Old English

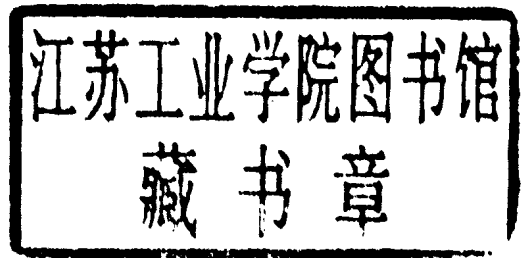## A LINGUISTIC INTRODUCTION

Jeremy J. Smith

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A Linguistic Introduction

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Preface

This book is designed for the use of undergraduate and postgraduate students who wish to understand the linguistic structure of Old English. It is designed as a bridge between elementary primers (e.g. Hough and Corbett 2006, Hogg 2002, the OE sections of Smith 2005, and classic and still useful outlines such as Sweet/Davis 1953) and more advanced discursive works (e.g. Lass 1994) and OE grammars (e.g. Campbell 1959, Hogg 1992). I envisage the book being used, at a fairly early stage, as part of a general programme in English historical linguistics or (it is hoped) wider Germanic philology.

This book was commissioned some time ago, and since I undertook it other publications have appeared which cover some of the same ground. Perhaps the most important of these, and certainly the best, is McCully and Hilles 2005, which is designed with a similar audience in mind. However, I see my book as complementary to such works; it derives its orientation from 'traditional' philology (though drawing, of course, on more recent scholarship), and it is laid out as a resource rather than in units. Although, happily, old antagonisms between traditional approaches and more 'modern' linguistics are now receding, there is maybe a place for an approach which tries to synthesise long-established and more recent scholarship, accessible to scholars of both backgrounds.

Materials in this book derive from courses I have taught in English historical linguistics over the last twenty years, and I am most grateful to undergraduate and postgraduate students and colleagues who have used and commented on them. In particular, I am grateful to Simon Horobin, who read through the first draft of the book and made many suggestions for improvements. I am also very grateful to Helen Barton of Cambridge University Press, for her tolerance and understanding in putting up with a dilatory and distracted author, to Rosina Di Marzo, to Jill Lake for her skilful and tactful copy-editing, and to Philip Riley for his meticulous proofreading.

<div align="right">Jeremy Smith</div>

Notations and Conventions

EModE	Early Modern English
EWS	Early West Saxon
IPA	International Phonetic Association
LWS	Late West Saxon
ME	Middle English
ModE	Modern English
OE	Old English
PDE	Present-Day English
<..>	graphemic transcription
<<..>>	allographic/graphetic transcription
/../	phonemic transcription
[..]	allophonic/phonetic transcription
>	goes to, becomes, is realised as
<	comes from
$	syllable boundary
#	morpheme boundary
Ø	zero
/	in the environment: X > Y/A_B = 'X becomes Y in the environment of a preceding A and a following B, i.e. AXB becomes AYB.'
V	vowel
C	consonant
:	indicates full length of preceding vowel (i.e. long vowel)
ˈ	main accentual stress or pitch prominence on following syllable

In the following list of phonetic symbols, based on those used by the International Phonetic Association, pronunciations are as in 'Received Pronunciation' (RP), the prestigious accent used in England, 'General American' (GenAm), the reference accent commonly used for US English, or sometimes 'Standard Scottish English' (SSE), the prestigious accent used in Scotland. Occasionally reference is made to other languages, e.g. French, German. For a full account of IPA usage, see the *Handbook of the International Phonetic Association* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

a   front open unrounded vowel, as in C<u>A</u>T (RP, GenAm, SSE)

æ   front unrounded vowel between open and mid-open, as in some RP pronunciations of C<u>A</u>T

ɑ   back unrounded vowel, as in B<u>A</u>TH (RP), P<u>A</u>LM (GenAm)

ɒ   back rounded vowel, as in CL<u>O</u>TH (RP)

b   voiced bilabial plosive, as in <u>B</u>EE

β   voiceless bilabial fricative, as in BLA<u>V</u>A 'blue' (Catalan)

ç   voiceless palatal fricative, as in I<u>CH</u> 'I' (German)

ɔ   back mid-open rounded vowel, as in TH<u>OUGH</u>T (RP, GenAm)

d   voiced alveolar plosive, as in <u>D</u>EEP

ð   voiced dental fricative, as in <u>TH</u>OSE

e   front mid-close unrounded vowel, as in F<u>A</u>CE (SSE)

ɜ   unrounded central vowel, as in N<u>UR</u>SE (RP), N<u>UR</u>SE (GenAm)

ɛ   front mid-open unrounded vowel, as in DR<u>E</u>SS (GenAm), P<u>È</u>RE (French)

f   voiceless labio-dental fricative, as in <u>F</u>EE

g   voiced velar plosive, as in <u>G</u>OAT

h   voiceless glottal fricative, as in <u>H</u>OT

i   front close unrounded vowel, as in FL<u>EE</u>CE (RP, GenAm)

ɪ   centralised unrounded mid-close vowel, as in K<u>I</u>T (RP, GenAm)

j   palatal unrounded semi-vowel, as in <u>Y</u>ACHT

k   voiceless velar plosive, as in <u>C</u>LOTH

l   voiced alveolar lateral continuant, as in <u>L</u>OT

ɫ   voiced alveolar lateral continuant with velarisation, as in I<u>LL</u> (RP)

m   voiced bilabial nasal, as in <u>M</u>OUTH

n   voiced alveolar nasal, as in <u>N</u>URSE

ŋ   voiced velar nasal, and in THI<u>NG</u> (RP)

o   back mid-close rounded vowel, as in G<u>O</u>AT (GenAm, SSE)

ø   front mid-close rounded vowel, as in P<u>EU</u> 'few' (French)

œ   front mid-open rounded vowel, as in P<u>EU</u>R 'fear' (French)

θ   voiceless dental fricative, as in <u>TH</u>ING

p   voiceless bilabial plosive, as in <u>P</u>ALM

r   voiced alveolar trill, as in <u>R</u>ED (SSE)

s   voiceless alveolar fricative, as in <u>S</u>ING

ʃ   voiceless palato-alveolar fricative, as in <u>SH</u>IP

t   voiceless alveolar plosive, as in <u>T</u>AP

u   back close rounded vowel, as in G<u>OO</u>SE

ʊ   centralised rounded mid-close vowel, as in F<u>OO</u>T (RP, GenAm)

v   voiced labio-dental fricative, as in <u>V</u>IEW

ʌ   back mid-open unrounded vowel, as in STR<u>U</u>T (RP, GenAm)

w   labial-velar semi-vowel, as in <u>W</u>EATHER

ʍ   voiceless labial-velar fricative, as in <u>WH</u>ETHER (SSE)

x   voiceless velar fricative, as in LO<u>CH</u> (SSE)
y   front close rounded vowel, as in T<u>U</u> 'you (sg)' (French)
ʏ   centralised rounded mid-close vowel, as in F<u>OO</u>T (SSE)
ɣ   voiced velar fricative, as in AU<u>G</u>E 'eye' (German)
ʒ   voiced palato-alveolar fricative, as in MEA<u>S</u>URE
z   voiced alveolar plosive, as in <u>Z</u>OO

Contents

Figures

About Old English

In this chapter ...

This chapter explains the purpose of this book, and how to use it. We look at the origins of Old English and how it developed from its ancestor, Proto-Germanic. We also look at the evidence for Old English, which derives for the most part from Anglo-Saxon manuscripts.

Contents

1.1 The purpose of this book

This book is intended for undergraduate students, and some postgraduates, who are working on the history of the English language and/or Old English literature and who wish to develop a comprehensive understanding of the language of the Anglo-Saxons, i.e. *Old English* (hence OE), enabling them to proceed to more advanced study in English historical linguistics.

There are many excellent modern introductory books on OE, but most focus on the material needed for a basic literary understanding of the poetry and prose of the period, or have other limited goals. This book is rather different, and is designed to complement such approaches: it is designed to equip students with a secure grasp of OE linguistic structure. It is hoped that students who work through this book will not only have acquired an understanding of the basic features of OE but also will be able to engage with some of the fascinating textual and linguistic problems with which this form of English presents us.

1.2 How to use this book

There is no single correct way to use this book. Most readers will probably be studying with teachers, all of whom will have their own ideas about what is appropriate for their own institution. However, some readers will be working on their own, and for them suggestions for further reading are offered as part of *Appendix 2*, at the back of the book.

It is envisaged that most students will be using the book alongside a collection of OE texts, moving between text and discussion; it is important that anyone seeking to understand how OE works linguistically should spend a good deal of time reading OE. A small collection of illustrative texts, many of them not often printed in standard readers, has been included as *Appendix 1*.

This book is organised as follows. In chapter 1 I give a broad-brush account of OE: its historical setting and how we know about it. Chapter 2 provides an outline of linguistic terminology used generally in the book, applicable both to OE and to Present-Day English (PDE), and chapter 3 gives a detailed linguistic analysis of a series of short OE texts. The student who has worked through these three chapters will have acquired a basic understanding of OE structure.

From chapter 4 onwards these linguistic characteristics are studied in much greater depth, in terms of *levels of language*, namely *meaning* (*semantics*), *lexicon*, *grammar*, and *transmission* (*speech* and *writing*). These levels of language are related as follows: meaning is expressed through the lexicon and grammar of a language; the lexicon (vocabulary) of a language is made up of the words it uses; the grammar of a language is to do with how words are put together (its *morphology*) or relate to one another (its *syntax*). In turn, the grammar and lexicon of a language are transmitted from speaker to speaker primarily through speech, and secondarily – a comparatively recent development – through writing. Chapter 4 deals with spellings and sounds, chapter 5 with the lexicon, chapter 6 with syntax, and chapter 7 with inflexional morphology.

The various levels of language are presented in two ways in these four chapters. First, they are described *synchronically*; that is, the systemic features (or *rules*) of the language are described with reference to a particular point in time and space. The form of OE which is described in this way is that which is traditionally dated to the time of Alfred, King of Wessex, i.e. Early West Saxon (EWS) of the ninth century AD; this form of the language is adopted as a convenient reference-point for later use. Second, this EWS usage is placed in relation to two contexts: *diachronic* ('through time'), in which it is compared to earlier and later states of the language, including earlier

2

varieties of Germanic, and *diatopic* ('through space'), that is, in relation to forms of OE from other parts of the country.

It is important to realise that the adoption of EWS as a reference-point is a matter of convenience for modern readers. As we shall see, OE has come down to us in many forms; indeed most material survives in that variety known as Late West Saxon (LWS), whose relationship with EWS is not straightforward. However, the adoption of EWS as a point of departure for description gives a reference-point for further study. The student who has worked through these chapters should have a broader grasp of OE, sufficient to engage with advanced topics in English historical linguistics.

The book finishes with a number of resources to support the reader's learning. *Appendix 1* offers a selection of texts, some of which are discussed in the course of the book, but all of which will repay close study. *Appendix 2* poses some general discussion questions to work on, and a substantial 'further reading' section to enhance all areas of study covered in the book. A *Glossary of Old English–Present-Day English*, a *Glossary of Key Terms*, *References* and a thematic *Index* complete this section.

1.3 The origins of English

The English language belongs to a large family of related languages whose native speakers now occupy wide swathes of the world, notably Europe, the Indian sub-continent and the Americas: the *Indo-European language-family*. Other modern Indo-European languages include, for example, Russian, Hindi, Albanian, French, German and Scottish Gaelic. All Indo-European languages descend from a common ancestor, *Proto-Indo-European*, which – some scholars argue, controversially – was spoken in what are now the steppes of southern Russia and the Ukraine, perhaps in the fourth or third millennium BC.

One group of Indo-European languages, the *Germanic* languages, emerged in the first millennium BC in northern Europe. The speakers of what were to become the Germanic languages seem to have originated, possibly in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, in what has been referred to as 'that bottleneck of the Baltic which is constituted by present-day Denmark and southern Sweden' (Haugen 1976: 100). In the sixth century AD, the writer Jordanes, probably himself of Germanic origin, though writing in Latin, referred to Scandinavia as *vagina gentium*, 'a womb of peoples', and this description – if extended to the north of Germany between the rivers Weser and Oder – seems to be an accurate one, even though it should be recognised that Jordanes was referring to events which took place perhaps a thousand years before he was born.

From this area of origin the Germanic peoples spread south and east; their migration to the west was constrained by resistance from first the Celtic peoples and subsequently the Roman Empire. Antagonism between the Germanic peoples and the other groups they encountered was not consistent, warfare alternating with more peaceful contacts through trade and other forms of cultural exchange. Towards the end of the imperial period, the Romans took to hiring large numbers of Germanic mercenaries as auxiliary troops; many of the great generals of the late Roman period, such as Stilicho, were of Germanic origin.

The language spoken by the first identifiable Germanic peoples was *Proto-Germanic*, which is the presumed common ancestor of all the modern Germanic languages. Proto-Germanic, like all natural languages, cannot have been homogeneous, and it is likely that the differences between its dialects – which subsequently developed into distinct languages – were present from the outset. Records of Proto-Germanic do not survive. This proto-variety itself eventually split into three further groups, commonly referred to as *East*, *North* and *West Germanic*. Most modern scholars are of the opinion that an initial split led to the emergence of two proto-languages, *Proto-East Germanic* on the one hand, and *Proto-North-West Germanic* on the other. Subsequently, it is held that two further proto-languages emerged from the latter: *Proto-North Germanic*, the common ancestor of Present-Day Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, Icelandic and Faroese, and *Proto-West Germanic*, the common ancestor of Present-Day German, Dutch, Frisian, Afrikaans and English.

It is usually held that English emerged from the other Germanic usages in the first three centuries AD, deriving from a group of dialects on the shores of the North Sea with common characteristics distinct from the other West Germanic usages. It is usual to refer to this group of dialects either as *North Sea Germanic* or as *Ingvaeonic*, the latter being derived from the Roman term for the tribes who lived along the North Sea coasts. There is considerable controversy about what is meant by an Ingvaeonic language; most scholars hold that core Ingvaeonic languages are English and Frisian, with Old Saxon as another possible – if peripheral – member of the group.

A diagram illustrating the relationship between the principal varieties of Indo-European, and of the Germanic languages in relation to those varieties, appears as Figure 1.1. The lines which connect the various nodes summarise periods of considerable complexity, representing times when different languages were in the process of divergence; whereas the nodes represent *proto-languages*, the lines represent *pre-languages*. Thus, for instance, we might refer to Proto-Germanic (a node) as a common ancestor of the Germanic languages, but we might refer to *pre-English* when we wish to
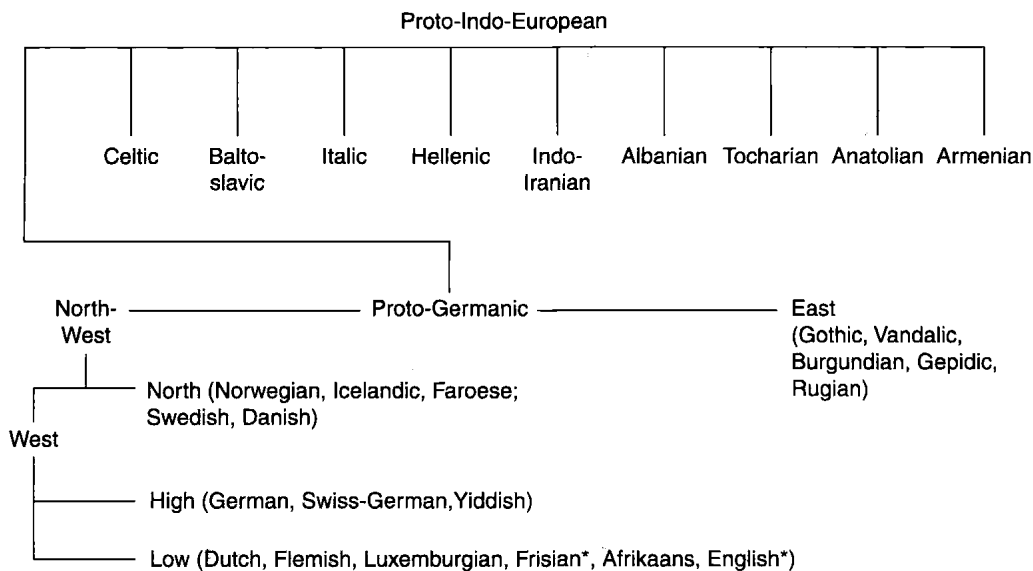
Proto-Indo-European

Figure 1.1 The Indo-European family of languages, with special reference to Germanic

refer to the period of divergence which resulted in the appearance of what may reasonably be considered a language distinct from other varieties of Germanic.

Varieties of West Germanic were brought to Britain in the fifth century AD by the Angles and Saxons, invaders from what are now northern Germany and southern Denmark. These tribes took over from the retreating Roman Empire; the varieties they spoke combined to create a new language, OE. OE was eventually used over much of the old Roman province, from the English Channel into what are now the Lowlands of Scotland.

The Anglo-Saxons displaced the earlier inhabitants of Britain, the Romano-Britons. These people, who formed the bulk of the population of Roman Britain, spoke British, a variety of another Indo-European language-family known as Celtic; a descendant of British, Welsh, is now spoken only in the western part of the British mainland. Other varieties of Celtic, such as Scottish Gaelic, developed in the northern parts of Britain; Irish Gaelic emerged in Ireland.

The English of the period between the invasion of the Angles and Saxons (sometimes known as the *Adventus Saxonum*) and the Norman Conquest of 1066 AD is generally referred to as *Old English* (OE). OE is also sometimes referred to as *Anglo-Saxon* after the peoples who used it, though this term is used comparatively rarely by modern scholars.

OE is the earliest form of English. It may be distinguished from *Middle English* (ME), the form of the language spoken and written after *c.* 1100, and from *Modern English* (ModE), which is the term used to refer to English after

5

c.1500, including *Present-Day English* (PDE). The OE period thus corresponds roughly to the period between the arrival of Germanic tribes in Britain in the middle of the fifth century AD and the Norman Conquest of 1066, though OE texts continued to be copied after 1066.

Since OE is closer in date to Proto-West Germanic than is PDE, it is, as we shall see, rather more like other West Germanic varieties. Contact with other languages from the end of the OE period onwards, notably with Old Norse (the language of the Viking invaders, early varieties of Norwegian and Danish) and with varieties of French, affected the history of English in a profound way, and caused it to diverge markedly from the other West Germanic languages.

Of course, it is important to realise that these transitions were gradual ones. OE gradually emerged, in Britain, through the interaction of West Germanic varieties spoken by the invaders. And OE did not become ME on the day that William the Conqueror landed; Anglo-Saxon texts continued to be copied, in a form of English which is recognisably OE, for at least a century after 1066. But it is generally accepted that there are certain common characteristics of OE which distinguish it from other language-states. The purpose of this book is to equip readers with an understanding of these common characteristics, enabling them to engage with more advanced work in English historical linguistics in general and in OE studies in particular.

1.4 Evidence for Old English

How has this material come down to us? Primarily, we depend on the (comparatively) fragmentary written records which have survived. A small amount of written OE survives in inscriptions carved on stone, metal and bone. This material includes some of the oldest texts known to us, for example, the phrases and short poem carved on the tiny *Franks Casket*, dating from the eighth century AD, which may be seen in the British Museum, or the poem carved on the massive stone *Ruthwell Cross*, which may still be seen near where it was erected, probably in the seventh/eighth century AD, overlooking the Solway Firth in what are now the Scottish Borders. Both the Ruthwell Cross and Franks Casket inscriptions were made in *runes*, an alternative to the Latin alphabet which was used for both ritual and more mundane communication in several varieties of Germanic.

However, most OE has come down to us in manuscripts, written by scribes on pieces of prepared skin known as parchment (see Ker 1957 for details, and Roberts 2005 for lavish illustrations). Some of these manuscripts, such as charters and other documents, consist of single sheets of

parchment; other manuscripts form *codices*, or manuscript books. OE *prose* is fairly well attested, though many texts were copied at the very end of the period and in the two centuries immediately after the Norman Conquest. Major texts include *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which seems to have been begun in the ninth century and which survives in several copies, including a famous version made after the Conquest (the *Peterborough Chronicle*), and the prose sermons of Ælfric and Wulfstan, which date from the end of the Anglo-Saxon period and which continued to be copied and plagiarised by scribes well into the twelfth century. Almost all OE *poetry*, however, survives in just four major manuscripts dating from the end of the tenth century: *The Exeter Book* (which has been at Exeter Cathedral since Anglo-Saxon times), *The Vercelli Book* (which was left at a north Italian monastery, probably by an Anglo-Saxon pilgrim travelling to Rome, some time in the eleventh century), *The Junius Manuscript*, now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, and *The Beowulf Manuscript*, now in the British Library in London.

It will be clear from this account that the direct evidence for OE is partial. The texts are few in comparison with those which survive from later in the history of the language, illustrating the usages of a few regional centres at a few points during the six centuries of the Anglo-Saxon period. Moreover – of course – no direct evidence exists for a whole level of language: speech. There are, obviously, no sound-recordings from the OE period, and scholars can only reconstruct the speech-patterns of the Anglo-Saxon period by the forensic analysis of these writings – the commonly used term is *witnesses*, an apt analogy – and by means of the method known as *linguistic recon-struction*, drawing upon the evidence of later states of the language and making comparisons with other languages.

Linguistic reconstruction was developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for the purposes of recovering the prehistory of languages. Sir William Jones (1746–1794) and others noticed the similarities between languages such as Sanskrit, Latin and English, and deduced that these similarities came from a common ancestor which had not been recorded in written form. Reconstruction of this common ancestor depends on the analysis of such similarities. Reconstruction also enables scholars to go beyond the evidence supplied by the (frequently) fragmentary pieces of primary sources of old languages or of older forms of languages to offer more comprehensive descriptions.

Linguistic reconstruction involves two procedures: *comparative* and *internal* reconstruction. Comparative reconstruction involves, as its name suggests, comparing distinct languages, or varieties of the same language, in order to work out the structure of the common ancestor language or variety. Internal reconstruction involves analysing what is termed *paradigmatic variation* within a single language or variety.

The two procedures are complementary, and can be illustrated from the history of English and related Germanic dialects. In OE, the verb **cēosan** 'choose' (infinitive) has the following 'principal parts', from which all other parts of the '*paradigm*' of the verb can be generated: **cēas** (3rd person preterite singular), **curon** (preterite plural), **(ge)coren** (past participle). As is suggested by the PDE pronunciation, c in **cēosan** was pronounced [tʃ] in OE; however, the evidence also suggests that c was pronounced as [k] in **curon**, **(ge)coren**. Internal reconstruction would suggest that [k] and [tʃ] in these words go back to a common ancestor. The evidence of other items in OE suggests that this common ancestor was [k].

This suggestion is supported if the complementary approach, comparative reconstruction, is used. In comparative terms, OE is closely related to other Germanic languages for which written records survive, such as Old Norse and Gothic, which are regarded as *cognate* languages (the word 'cognate' derives from Latin **cognātus**, literally 'born together'); thus OE, Old Norse and Gothic are seen as deriving from a common ancestor, and closely related. The Old Norse cognate form for **cēosan** is **kjōsa**, and the Gothic cognate is **kiusan**, and in both cases the evidence suggests that k was pronounced [k]. It seems likely, therefore, that [tʃ] in **cēosan** is an innovation in OE, derived from an earlier *[k] (it is conventional to flag reconstructed forms with an asterisk, *).[1]

Linguistic reconstruction was one of the great intellectual advances of the nineteenth century, relating to similar developments in, for example, textual criticism of the Bible and (most spectacularly) the Darwinian insights as to the origin of species, and it has shown its value for historians of the language on numerous occasions. But it is important to be aware of its limitations. The reconstructed form *[k] is of course an abstraction; we have no historically attested information as to how precisely it was pronounced, as we have for present-day languages using the equipment of a modern phonetics laboratory. Thus it is not possible, using reconstruction, to be absolutely certain as to what this reconstructed form sounded like. A pronunciation [k] is therefore a 'reasonable hypothesis' rather than an absolutely proven fact.

Moreover, the whole process of reconstruction depends on the adoption of a particular model of linguistic evolution: the so-called *tree-model*, whereby cognate languages and forms descend from a common ancestor. Such diagrams are useful, but their limitations need to be recognised. The tree-model is a nineteenth-century invention, clearly relating to the phylogenetic tree of biological evolution. However, linguistic evolution differs from biological evolution in that languages and varieties can acquire characteristics through contact with other languages and varieties, e.g. so-called *borrowing* of vocabulary; and this fact makes the tree-model problematic.