

A Review of *The Germanic Languages: Origins and Early Dialectal Interrelations*

Benjamin Keil

November 20, 2001

1 Introduction

This paper is a summary and review of Hans Frede Nielsen's *The Germanic Languages: Origins and Early Dialectal Interrelations*, published by the University of Alabama Press in 1989. If this review were limited to one word, it would be "disappointing," not because the book is anything less than comprehensive, but because the issues it addresses remain mostly unsolved while the title of the volume confidently suggests a solid exposition. In fact, after reading the book, one has the impression that the problems encountered are (for all practical purposes) unsolvable. Rather than making a strong argument for any existing analysis of Germanic language grouping or proposing a new analysis, Nielsen uses this book mainly to criticize the methodology of his predecessors and contemporaries.

2 The Germanic Languages

Nielsen begins by introducing the current languages of the Germanic diaspora. This introduction is very different from the rest of the book, which assumes the reader has extensive knowledge of both German and Dutch as well as a moderate understanding linguistic issues in Saxon (mostly used interchangeably with Low German), Frisian and Old English. For English, Frisian, Franco-nian, Dutch, Gothic, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, and Faroese, he gives a list of their earliest

attestations. This list serves as a preview of the problems to come; because the earliest attestations of each language are at different points in time, the early interactions are very difficult to ascertain.

In this section, Nielsen also examines the evidence provided by early runic texts. Many aspects of runic have been used to argue for the existence of a separate North Germanic language group (e.g., the use of the form ‘-eka’ for the first person in many runic texts which is evidently mirrored in Scandinavian languages). Nielsen enumerates these arguments, and makes a strong case against each one. He sees the ‘ik’/‘ek’ distinction as a result of paradigmatic leveling, with each language making an independent choice from a set of competing forms. Such evidence, Nielsen points out, cannot be used for the purposes of grouping closely related languages.

3 Germanic Languages Within Indo-European

In his next section, Nielsen first gives a brief account of Indo-European from Hittite to Tocharian, Modern Persian, Slavic and Celtic. Having laid out several languages and their distant relations, Nielsen then examines the place of the Germanic languages in this linguistic constellation. First he divides the IE languages into *centum* and *satəm* languages and indicates that Germanic [hund] reflects a stop consonant, making it a *centum* language, but then goes on to say that it shares many other similarities with the *satəm* languages Baltic and Slavic. This marks the beginning of one of the central arguments of the book: that the *Stammbaum* (or ‘family tree’) method of language grouping should be abandoned, probably for the ‘wave model’ or for methodology borrowed from the field of dialect geography. No actual argument in this direction occurs at this point in the book, as Nielsen does not introduce alternative methodologies until his final chapter, but he is clearly developing the foundation of his argument.

Also in this section, Nielsen looks at the contact Germanic tribes must have had with other Indo-European tribes (i.e., the Italic and Celtic peoples) as well as non-IE tribes (such as the Finnish and Sammi peoples). This section is primarily valuable for its handling of hydronymy, the use of the names of bodies of water (mostly rivers) to determine the original settlers of the

region. It seems, however, that this section would make more sense in the next section of the book, in which Nielsen investigates the question of the “*Urheimats*” (original homes) of the Germanic tribes.

The section concludes with a very short page covering the (First) Germanic Consonant Shift and the systematic relation of IE ablaut grades to the strong verbs of Germanic languages. Nielsen’s terse treatment of this issue, which seems like it could be of great import to a book on the “Origins” of “Germanic Languages,” is a little disconcerting.

4 Movements of the Germanic Tribes

This section of the book is primarily a summary of the available archaeological scholarship on early Germanic peoples. The primary sources referenced include Tacitus and Jordanes, but even here Nielsen spends a great deal of time poking holes in the accounts they give, without making any real attempt to fill the holes that he creates. What I found most interesting in this section was the investigation into the origin of the Alemanni, who are not mentioned by the classic sources at all, and seem to have appeared “out of nowhere” at the end of the second century A.D. Nielsen points out, however, that the tribal name (meaning “all men”) suggests a federation of tribes, and—in a very poorly worded sentence—seems to suggest the possibility that the term might be equivalent to (at least Tacitus’ use of) Swabian. Otherwise, this section is sufficiently vague to be of little use in determining the “early dialectal interrelations” of the Germanic languages.

5 Germanic Language Grouping

This section is the bulk of the book, and perhaps the most frustrating. Nielsen moves through a series of analyses, each of which he rejects. Most harshly criticized is the work of Schwarz, but just about everyone else to have written on the subject gets a turn on the whipping post. He does not reject them unfairly, however. Several attempts at grouping Germanic languages and dialects have relied on shared retentions rather than shared innovations, and many have based their groupings

on changes that are more likely attributed to parallel development than shared innovation (e.g., phonemicization of [a] vs. [æ] in several dialects where there was already allophonic variation). As he introduces each analysis, he gives the impression that “this might just be the one,” but it never is; he always has some spoiling evidence from another source. Nielsen concludes this section with the gloomy statement “Until we [can develop a better methodology], it is useless to speculate on the closeness of relationship of related languages.”

6 On Methodology

Nielsen finishes his book with several deliberations on methodology, dealing first with the *Stammbaum* model. One problem Nielsen sees with the Stammbaum model is that it does not allow for a language to have an offshoot without disappearing, that is, in a Stammbaum model, (proto-)Germanic would be replaced with perhaps North, West, and East Germanic. Nielsen finds it strange that we do not have something like Germanic splitting into Germanic and East Germanic. He points out the absurdity of positing a Dutch-Afrikaans node splitting into Dutch and Afrikaans; surely a language can have an offshoot and still remain a living and active language. Also, many IE languages have close relations with two or more languages that do not seem to be closely related to each other. Nielsen gives the example of Greek, which is similar to both Latin and Indo-Iranian, but in a Stammbaum model must be grouped in a parent language with only one of them, normally Graeco-Italic.

As an alternative, Nielsen offers the wave model, in which concentric circles indicate a series of relationships, going from more strongly related within the inner circles to weaker relations in the outer circles. After some discussion, however, Nielsen decides that the wave model is more of a compliment to the Stammbaum model than a replacement for it. Still looking for something better, Nielsen examines the ‘substratum theory,’ which suggests that the differentiation in IE languages is due to the (incomplete) acquisition of IE by conquered peoples. The different Germanic languages would, then, also be the result of existing substratum languages throughout the German-speaking

area. Eventually, Nielsen abandons this as well, on the grounds that too little is known about the pre-IE languages.

According to Nielsen, the last glimmer of hope for the Germanic language grouping problem is to apply the methods of modern dialect geography in a historical context. Dialect geographers, according to Nielsen, are “more aware of inherited features in (cognate) dialects than [were early proponents of the wave model].” Unfortunately, Nielsen does not give a true introduction to modern dialect geography, but instead takes yet another opportunity to criticize the assumptions made by his predecessors. He attacks the notion that bodies of water are necessarily barriers to linguistic contact and feature spread; well traveled bodies of water can actively and efficiently transport linguistic features. He reiterates the necessity to use shared innovations rather than shared retentions or parallel developments. That reiteration is followed by the final section and most valuable contribution to scholarship in this book: a list of correspondences that Nielsen believes are due to parallel development along with a section of evidence on each one.

7 Conclusions

A better title for this book would have been “The Futility of Grouping Germanic Languages,” or “How Not to Group the Germanic Languages.” The current title and back matter are misleading, as the book leaves the reader with the feeling that she or he knows less about early Germanic linguistic relations than before reading the book. What this book offers, however, is a comprehensive review of the literature on the subject and a highly critical account of where previous scholars have gone astray. This book would be a useful read to anyone intending to do an analysis of Germanic language grouping, as it could keep the potential author from making a false start. To someone who wants to know about the history of Germanic languages, I would suggest reading a more recent book, but I would also suggest that they read this book and keep in mind the criticisms Nielsen makes; doing so will give anyone the opportunity to very critically judge the material presented.