conquest of Kent and Sussex in the fifth century and a later, "Anglian" invasion which can be connected with the subjugation of the north starting around the middle of the sixth century. Colleran incorrectly states that the first wave of migration settled in Frisia and northern England while the second wave settled in southern England and stemmed from a slightly different homeland, as a result of which the Saxon dialect of Old English was less similar to Old Frisian than the Anglian dialect (2016: 22 and 49). This is the opposite chronology of the one I have claimed. In my view, the Anglian dialect is closer to Old Frisian than the Saxon dialect of Old English because the latter reflects an older stage of Anglo-Frisian than Anglian and Frisian, which exhibit the shared innovations just mentioned that can be dated after the first wave of migration.

My theory is in accordance with the archaeological and genetic evidence (cf. Härke 2011: 6-10). It appears that the first (Saxon) migrants followed the river Thames from Kent to Oxfordshire in the early 5th century whereas "the great gateway by which the Angles penetrated into the north Midlands and Yorkshire was the estuary of the Humber" (Jackson 1953: 207). Both migrations started out from the region between the Elbe and the Weser (cf. Nielsen 1981: 265). The first migration started when "Germanic mercenaries were called in by the sub-Roman authorities and then rebelled against their employers", resulting in "ethnically divided communities and regions, with limited mixing and intermarriage between immigrants and natives" (Härke 2011: 10, 19). The second migration, which attracted incomers from other Germanic tribes, offers a different picture for "Northumbria, and more specifically Bernicia, where there was a noticeable Celtic contribution to art, culture and possibly socio-military organization" (Härke 2011: 17). It appears that the immigrants took over the institutions of the local population here. At the same time, or perhaps slightly later, there was a second wave of migration to Kent, where the new settlers adjusted to the earlier immigrants (cf. also Nicolay 2005: 75-78).

The establishment of a relative chronology requires a sequence of interrelated developments yielding an outcome that is preserved in the historical record. Every development gives rise to an isogloss between speakers who did and who did not share the development. Consequently, the number of linguistic varieties that once existed is of a different order of magnitude than the number of stages in a relative chronology, which only registers varieties that eventually survived the course of history. In the case of Anglo-Frisian we can identify an initial stage with developments that were partly shared with some of the neighboring German dialects, a formative stage with monophthongization of **ai* to *ā* and fronting of **a* to *æ*, followed by the early migration to southern England and continental Anglo-Frisian developments such as the raising of **ǣ* to *ē*, which did not reach Insular North Frisian, then followed by the second migration to Yorkshire and Kent, with development of breaking first in West Saxon and later in Anglian and Kentish, and finally a stage of independent developments in Old English (e.g. second palatalization, palatal diphthongization, *i*-umlaut) and Old Frisian (e.g. fronting of **ā* to *ǣ*, monophthongization of **au* to *ā*, *i*-umlaut, breaking). This relative chronology of course does not imply that every speaker in the area belonged to one of these stages, on the contrary: since every development created an isogloss, any number of speech variants may have existed. The claim is that every line of development that made it into

the historical record belongs to this relative chronology. The nice thing about it is its perfect concord with the textual, archaeological and genetic evidence.

Arjen Versloot has objected to my theory that the reflex [ǣ] of **ai* is found not only in Old Frisian but also in Kentish, where the earliest attestations have [ā] (2014: 35f.). This supports the idea that the Kentish migration was slightly later than the Anglian migration and after its initial phase shared the Frisian fronting of **ā* to *ǣ* (cf. Kortlandt 2008: 271). The relatively frequent occurrence of [ē] as the reflex of **ē₁* in Wessex (Versloot 2014: 37) suggests that there was no "early, possibly peaceful settlement of Saxons in Wessex" (thus Härke 2011: 10), which is improbable anyhow, but rather a late arrival of the Anglo-Saxons after the Kentish migration. Versloot's comparison of the reflexes of "late-mediaeval" [ā] from different sources in the modern dialects (2014: 39) only confuses the issues. There was no "steaming broth" (Stiles 1995: 207) from which the West Germanic daughter languages emerged. The Anglo-Frisian homeland on the coast of northern Germany was a typical "bottleneck" through which the migrants moved on their way to Frisia and Britain. Versloot's comparison with the dialect of Rome as the bottleneck through which all Romance languages went (2014: 44) is a mistake because the Romance languages do not directly continue the dialect of Rome and the oldest isoglosses between Italo-Western, Eastern and Southern Romance are located in Lucania, not in Rome (cf. Agard 1984: 250).

We must be grateful to Rebecca Colleran for opening a new path of research by introducing syntax and semantics in the discussion of the earliest relations between Old English and Old Frisian. Her study may serve as an example for other scholars who are interested in the syntactic and semantic history of closely related languages.

Leiden University
www.kortlandt.nl

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