

Review of Timofeeva, Olga. 2022. *Sociolinguistic Variation in Old English: Records of Communities and People*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. ISBN: 978-9-027-21134-7. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/ahs.13>

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This book lays the foundations for studying the sociolinguistics of Old English, a period that has scarce sociolinguistic metadata and mass fragmentary evidence. While the Old English record is transmitted predominantly through a biased upper-class male religious elite, the author, Timofeeva, successfully illustrates that Old English has much to offer in the way of sociolinguistic information. Through eight chapters, the author surveys the applications of sociolinguistic methods and theories to Old English, focusing, in particular, on the application of social networks, and the extraction of sociodemographic information embedded in legal records.

Chapter 1 contextualizes the overall aim of the book by arguing that Old English can provide a glimpse into the social world of its speakers. While the dearth of sociolinguistic metadata may disable the possibility of using the composite extant record of Old English to reconstruct the social forces influencing Old English, the author maintains that if analysts circumscribe their analysis to a smaller subset of texts, Old English can still be sociolinguistically informative. The chapter begins with a discussion of major milestones in the reconstruction of extralinguistic influences on the history and development of Old English. The author subsequently turns to a review of two branches of sociolinguistics: correlational sociolinguistics and interactional sociolinguistics. Justifiably, the author raises issues concerning the representativeness of Old English texts and summarizes the genres and text categories available. This treasure trove of information will be of immediate interest to students and scholars of Old English, linguists, language historians, and Medievalists.

Chapter 2 illustrates how social network analysis can be applied to the study of historical documents and the texts associated with the court of King Alfred in the ninth century. King Alfred is revered as one of the most influential kings in British history, most notably, for his resistance



against the Vikings. Linguistically, Alfred is viewed as significant for his advocacy for educational form, which led to an abundance of Old English records in the West Saxon dialect, abundant at least relative to the other attested regional varieties (Kentish, Mercian, Northumbrian). While many texts in Old English are anonymous and lack (scribal) authorship, Timofeeva argues that Alfredian texts can be used to reconstruct social networks, as these texts often contain scribal authorship information. The author subsequently illustrates how specific lexical choices (e.g., *Angelcynn*, *here*) appear to correlate with particular social networks (e.g., the court of Alfred), showing how social network analysis can be used to localize speech/scribal communities in historical periods.

Chapter 3 discusses the use of legal documents when studying or reconstructing the sociology of Old English. While the author states that letters “are commonly considered the best type of data” (p. 52) in historical sociolinguistics, she argues that legal documents can be used as a workaround for the absence of such texts in Old English. Since charters are a type of legal document that were designed to be read aloud, they may provide insight into oral language during this period. Analyzing more speech-related texts of this kind can be valuable to researchers interested in language change since it is often assumed that the locus of linguistic change is in spoken as opposed to written language (Milroy 1992: 32), with some honorable exceptions (e.g., Hinrichs and Szmrecsanyi 2007: 441; Jankowski 2013: 103–105). The author illustrates that, given their status as legal documents, charters contain names (e.g., recipients, witnesses), occupations (e.g., bishops, clerics), titles (e.g., *eorl*, king), and information about gender—crucial extralinguistic information which can be used to reconstruct the sociohistorical sphere of Old English. At the end of the chapter, the author references four major charter types, which sets up the structure of the following four chapters: Chapter 4 (diplomas), Chapter 5 (writs), and Chapter 6 (wills).

Of the chapters that follow, in my view, Chapter 5 is most insightful, as it illustrates how linguistic variation (i.e., salutation choice between *freondlice* vs. *eadmodlice*) appears to correlate with the “social status” of the sender and addressee. This finding suggests, in line with the Uniformitarian Principle (Labov 1972: 275), that the forces at play today (e.g., socioeconomic status and power) were also likely at play historically. The analysis of wills in Chapter 6 is also particularly valuable for its insights into differences between male and female language. In an analysis of cursing, the author reports that women who had wills prepared for them used more cursing than men who had wills prepared for them, speculating that the higher use of cursing was due to women’s predilection for being more “emotional”. Since there is a long history of discourse and public perception that women are more emotional in their language (e.g., Stoffel 1901: 101–102; Peters 1994), an observation that still appears to hold true for some linguistic variables today

(e.g., Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005; Tagliamonte 2008), it is fascinating to see some potential evidence that this was also true historically.

Chapter 7 examines changes in the community of practice of the royal chancery and in the discourse community of the local courts in Early Middle English. Examining loanwords in Latin legal documents, the author shows how the borrowings illustrate a change in the scribal authorship, moving from Anglo-Saxon scribes to Norman scribes. Norman linguistic influence was strongest at the verbal domain but was also prevalent in inflectional morphology. In a short epilogue, in Chapter 8 the author returns to the principal aim of the book which was to explore “the possibilities of a sociolinguistic enquiry into the Old English period” (p. 175). The author certainly achieved this objective, showcasing new methodological and qualitative procedures.

If I may indulge in any criticism, with advances in recent decades in statistical methods in sociolinguistics and the notable shift in historical linguistics toward a more quantitative science (Jenset and McGillivray 2017; Brinton *et al.* 2021; Kortmann 2021), this book could have benefited from the application of advanced statistical methods, in particular mixed effects modeling, to uncover “orderly heterogeneity” (Weinreich *et al.* 1968). Mixed effects regression models have become a cornerstone of correlational sociolinguistics and studies have illustrated the application of these models to Old English data (De Cuypere 2015; Stratton 2022, 2023). However, the underlying goal of the book was clearly to bring forth new methodologies and approaches and illustrate how modern sociolinguistic theories may be applied and tested in Old English. It goes without saying that the author certainly achieved this goal, and readers will gain a great deal from the case studies and application of sociolinguistic theories and methods addressed in this book.

This work provides an important first step towards unpacking the complex sociolinguistic makeup of Old English. While the number of extant Old English texts will likely remain stable in the coming years, analysts can invigorate the data with new methods and theories and can turn to this body of work for inspiration. This book will inevitably be of great use to students and scholars of Old English, historical (socio)linguists, and language historians, and possibly even legal scholars.

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