

BESPREK

Kathrin S. Bussmann, Diphthongs in Frisian, a comparative analysis of phonemic inventories past and present. Germanistische Bibliothek, Bd. 21, Heidelberg (2004), Universitätsverlag Winter, 271 pp., ISBN 3-8253-5003-7.

I was surprised to find this book appearing on my desk, and I am not the only one. No Frisian scholar that I know had ever heard of this research project, and no Frisian scholar is mentioned in the ‘Acknowledgements’. This is important for two reasons. That Frisian may apparently be a subject of interest to scholars outside the small circle of Frisian scholarship, and that Frisian considered not as a discrete unit may be used to contribute to a universal typology of language features. A negative aspect, especially for the author, is that she has not managed to negotiate the minefield of Frisian dialects and phonological history completely unscathed.

As the title states, this study addresses diphthongs in Frisian. Frisian is here taken in its broad sense, from Old Frisian to modern West, East and North Frisian dialects. The goal is to grasp a better understanding of distinctive phonological features concerning diphthongs in Frisian and to “[...] detect certain typological trends.” Frisian was chosen because “Frisian dialects have been particularly noted for the wealth and variety of their diphthongs.” (page 2).

The author treats Old Frisian and all the living modern dialects one by one and evaluates the diphthongs for possible distinctive features: length, roundness, accentuation and directionality (Chapter 1). After a comparative analysis of all Frisian varieties (Chapters 2 and 3), diphthongs in several West Germanic languages are studied (Chapter 4) and their typological aspects compared to the Frisian. Finally, some general conclusions are drawn (Chapters 4.2 and 5).

In the first place, Frisian is normal in the sense that the abstract diphthongs /AU/ and /AI/ are the most commonly occurring in the language, and this is the case too in other West Germanic languages and most languages of the world. But most Frisian dialects show a lot more diphthongs. Bussmann identifies three features of Frisian diphthongs that are typologically marked (Sections 4.2 and 5.1):

- The first is length. Diphthongs are phonologically long in most languages. In Old Frisian, Helgolandish and Wiedingharder Frisian length is sometimes a distinctive feature, as in the case of Old Frisian *riucht* ‘right’ with short /iu/ versus *stiura* ‘to steer’ with long /iū/.
- The so-called darkening diphthongs, like /ia/ and /úo/, constitute a marked type of diphthong with falling accent and rising sonority. Old Germanic languages had this

type of diphthong but these were abandoned in most modern Germanic languages. In Frisian they survived as a type. A related, also marked, type are the centring diphthongs. These appear in some other Frisian dialects, such as Standard West Frisian.

- It has been claimed that languages cannot have both rising and falling diphthongs, but some Frisian varieties do.

So far the main conclusions and, as far as I am able to judge, the material and presented analysis are concerned, I think they stand. But things have sometimes gone seriously awry at the level of details.

The task was not simple: Frisian dialects have not been described in a uniform way and using a uniform approach. The various source data, many at least 50 years old, “confront today’s scholar with a confusing variety of antiquated, idiosyncratic notational systems.” (page 53). Unfortunately, Bussmann has apparently missed the *Handbuch des Friesischen/Handbook of Frisian Studies*. The author has tried to convert the spellings applied in several monographs into modern IPA notation. This was definitely not an easy task. Sometimes it goes wrong, e.g. on page 165, where Standard Dutch and Terschelling <ui> are transcribed as /œy/ and /ui/ respectively, deviant transcriptions for the same sound. But all in all the task of phonological interpretation of given spellings seems fairly accurately fulfilled.

The main omission is authorial overlooking of Århammar’s article on Old Frisian /ia/ (*Die Friesischen Wörter für ‘Rad’ (‘Wheel’)*. In: *Kopenhager Germanistische Studien*, Bd. I, 1969, pp 35-84.) This article treats complex developments in the Old Frisian /ia/. The most important outcome of the article is that the Old Frisian /ia/ and /iu/ must have been rising diphthongs in every Old Frisian dialect, even in cases where the modern representation is a monophthong or a falling diphthong, like standard Wfr. *biede* ‘offer’ <Ofr. *biada*. Bussmann considers the Old Frisian /ia/ and /iu/ to be ‘falling’. The consequence is that she has to assume a whole bunch of incidental developments to account for the modern forms. She even tries to deduce Schiermonn. *tjail* ‘wheel’ from a falling diphthong /ia/ by assuming a development /ia/ > /iɛ/ > /i:/ > /éi/ > /jéi/ > /jái/, instead of /iá/ > /ja:/ > /jai/ (cf. Schm. *baim* <Ofr. *bām*). In particular in connection with the complicated development of Ofr. /ia/ and /iu/, several etymological mistakes are made, like not recognising Wfr. *dief* ‘thief’ as a Dutch loanword (phonological Frisian is archaic *tsjeaf*), deducing *ljocht* ‘light’ from Ofr. *liacht* (where dialectal forms *ljacht* / *l(j)echt* are the proper examples; *ljocht* is an analogue formation according to the verb **liuchta*) or, another case, deducing Schierm. *seeunde* ‘sin’ from Ofr. *sende*, instead of *sonde*. It does not seem useful to me to mention here every etymological mistake in detail, but there are quite a few.

A proper application of the outcome of Århammar’s paper would imply different conclusions for the Old Frisian part. It would also imply different viewpoints to be adopted in diachronic discussions throughout the book (cf. page 163, where we again find the statement that when “[...] dealing with darkening falling diphthongs, [...] accent shift is not observable in Wfris. dialects.”). As the book is mainly concerned with

synchronic phoneme inventories, these diachronic mistakes do not overly influence the general outcome. For Old Frisian, however, it would mean that this dialect did not have darkening diphthongs (falling accent, rising sonority) but that accent and sonority had been levelled out. As a consequence it would become questionable whether Old Frisian even had rising diphthongs, because Old Frisian /ia/ developed as glide + (long) vowel. Modern Frisian 'breaking'-diphthongs are also interpreted this way by Bussmann (following Booij and Visser, page 59).

It may be of interest to add two minor synchronic observations. In 3.1.2.7 the Hindelooper *ɛ*-diphthongs are considered not to be phonemic because their distribution is predictable. But in words like *bird* [bɪɪt] 'beard' en *hert* [heɪt] 'heart' the diphthongs may be historically predictable but they form synchronic minimal pairs with *bit* 'bit' and *het* 'what'. At least phonetically, these diphthongs are short and contrast with e.g. [ɪ.ɛ] in e.g. *beald* 'statue', which would plead in favour of their phonemic status.

Another intriguing case is that of the opposition between WFr. *dei* 'day' and *daai* 'dough'. In the Walden-dialect the difference is both qualitative and quantitative: [dɛi] - [da:i]. In the Klaai-dialect the length opposition has been levelled out and the pronunciation in both instances become something like [dā.i]. At the southern fringe, especially among older speakers, a clear distinction [dai] - [da:i] can/could be heard. The marginal status of this phenomenon fits nicely into the typological characterisation of length oppositions in diphthongs as being marked. This opposition has existed in West Frisian only since the 19th century, when the pronunciation [dai] for *dei* came into being and soon disappeared again.

Altogether, this study is a valuable contribution to an integral study of Frisian varieties and, what makes it even more interesting, it shows that elaboration of Frisian material can be used to contribute to the debate concerning international theoretical linguistics. The general conclusions hold, but many mistakes may be found in etymological details. The diachronic observations are not valid, mainly due to wrong interpretation of Old Frisian /ia/ and /iu/. The most intriguing question, as I see it, is why most Frisian dialects on the one hand convert marked diphthongs into unmarked sequences - typologically a logical development - and on the other create new marked diphthong sequences, e.g. Ofr. *biada* 'to offer' (be it with /ia/, as Bussmann supposes, or with /iá/ or even /ja:/, still a marked sequence) > mod. Hallig Frisian *biide*, but Ofr. *stān* 'stone' > mod. Hall. Fr. *stian* (with /ia/). To find answers to this question a careful reassessment of Bussmann's data is required.

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