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Reviewed by Olga Fischer

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How this book came into being can be very nicely gathered from its dedication to two of the author’s students, “For Sue and René, whose fault this book is, whether or not they intended it”. It is a book that Roger Lass himself “felt a great need ... for” (p. xiii) when he was a student, and he hopes it will fill the need of today’s students when embarking on a language orientated course of Old English (OE). His love and interest in the subject and in his students is clear throughout the book in the care with which difficult linguistic theoretical constructs and assumptions are explained, in the lucidity of the language, and in the tone. The latter sometimes borders on the moralistic, especially when he crusades against “facile argument[s]” such as that “changes are ‘caused’ by the growth of morphological ambiguity” (p. 139). It is, to be sure, a great strength of the book that it does not fall for such arguments. Instead it presents the synchronic details of each stage (which, of course, are not always so clear when it comes to reconstructed stages) and makes suggestions about the possible causes that may have led to the situation present in the next stage, trying each time to highlight general linguistic and systemic factors at work. (Perhaps at times these general, systemic tendencies are emphasised too much, leading to some oversimplification. Usually, how-
ever, the reader is given adequate warning of this.) Clearly, the book tries to live up to the intention with which the cynical Williams is quoted (from Umberto Eco’s *The name of the rose*) on the first page: it is better to conceive a number of errors, than to believe fervently in only one, so that at least one avoids becoming enslaved by one.

Since the book was written as a guide for students, the first question a reviewer should ask is: how helpful is it to students; does it answer the kind of questions a student would be likely to ask? It does indeed answer most of the queries I myself had as a student, such as, what exactly Ablaut is (it gets a whole chapter to itself), why there are seven classes of strong verbs distinguished in OE, what the difference is between thematic and athematic nouns, what the exact phonological relation is between the various cognates given in etymological dictionaries etc, etc. It was only a few times that I felt more of an explanation could have been attempted, even if there is none. For instance on p. 51, Lass writes that “*Back Umlaut* (...) might just as well be called ‘breaking before vowels’.” If Breaking and Back Umlaut are indeed similar processes, why is it, a student might ask, that Back Umlaut occurs much later, affects only short vowels and is much less general both geographically, and linguistically in terms of its neighbouring sounds? Are backvowels less strong as ‘elements of backness’ than consonants, intrinsically or because they are, as in this case, further away? This is not answered. Another question my students always have (or rather a point of confusion) is whether there is any relation between ‘Anglo Frisian Brightening’, which affects the development of Wgmc short */æ/ in OE, discussed on p. 42, and the development of */æ/, from Wgmc long */æ:/, discussed on p. 65. Similarly, after reading this book, I am still intrigued why it is that causative verbs are formed from the *past singular* form of strong (non-causative) verbs (the process is discussed on p. 166).

But perhaps this is to ask too much. There are many ways in which the guide is extremely helpful. It does indeed, as the blurb promises, function as a bridge in more than one way. It bridges the gap between the elementary OE grammars used in most courses and the standard philological handbooks (such as Sievers, Luick, Campbell etc.), which are not always easily accessible to students, due to language problems (many of them are in German), unfamiliarity with the idiom or often just the ‘heaviness’ of the page. Helpful in this connection is the fact that in the discussion of particular sound changes or ‘laws’, the author does not only give the current English terms but also any
other (German) terms that have been or are still in use. At the same time there are copious references in footnotes to help the interested student along.

In addition, the book bridges a diachronic as well as a synchronic gap. Diachronically, it shows the Indo-European and Germanic background from which OE grew, clarifying why the system of OE is the way it is, why some structures can be captured by general rules whereas others must be seen as relics of an earlier system. Synchronically, much more attention than in the standard handbooks is paid to the interrelatedness of linguistic levels: between morphological systems and how they are affected phonologically, between morphology and syntax, and especially the relation between syllable structure and stress and developments in morphology and phonology. Another way in which the author stimulates the student is in his keenness to illustrate particular historical processes by means of processes in contemporary languages, encouraging the student to see the generality or systematicity of many such processes. Finally, helpful from a more technical point of view, is the extensive glossary and the tripartite index, consisting of names, subjects and OE words and affixes.

Historically, the book is divided into three parts. Part I, called the “Historical prelude”, deals with the Proto-Indo-European and Proto-Germanic background, it discusses what is known of the branches of the family-trees (sticking to the notion of ‘tree’ as a useful metaphor) and of their vowel and consonant systems. Via Grimm’s Law and Verner’s Law, we slowly arrive at Northwest Germanic, which is distinguished from Proto-Germanic by its own innovations such as e.g. the change of */e:/ to */a:/ and rhotacism. West Germanic, the more or less direct ancestor of OE, distinguishes itself in turn from North Germanic, the ancestor of the Scandinavian languages, by yet further changes such as gemination, the loss of final */z/ etc. The second part, the bulk of the book (this actually consists of three parts: phonology, morphophonemics, and morphology, lexis and syntax), deals with OE proper, with the evolution of its system from its Indo-European and Germanic roots. We will come back to this in more detail below. The third part, appropriately called by one of Lass’s typical neologisms “Historical postlude”, is very brief and shows the dissolution of the OE system: the disappearance of old and appearance of new diphthongs, quantity adjustment in both long and short vowels, and especially the collapse of weak vowels and its consequences for the morphological system.

The first two chapters in the OE part deal with phonology and supra-
segmentals. The chapter on phonology is the least innovative of the whole book since it duplicates to a large extent the well-known handbooks by Campbell (1959) and more recently Hogg (1992). Lass does pay special attention to some of the notorious problems in this area, where it is useful to get an overview of the various arguments that have been employed, such as the question of the short diphthongs, and whether ‘Palatal diphthongisation’ is a true sound change, or merely an orthographic innovation to indicate the palatal nature of the preceding consonant. In the first case, Lass opts for the majority view, i.e. that there were short diphthongs in OE, and he does that in a clear and convincing way. In the second case, he goes against established opinion by positing, rather strongly (is he here in danger of “becoming enslaved”? see above), that there is no such thing as palatal diphthongisation. He relies mainly on general arguments, such as a lack of “phonetic motivation”: “why should palatales diphthongize front vowels” (p. 79) (note that in the case of the short diphthongs it does not seem to matter that these are phonetically “odd” (p. 46)), and the occurrence of diacritic <e> in other environments such as OE geong. I do not find the latter a valid argument, however, since in geong there is a real need for the diacritic: normally before a backvowel the <g> would be pronounced as a velar plosive. It seems to me that this same argument could be more convincingly used to the opposite effect: the fact that <e> appears with front vowels, when there is no need for a diacritic at all, might quite strongly indicate that it is pronounced. The reader would be wise to check Hogg (1992: 106-121) on this occasion, which gives far more details than Lass’s account (and is to my mind more convincing). It is strange that Lass, who is otherwise quite copious with references, does not refer to Hogg here, who after all deals with the arguments given by the defenders of the ‘diacritic’ interpretation, who are referred to by Lass.

The chapter on suprasegmentals is of more interest because this area is usually not dealt with in the handbooks. It is also very important. Syllabic structure is a “layered” (p. 83) construct that rises above the simple linear structure of vowels and consonants. As such it can have enormous influence upon what happens to the sound segments. In this chapter, therefore, Lass is at pains especially to show how one affects the other. For instance, the development of a new Germanic Stress Rule (where the account does not follow the new idea of /VC/ being a heavy syllable, posited e.g. by Dresher & Lahiri (1991) and Minkova & Stockwell (1994)) is closely linked to developments in weak syllables, such as the loss of final consonants and the reduction of
vowels (which, of course, in turn affect the morphology, as shown in chapters 6 and 7). Other changes are presented as the result of a combination of a weak syllable and the total weight of the foot, that is, certain weak vowels only disappeared after a ‘heavy’ root syllable (i.e. */VV(C)/ or */VCC/), which accounts for the difference between OE *deid ‘deed’ from earlier *δα:δ-ι and wine ‘friend’ from *win-i, and cf. also hier-de ‘heard’ vs ner-e-de ‘saved’.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 deal with Ablaut and inflexional morphology. In the Ablaut chapter, Lass discusses in great detail the structure of the IE root, especially in what way the discovery of the Hittite ‘laryngeals’ has altered ideas about IE syllable structure. The chapters on morphology show the systematicity of OE inflexions from a diachronic (IE) point of view. We are also given a clear explanation of the differences between ‘root’, ‘theme’ and ‘ending’, and the changes that take place here in OE.

Chapter 8 treats vocabulary and word-formation. I found this chapter less informative than the preceding ones, but this is mainly because the earlier chapters have ‘preempted’ much of what is discussed here (such as the role played by Ablaut to form new words), and also, I think, because lists of loanwords and words illustrating particular word-formation types are never very exciting. But there is some useful discussion on the problem of recognising and dating loanwords with the help of phonological changes that have taken place in both the receiving and the donor language, and on the question of the productivity of word-formation processes.

The last chapter in the OE section deals with topics in syntax: word order and case. This chapter is short because syntax is notoriously much less easy to reconstruct than phonological and morphological structure, since, as the author makes clear, we are dealing with underlying not with surface structures. Another reason is that syntax does not really have the author’s interest, as he openly admits (p. xvi and p. 217, note 1). The two topics are treated carefully but, to my mind, rather minimally, without the ‘excitement’ that pervades many of the earlier chapters. As far as word order is concerned, it is clear that the author has not absorbed some of the very interesting generative literature. He does not discuss, for instance, the relation between clitic status and the position of pronominal subjects, objects and prepositional objects. This was one of the important findings of van Kemenade’s thesis (1987), which accounts for a great deal of regularity in OE word order. (He does mention this book but only with reference to case, not word order. In spite of its title, the thesis is mainly on word order, and hardly on the sort of case that Lass talks about here.) Nor does he refer on p. 224 to the relation between the
rule of Verb-second and the presence of material in COMP that generative scholars have shown to exist, accounting for the distribution of OV and VO in subordinate and main clauses respectively.

There are, as far as I can see, few mistakes or misprints in the book. There is a reference to § 7.1.3 on p. 26 which does not exist; there is an incorrect, potentially confusing, abbreviation on p. 38: OFr instead of OFri; on p. 54, a second (ii) should be (iii). Quite a few things have gone wrong with the references to articles by Minkova and Stockwell (compare p. 223, note 11; p. 228, note 14 and the references), in addition to some other sloppiness in the references such as slightly altered titles, reversed authors etc. There were some things that I found strange or unclear, such as the remark on p. 29 that OE had no phonemic glottal fricative /h/; and on p. 59 that harmonic processes become marginal after the tenth or eleventh century in English. What does ‘harmonic’ mean? Aren’t processes like ME vowel-lengthening/shortening essentially harmonic too? At another place there is confusion about the term ‘theme’. Having used this all the time the author suddenly introduces the term ‘stem-formative’ (p. 166; not as such in the glossary), which according to the glossary entry under stem is the same as ‘theme’, but the term ‘formative’ is also used for theme + ending on the same page. But these are only minor details. The book clearly fulfills its purpose as a student’s guide leading towards a deeper understanding of the origins and systematicity of OE linguistic structures, especially as far as its phonology and morphology are concerned.

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REFERENCES

Reviews


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Reviewed by Ken Turner
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There are very many interesting questions in contemporary philosophy of language. One has to do with the nature of semantics, the nature of pragmatics, and the character of the interface between the two. A second has to do with the nature of intensions, the nature of extensions, and the character of the interface between the two. A third has to do with the nature of *de dicto* interpretations in intensional contexts, the nature of *de re* interpretations in intensional contexts, and the character of the interface between the two. The following diagram may be of some use in positioning the issues:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>&quot;meaning&quot;</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>semantics</td>
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<td>intensions</td>
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<td>de re</td>
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<td>extensions</td>
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</tbody>
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A fourth interesting issue has to do with the allegation that ‘[i]ntensions are creatures of darkness’ (Quine 1976, 188) and that ‘[w]histling in the dark is not the method of true philosophy’ (Quine 1960, 207). These allegations lead to the attempt to solve the problems that intensions were originally introduced