BESPREK

[0877]Arjen P. Versloot, *Mechanisms of Language Change: Vowel Reduction in 15th Century West Frisian*. Utrecht (2008), LOT, 368 pp. ISBN 97890-78328-69-8.

Many years ago, the Old English scholar Bruce Mitchell posed the question as to why vowel reduction (to schwa, and thereafter in some cases in the same vowels, to zero) seemed to occur so readily in English, but so much less readily in German (Mitchell 1988:342). The fact that English, unlike German, became an SVO language is in Mitchell's (and others') view caused to a great extent by inflectional reduction and loss, which had been accelerated by patterns of invasion and subsequent settlement from Scandinavia: 'As a result, the inflexional endings (which differed from dialect to dialect) were confused and reduced so that they were no longer distinctive' (Mitchell 1988: 342).

Since 1988 there has of course been a great deal of work on the extent and distribution of inflectional loss in English, including the benchmark study that is Minkova (1991) and the recurrent worries found throughout volume 1 of the *Cambridge History of the English Language* (ed. Hogg, 1992). Recently, the same topic surfaces in eds. Denison et al. (2011 – see in particular the paper by Ritt in that volume): it is a hardy perennial of English historical linguistics.

For all the work and worry, there is no general agreement as to the cause of such radical inflectional reduction in English. An older view, represented in e.g. Strang (1970), is that what linguistic historians so often understand as the key period of inflectional loss in English (roughly 1200 to roughly 1600) is in fact the end-product of a process that began in England long before and whose origins can be traced to 10th century Northumbria; a further and still-current view is that inflectional loss in English is partly to be ascribed to the emergence of a creole form of Middle English (Poussa 1982). Generativists, on the other hand, analyse schwa loss (if they analyse it at all) as the spread of a particular kind of rule (or ordered set of rules), which spread eventually causes the reanalysis of the underlying structure of the language (Minkova 1991: 7); such accounts have the drawback of seeming shy about *why* a particular rule should spread, and also seem vulnerable in the light of work on phonological theory during the last twenty years, during which many theorists – and not just optimality theorists – have suggested that changes in underlying structure begin in the phenomena of 'performance' – of speech and how speech is perceived, see e.g. Ritt in eds. Denison et al 2011. To some extent this is a recapitulation of an older, Neogrammarian view of sound change - see also Versloot, this volume (13).

Since many historical linguistic theorists of English pay only cursory attention to inflectional reduction in other languages, Versloot's work provides a useful counter-focus, and perhaps a corrective. Structured into five main sections – *Intro-*

duction, Description of Processes, Phionological Interpretation, Late Mediaeval Frisian as a Tonal Language, and Modelling Language Change – Versloot attempts to show where, when and how inflectional reduction took place in mediaeval Frisian. It will not have escaped the reader that inflectional reduction in Frisian was taking place at almost exactly the same time, and in many of the same contexts, as were taking place in many varieties of English, i.e. in the period c.1200-c.1500 – which is one of the reasons why Versloot's work here provides such a useful focus on an apparently more general phonological phenomenon. Further, the work is innovative in its theoretical approach: it is the first full-length work known to me which models linguistic change within the framework of dynamic systems theory: '[t]his study considers language as a deterministic dynamic system, governed by self-organisation. Such systems can exhibit chaotic behaviour.' (14). In section 1.4., Versloot points out the rooting of such a theoretical model in work by de Boer (2005) and others, but is equally at pains to stress that 'self-deterministic' linguistic systems are not necessarily either 'efficient' or 'stable' in any long-term sense. Nor does the emergence of such systems depend on speaker intention, and therefore the model is in no sense teleological.

The disclaimer that dynamic linguistic systems are not 'efficient' is wise given the fact that so many apparently 'efficient' systems are so full of the residues of historical change. A linguistic example may be provided by e.g. the remnants of the grammatical gender system of present-day Dutch; a physical example may be provided by the human tonsils and appendix, neither of which apparently contribute to the 'efficiency' of the human organism, since both can be removed at no cost.

Where Versloot excels is in the background work which informs his study (which non-Dutch and non-Frisian readers will find particularly welcome, since they provide easy-to-follow maps of the extent of historical spoken (West) Frisian as well as clear time-frames (8)) as well as his scrupulous handling of the data, which is provided by a corpus of Frisian charters, city administration books and letters from the period before 1600 (Versloot, 15). In this context, the working through of examples such as Frisian *seke* 'case' is superb, giving charter number (from the digital edition), root form, ending, grammatical case, text in which the example is embedded, year of attestation, location of the charter, and whether the text is original or a copy.

Chapter 2 provides a description of the phonological contexts in which inflectional reduction in West Frisian occurred. The contexts include degemination, open syllable lengthening, vowel reduction, vowel balance and vowel harmony. As Versloot states (129), '[t]he reduction of…unstressed vowels is at the core of this study'. A key example is provided by the behaviour of unstressed Old Frisian /a/. This may exhibit different patterns of development according to the grammatical gender of the noun to which it was affixed and/or to the heavy or light nature of the root syllable. In *nama* 'name' for example, final unstressed [a] is retained as schwa in Modern Frisian (weak masculine noun, light root syllable > Modern Frisian *namme*), whereas strong feminines such as *seke* lose their final schwa. A particular-

ly interesting example is formed by *strête* (nom. and acc. sg.) and *strêta* (gen. and dat. sg.). Versloot points out (134) that the form *in der streeta* appears 41 times in the relevant charters, and adds that '[b]ecause the oblique form…was far more frequent, [it] formed the input for the modern form when the case system was abandoned in the late 15th century'. At the same time, there are also certain environments when final unstressed vowels were protected, such as (i) light initial root syllable, (ii) quality of the final consonant, and (iii) linguistic conservatism (most marked apparently in the south of Friesland - Versloot, 135).

Why, then, did things change? Versloot notes (in section 3) the presence of two interacting processes, *vowel balance* (whereby heavy root syllables cause syncope of short unstressed medial vowels in polysyllables or where heavy roots are preferably accompanied by short final vowels in disyllabic words) and *vowel harmony*, in which the vowel quality of a root syllable is harmonic with that of a final (inflectional) vowel – an example would be historical *seka* written <s<u>**a**</u>ck<u>**a**</u>> (Versloot, 193 – harmonic vowels are boldened and underlined). Such vowel harmonic processes were underway in Friesland in the Old, Middle and early Modern periods, though regressive vowel harmony (as in <sacka> above) must have ceased earlier than the early Modern period since the triggering vowel could only have been other than schwa.

This seems straightforward, but there are some puzzling oddities, e.g. those where syncope does not occur as expected: these surround the nature of unstressed vowel phonemes in words such as <swerren> (gerund of 'to swear') and <ker(r)en> (gerund of 'to choose'). These forms are *never* subject to syncope in their gerund forms (*<swern>) whereas in the past participle, syncope can occur (<swern, kern>, 'sworn, chosen'). Versloot here argues that two different phonemes may be distinguished: /a/ in the gerund (spelling <an>, pronunciation in schwa) and schwa in the participle (> syncope in the above examples, spelling schwa + <n> elsewhere).

To account for these and other oddities brings the reader to the most innovative aspect of Versloot's work: to account for the underlying persistence of /a/ in certain Frisian dialects, he posits the existence of a tone contour such that 'Old Frisian unstressed /a/ bore an extra phonetic marker: a pitch peak' (227). Exploring 'typological parallels' in North Germanic languages (notably Norwegian and Swedish, which have contrasting tone contours, see Versloot, 232ff.), Versloot comes to the conclusion that if Old Frisian patterns like its North Germanic cousins, then /a/ 'in a non-root syllable, bearing pitch accent, was probably not subject to syncope or apocope because it was stricto sensu not unstressed' (242).

This is ingenious. Nevertheless (a) why should Old Frisian have tonal contours which one would otherwise associate with North Germanic languages? Did the relevant tone contour survive from Proto-Frisian (and see Versloot, 235)? (b) did English, which was undergoing some of the same processes at more or less the same time, also have – did it inherit or adapt – a 'North Germanic' tonal contour operative in some dialects sufficient to preserve certain unstressed syllables (as

schwa), or are tonal effects and vowel reduction limited in geographical extent just to Friesland?

Chapter 5 of this work offers a theoretical perspective on modelling Frisian linguistic changes within a 'deterministic' frame: 'the reduction of unstressed vowels seems to be the result of features such as muscular motion and acoustics, obeying the laws of physics and the logarithmic ordering of human perception scales' (298). Versloot also provides a welcome reformulation of the Uniformitarian Hypothesis (298) before acknowledging that languages may be *internally* non-stable (example: the frequency of occurrence of non-regular plural morphemes) or subject to 'social instability' (301). In fact, '[f]or dynamic systems, the question is why (some aspects of) languages can remain stable over longer periods, rather than why languages change' (301) – a question with which it is good to end.

In summary, this is a thought-provoking, rich monograph, scrupulous in its handling of data and ingenious in its explanations. It is well-written and well-structured – the section summaries are particularly user-friendly – and I found very few typos (p5 'likes' for 'like', p299 fn164 'referneces' for 'references'). It is to be recommended to linguistic historians and those interested in exploring the limits of dynamic systems approaches in historical linguistics.

References

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