

Old High German ‘dialect mixing’

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Using the present to understand the past and drawing on evidence of contemporary ‘dialect mixing’ (Evans et al. 2013), this paper grounds ‘dialect mixing’ in Old High German (OHG) texts in the sociolinguistic setting in which the texts were produced. Many OHG texts show disparate regional features, mixing from distinct OHG dialects or mixing of OHG with elements of other West Germanic languages, like Old Saxon. The Wessobrunner Gebet, for instance, is clearly Bavarian but the poem opens with the apparently Old Saxon *dat* ‘that’ and has an Anglo-Saxon rune for *ga*. The Hildebrandslied includes Old Saxon forms next to unambiguously southern forms. On explanations of such patterns, Bostock (1976:78) concludes: “The efforts of scholars to devise a scheme of evolution which would afford a logical explanation of all the details have led to elaborate constructions, some of which reflect more credit on the ingenuity than on the common sense of their authors.” A major feature of most accounts is that much blame goes to scribal (mis-) copying, a story without clear independent support.

Evidence on the contexts in which these languages and dialects were acquired and used is sparse, but it provides glimpses, as three examples show. First, Carolingian writing culture involved migration of scribes, to the point that written monastery dialects sometimes did not match local dialects and changed over time (Braune/Reiffenstein 2004:5). Second, McKitterick (1989) shows not only changing regional distributions of scribal activity, but also surprising social diversity among scribes, especially lay vs. clergy, cloistered or not. Finally, monastery culture itself shaped the linguistic competence of scribes, who often came into schools at age 7-8 and so went through their periods of ‘vernacular reorganization’ (D’Arcy 2014) in communities where solidarity was stressed by principles like ‘obedience’ and ‘labor’. This suggests a situation not unlike those that lead to ‘new dialect’ formation (Trudgill 2010).

All this strongly suggests that monasteries and scriptoria provided environments rich in linguistic variation. Authors and scribes were exposed to diversity in speech and likely in writing. We should therefore EXPECT the attested patterns of dialect mixing.

References

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