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Primary and non-primary *i*-umlaut in (pre-)Old English?

The traditional accounts of *i*-umlaut treat it as a single process affecting all target vowels simultaneously. In the case of Old High German (OHG), the apparent chronological gap between "primary" umlaut of /a/ and "nonprimary" umlaut of all nonfront vowels (including /a/ in those consonantal environments where primary umlaut is blocked) has been explained in terms of phonologisation: the umlauted vowels are not phonologised until the loss or depalatalisation of the triggers in the later period of OHG; primary umlaut is orthographically visible at an earlier stage only because the umlaut allophone [ɛ] merges with inherited /e/ (Twaddell 1938). More recently, Iverson and Salmons have argued that the chronological division between primary and nonprimary umlaut is real, and is phonetically motivated (Iverson and Salmons 1996, 2003, 2004; Salmons 2007).

Detailed synchronic description of OHG *i*-umlaut is possible because the process appears to take place during the period of manuscript production. In Old English (OE), however, *i*-umlaut is regarded as a "prehistoric" sound change, with the umlauted vowels having been phonologised prior to the earliest records. Handbook descriptions of the process follow the structuralist assumption that it occurs as a single event (Campbell 1959:§§190-192; Hogg 2011 [1992]:§§5.74-5.86); there is no suggestion of any division parallel to that in OHG. If, as Iverson and Salmons propose, the distinction between primary and nonprimary umlaut in OHG is motivated by general phonetic principles, then it would be reasonable to hypothesise that *i*-umlaut in the other Germanic languages might conform to a similar pattern. To test this hypothesis for OE, we must take the earliest available data into consideration.

Although the absolute and relative chronology of (pre-)OE *i*-umlaut have been much debated, the debate typically relies on reconstruction and inference from documents created in the main period of OE writing; linguistic data from the early Anglo-Saxon period (prior to c.700 AD) receives little or no attention. The corpus of material is small and presents many problems to interpretation; nonetheless, this paper will suggest that contemporary data should be given greater prominence in any study of Germanic dialects spoken in Britain during the early Anglo-Saxon period. Attending more closely to this material can help us to refine our understanding of how *i*-umlaut developed during this early period, and – perhaps more importantly – to address some of the methodological questions arising from the tension between idealised reconstructions and the observable realities of a problematic dataset.

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