

Book Review

Olga Timofeeva. 2022. *Sociolinguistic variation in Old English: Records of communities of people* (Advances in historical sociolinguistics 13). Amsterdam: John Benjamins. ISBN: 9789027211347 (hardcover), xv, 204 pp. €99.00/\$149.00.

Reviewed by **Christine Wallis**, School of English, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK,
E-mail: c.wallis@sheffield.ac.uk

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jhsl-2022-0026>

Historical sociolinguistic enquiry into Old English is not a straightforward task, and compared with later periods of English, rather less research has been undertaken on the English of that period. There are several reasons for this difficulty, from the vagaries of textual survival to the restriction of literacy to a small ecclesiastical elite. Moreover, we have no ego documents; the vast majority of texts are anonymous, and in very many cases what survives consists of copies of manuscripts, rather than autographs by an author. To an extent, this situation results in the surviving data from the period being less amenable to historical sociolinguistic enquiry than documents from other periods. That is not to say that such “bad data” cannot be interrogated using historical sociolinguistic methods. It is a challenge which requires a good knowledge of the material and its circumstances of production in order to see how it can best be interrogated (Labov 1994: 11). Previous studies have demonstrated the successful implementation of sociolinguistic approaches, investigating the role of networks in the Benedictine Reform (Lenker 2000), the development of ‘Winchester vocabulary’ among this group and its adherents (Hofstetter 1987), or intra-writer variation among manuscript copyists (Wallis 2023). In spite of the challenges of working with what is in many ways a limited dataset, Old English is “a rich collection of genres, text types, registers and styles that still awaits its full sociolinguistic appreciation” (p. 3). Timofeeva tackles the difficulties of conducting a sociolinguistic analysis on Old English texts head on. Her solution is to focus on the data at the level of genre and register, and the communities of practice who engaged with the texts – in this case, the people who produced and used legal administrative records such as writs, wills and diplomas. Thus, the present volume is not about the *speakers* of Old English, but specifically about the practices of a specific section of literate (in a broad sense) language users and their written registers in mono-, bi- and trilingual settings: “[t]he fact that the history of Old English is essentially a history of texts, registers, and genres in Old English cannot be overstated” (p. 19).

The book’s chapters fall into two sections. The first part, covering Chapters 1–3, lays the groundwork for the study. The first chapter discusses previous (socio)linguistic approaches to Old English, from linguistic, philological, archaeological and

codicological perspectives, and outlines concepts such as genre, register and text type that the study relies on. The second chapter applies sociolinguistic concepts to Old English. It explores the social networks at play in the court of King Alfred, including priests and helpers from other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms such as Mercia, as well as individuals from further afield in Britain and Continental Europe. The chapter gives an account of how these officials worked together as a coalition to undertake the duties of a proto-chancery, and two case studies, on the nouns *angelcynn* and *here* show how the terms were used and appropriated by the writers around Alfred. While *angelcynn* was generalised beyond its original meaning of ‘Angles’ to encompass all ‘English’ or ‘Anglo-Saxon’ people, *here* (‘army’) was narrowed to refer almost exclusively to the Viking outgroup, acquiring negative moral connotations. The two terms are rather tightly controlled in texts from the Alfredian period, reflecting the tight-knit community using them. In later periods and other genres, however, the discourse community was not so tightly bound and the terms are more loosely applied.

Having discussed the broader linguistic approaches to Old English material and some of the actors involved, the third chapter turns to data. While historical sociolinguists frequently base studies on ego documents such as personal letters, as they are considered to be the most speech-like genre, this option is not available to scholars of Old English, as letter-like documents appear in a rather fuzzy selection of genres, including prefaces, religious tracts, and proclamations, among others. Timofeeva therefore selects legal texts as “they share many of the formal aspects with letters and are much more numerous in our period” (p. 52), and have links with contemporary oral practices of legal declaration. They are often dated and contain names of individuals (for example, those of witnesses who make up the discourse community), who are identifiable thanks to resources such as the *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England* (PASE), which lists every individual mentioned in historical documents from the period. By using PASE in combination with legal documents, Timofeeva is able to extract a degree of social and biographical data about the individuals who appear in her corpus. The remainder of the chapter is an invaluable guide to the different types of legal document used in the study and their various protocols.

The second section of the book consists of chapters 4–7. The first three each focus on a particular text type (diplomas, writs and wills), while the last examines how Anglo-Saxon legal texts were used and adapted by the incoming Norman administration. Each chapter includes a number of case studies exemplifying the book’s methodological approaches.

Chapter 4 examines diplomas (predominantly Latin-language documents that record the transfer of land). After discussing their component parts, Timofeeva notes that the variation present suggests an initial “localised production of charters,

initiated by the beneficiaries” (p. 70), however this increasingly gives way in the ninth century to West Saxon templates. Two case studies, focusing on witness lists and dispositive verbs, explore this change in more detail. The dispositive verbs study shows Latin variation at a regional or scriptorium level, demonstrating the close ties that link these permanent groups. Witness lists, on the other hand, reveal the make-up of temporary communities of practice who come together at regular intervals for royal assemblies and other meetings, and document the beginnings of a royal writing office or chancery. Depending on the importance of the business, different local or royal scribes, and different levels of local leaders, were involved. These events would encourage the kinds of weak ties that could enable the spread of linguistic features from the court to local centres.

Chapter 5 investigates further the proto-chancery and its standardising effects through a study of writs (documents which record grants or purchases of lands, and which are usually written in English). Timofeeva notes that this genre “emerges as a reflection or adaptation of earlier oral practices” (p. 87) such as the reading aloud of royal notices at assemblies, and suggests that members would have come to develop familiarity with writs, developing “genre literacy” (p. 88). Thus, writs provide another mechanism whereby literate practices could diffuse from the core to the periphery. A study of the salutation-notification template traces its origins in the royal chancery and its further development by non-royal writers, whose choice of adverb in the phrase *x gret y freondlice/eadmodlice* (*x greets y in a friendly/humble manner*) appears to be dependent on the writer’s social status and gender. Surviving writs issued by women are rare, but there is tantalising evidence to suggest that the marital status – and therefore power – of a queen (whether as a consort or dowager) is reflected in the linguistic choices embedded in writs issued in her name.

Chapter 6 focuses on wills. These vernacular documents, dealing with bequests to local beneficiaries, were commissioned by both men and women and survive in a number of archives across England, allowing for a comparison by region and gender. A study of Old English dispositive verbs by date and archive complements the study of Latin dispositive verbs in Chapter 4, and shows initial variation giving way to the verb (*ge*)*unnan* (*‘to grant’*) in the years after 900, once the proto-chancery had been established. Nevertheless, this is not a one-way process of standardisation; older (*ge*)*unnan* constructions with a genitive object are favoured in most archives, however documents from Bury St Edmunds show a clear preference for the newer (*ge*)*unnan* + accusative construction. Timofeeva suggests that for this feature “regional innovation overrides genre convention” (p. 120). The circumstances of composition for wills gives more scope for textual shaping and influence by the donor (or at least a compromise between the donor and the scribe), and the remaining case studies, on soliciting patronage, curses and sociolinguistic outliers explore the extent to which an individual’s voice may be heard in these documents. Unlike diplomas and writs,

the discourse community involved in will-making did not meet regularly, and it is suggested that the weaker ties involved allow for the spread of oral features (such as *(ge)unnan* + accusative) from the local community into the written record.

The final chapter deals with mixed-language practices in the chancery of William I, and traces the changes in the royal chancery and local courts during the second half of the eleventh century. Two studies form the heart of the chapter. The first surveys English loanwords used in William's *acta*, which predominantly fall into categories such as rights and privileges, units of land, or titles (e.g. *fihtwihta* 'right to collect fines for fighting', *hide* 'hide', *socamannus* 'sokeman'). While some of these terms were borrowed into Latin before the Conquest by Anglo-Saxon scribes, morphological integration into Anglo-Norman suggests that others were borrowed by Francophone scribes. The second case study looks at French and Gallo-Latin loans, including titles, occupational terms and verbs. Timofeeva points to verbs as important evidence for the agency of Norman L1 speakers in negotiating the change from a bilingual pre-Conquest chancery to the trilingual situation after 1066. The borrowed verbs typically consist of a few simplexes with related prefixed forms (e.g. *placitare* 'to plead', *explacitare* 'to gain by pleading', *deplacitare* 'establish a claim to'), suggesting that the scribes' motivation was to develop a technical vocabulary that could be easily understood by all members of the discourse community. The chapter also details what can be gleaned about the post-Conquest chancery, its scribes and officials from the surviving sources. In this way, we are able to put some meat on the bones of the 'Anglo-Norman scribe'. What is revealed is, as Clark (1995) noted, a far more nuanced picture of scribal competence and practice than traditional accounts portray. A brief epilogue summarises the studies and points to further avenues for investigation.

This book presents an elegant solution to the problems of scribal anonymity by investigating texts for which we can obtain some social/biographical data, and by considering that data at community level. By examining the texts through the lens of temporary and permanent communities of practice, coalitions and discourse communities, Timofeeva is able to make links between the history and politics of the period and the users of the texts. A key strength of the book is in its exploration of the individuals who make up the communities involved with legal texts – as scribes, chancery officials, assembly members or donors composing wills – and the context in which the documents were produced, read aloud or enacted.

Administrative documents are often overlooked by linguists, and Timofeeva's excellent and clear introduction to each text type, detailing how they were produced and how they functioned in Anglo-Saxon society is most welcome. Good use is also made of *PASE* and other historical databases, and advantage is taken of the abundant scholarship on aspects such as the authenticity of the texts, showing just how much biographical and other supplementary data can be gained about the source material

and the people named in it. A further benefit of this book is its juxtaposition of Old English and Latin sources, along with links to documents beyond the immediate Anglo-Saxon period. It is increasingly acknowledged that there was more textual continuity across the period of the Conquest than hitherto assumed (Treharne 2006), and it is really good to see a book on ‘Old English’ that stretches across these boundaries.

This book is full of detail and the case studies are carefully planned and undertaken, and well evidenced and illustrated. For this reader, a more leisurely conclusion, drawing together the case studies and discussing the overall importance and impact of the findings would have been welcome, as there is a lot to digest and unpack here. Nevertheless, this book is an exciting interdisciplinary study which sheds some fascinating light on what can be gleaned about sociolinguistic variation among the communities who made use of Old English legal texts.

References

- Clark, Cecily. 1995 [1992]. The myth of ‘the Anglo-Norman Scribe’. In Peter Jackson (ed.), *Words, names and history: Selected writings of Cecily Clark*, 168–178. Cambridge: Brewer.
- Hofstetter, Walter. 1987. Winchester vocabulary and the standardisation of Old English vocabulary. *Anglo-Saxon England* 17. 139–161.
- Labov, William. 1994. *Principals of linguistic change: Internal factors*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lenker, Ursula. 2000. The monasteries of the Benedictine reform and the “Winchester School”: Model cases of social networks in Anglo-Saxon England? *European Journal of English Studies* 4(3). 225–238.
- Wallis, Christine. 2023. Linguistic repertoires and intra-writer variation in Old English: Hemming of Worcester. In Markus Schiegg & Judith Huber (eds.), *Intra-writer variation in historical linguistics*, 451–472. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England (PASE)*. <https://pase.ac.uk/> (accessed 01 May 2023).
- Treharne, Elaine. 2006. Reading from the margins: The uses of Old English Homiletic manuscripts in the Post-Conquest Period. In Alger Nicolaus Doane & Kirsten Wolf (eds.), *Beatus Vir: Studies in Early English and Norse manuscripts in memory of Phillip Pulsiano*, 329–58. Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.