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A DIFFERENT LOOK AT TEACHING HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS: THE APPLICATION OF NEW TOOLS IN AN OLD ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Current trends in ELT

The turn of the century has witnessed enormous developments in **Information and Communications Technology**. The progress involves not only equipment, but also the means of communication, i.e. the Internet. While in past decades the internauts were largely passive users, nowadays they have an opportunity to become co-developers of the content.

The 'revolution' in ICT did not pass unnoticed by methodologists. Education, especially Foreign Language Teaching, has benefited greatly from the changes. Having gone through various stages of the development of methodological thought, from Grammar-Translation method, to Audiolingual method, to Communicative approach, **modern methodology** emphasises **flexibility** on the part of the teacher, rather than rigid adherence to one particular 'miracle' method (Harmer 2007). Thus, not only should the teacher adjust the course to the needs of the learners, but he should also encourage more autonomy on the part of the class, so that each student can take greater responsibility for the learning process.

The Internet, whose inherent property is eclecticism, fits perfectly within this framework. Wikis, webquests, podcasting, interactive whiteboards, authoring tools and other features of ICT have been adapted to **computer-assisted language learning** (CALL), making the course more appealing to students and giving them a chance to contribute to the global community by publishing the effects of their work in the Internet (Dudeney and Hockly 2007, Sharma and Barrett 2007). The fact that it is the young generation that is the most enthusiastic about new technology strengthens the learners' intrinsic motivation and should not be underrated.

Within the curriculum of English studies, **historical linguistics** appears to be a subject in which the introduction of new trends in teaching is particularly

worthwhile. The aim of this work is to show how **ICT** and **modern methodology** can be employed in a more academic environment, and how these two can be combined with **linguistic analysis**, to make the course more efficient and – at the same time – attractive to students. And there *are* reasons for experimenting with novelties in historical linguistics.

The need for a breath of fresh air in historical linguistics

First of all, ripe as the research in diachronic studies may be, it cannot conceal the fact that **historical linguistics as a subject** is fighting an uphill battle. In the face of stiff competition for a secure position on the curriculum, it is more and more often being replaced by more novel and 'fashionable' branches of linguistics, like sociolinguistics or psycholinguistics (see, for example, Shippey 1993, Ritt 1997 and Schousboe 1997). Unfortunately, historical linguistics classes often earn a bad reputation among students, whose opinion cannot be neglected. Indeed, students who attend classes in the "History and Varieties of English" are bound to experience a rude shock. Not only are they forced to study the past, but also they are forced to do it using methods taken from the past. 'Spoiled' – that is the word – by ever-improving contemporary teaching methods used in EFL, students bemoan the grammar-translation approach pursued in the study of Old English. Not that they are alone in their misery because other teachers often view those who teach the subject in question as fanatics or, at best, martyrs. All these attitudes stem from the stereotype of historical linguistics as an utterly tortuous, gruelling enterprise.

In view of these facts, it becomes self-evident that serious measures have to be implemented if the tide is to be turned, or at least weakened. Therefore, a number of universities offer more **interdisciplinary courses**, the result being an integration of sociolinguistics into the historical linguistics framework. Those institutions that can afford it (in terms of time devoted to the course, and ultimately – money), follow a **corpus-based approach** to the study of the language of the past (see, for example, Bammesberger 1998; Rissanen *et al*. 1997). As for the application of modern technology to historical linguistics, the 'happy few' universities in which historical studies hold their ground, like those of Glasgow, Virginia and Calgary, have already employed ICT to stunning effect.[1] Yet, there is still much to be done, especially when it comes to popularising the use of state-of-the-art technology and methodology among teachers. The more so given the fact that the subject in question does actually

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[1] A thorough description of CALL resources on Old English is given by Alcaraz-Sintes (2002).

offer the potential to apply ICT and recent ELT developments more than many other subjects on the curriculum; potential, which surprisingly often remains unexploited. It resides in the synchronic part of the course – namely, the language of the past, especially Old English, which can be studied like any foreign language (which it actually is, even for native speakers). Still, many teachers of historical linguistics remain sceptical.

It seems that their reluctance stems from the nature of the subject matter – the fact that the language studied in the classroom is no longer used, which reduces the scope of its practical usage virtually to nothing. The language of the past serves here as a means, not as an end; its synchronic analysis is worthwhile provided it is viewed in diachronic perspective. Thus, the grammar-translation method seems a natural tool for studying the past and any attempts at introducing more modern approaches would look artificial and pretentious, to say the least. Or would they? As a matter of fact, the resuscitation of a language long gone does not have to be necessarily futile, so long as it contributes to the better understanding of the tongue and its users' culture. There is certainly nothing wrong in showing students that those strange strings of symbols, looking like twisted English words, were once real examples of language, used by real people.

Teaching 'the old' the new way

As for the source texts, the Internet can be of great help. If the teacher is lucky enough to have a computer lab at his disposal with access to the World Wide Web, he can refer his students to a number of **on-line anthologies** and **libraries**. Many of them are hosted by universities and contain various examples of prose and poetry from different periods of the development of English, like for instance *The Labyrinth*[2] (University of Georgetown). Other websites focus on one period, but offer useful descriptions and exercises, which can be used in the classroom, like e.g. *Ælfric's homilies on Judith, Esther and the Maccabees* (Lee 1999). Another example is *The Old English Aerobics Anthology* (Baker 2003b), hosted by the University of Virginia.[3] Its greatest virtue is that while analysing any of its eighteen Old English texts, an on-line user can obtain an explanation of every word in the text just by clicking on it. This facilitates and speeds up the process. Apart from lexical

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[2] The merit of *The Labyrinth* extends well beyond English language, as the website contains numerous sections covering various aspects of European mediaeval history (e.g. chivalry, feudalism, architecture, drama, coins, furniture, etc).

[3] The Anthology is actually an on-line complement to *The Introduction to Old English* by Baker (2003).

information, the site contains notes on idioms and clauses, as well as comments on cultural and historical background. Last but not least, some texts are supplemented with audio recordings.

An invaluable form of help and reference for those who wish to explore the language of the past is provided by **digital dictionaries** and **glossaries**. Some are accessible via the Internet, like e.g. the on-line versions of *A Thesaurus of Old English* (hosted by the University of Glasgow), or the monumental Bosworth and Toller's *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*. Others can be downloaded onto a computer and used off-line, like e.g. *Wendere* (Robinson 2007), which operates on Microsoft Access. It contains a huge number of entries and can be easily expanded, as new entries can be added. The greatest advantage of a web- or computer-based dictionary over a traditional glossary usually attached to a paperback Reader is the ease and speed of use. Thus, the analysis of the source texts goes more smoothly and the teacher is relieved of the preparation of glossary, especially if the analysed text is taken from the Internet rather than from a conventional Reader. One obvious requirement, sometimes an insurmountable obstacle, is access to a computer lab.

As far as the application of contemporary methodological thought is concerned, Old English proverbs and riddles can serve as **warmers** at the beginning of the class. They can also be used as **fillers** after a period of intense effort, or as a way of rounding off the lesson (Ur and Wright 1992). Thus, Old English riddles can be used as a puzzle, but the activity does not have to be necessarily limited to eliciting the answer. Let us consider for example Riddle 66 (Williamson 1977):

> *Ic þa wiht geseah   on weg feran;*
> *heo wæs wrætlice   wundrum gegierwed.*
> *Wundor wearð on wege;   wæter wearð to bane*[4]

Using the informal context of solving the riddle as a pretext, the teacher can actually smuggle in some language analysis. Firstly, he can ask students to look for words which have survived in Mod.E. almost unchanged (e.g. *weg, wæs, wundor, wæter*[5]). He can also point to words now obsolete, like e.g. *wiht* and *weorðan*,[6] or words whose meaning has evolved, e.g. *feran*.[7] Finally, the teacher

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[4] "I saw a creature wandering the way: She was devastating-beautifully adorned.
On the wave a miracle: water turned to bone." The solution is 'iceberg'.

[5] The meaning of *way, was, wonder* and *water* is still the same in Mod.E.; the only changes concern the form, but do not prevent an average reader from identifying the words in question.

[6] O.E. *wiht* – Mod.E. *wight*: 'creature'; O.E. *weorðan* – Mod.E. 'become'.

[7] O.E. *feran* – Mod.E. *fare*: the literal meaning, used in this riddle, i.e. 'to travel' is nowadays archaic or poetic (the *OED*); the word is used most often with a more figurative sense: 'to experience good or bad fortune or treatment'. Interestingly enough, such usage was not uncommon

can focus students' attention on the fact that *on weg* in this case, like in many other texts written in Old English, refers to sea voyages, of which Anglo-Saxons had a strong tradition.

Secondly, the teacher may employ **visual aids** as pre-reading, in order to provide students with additional background information or basic vocabulary (Harmer 2007), or to whet the students' appetite for the main course, i.e. the text itself (Ur 1996). For example, a picture of an Anglo-Saxon warrior introduced prior to reading excerpts of *Beowulf* can serve as an illustration of the changes that English vocabulary has undergone over the centuries (*Figure 1*):
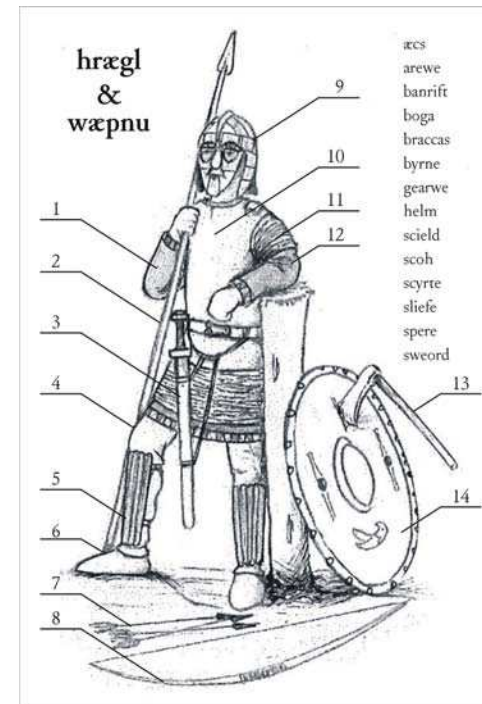

Figure 1. Picture of an Anglian king, early 7th century[8]

The simple matching word-to-picture exercise can be followed by a more elaborate one, in which students are to look up metaphorical synonyms of military terms in a dictionary (*Figure 2*):

in Anglo-Saxon times (the *OED*), proving the power of +LIFE IS A JOURNEY+ metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson 1980).

[8] Illustration by M. Kudła, based on Nicolle (1984).

sword	– *hildegicel*
helm	– *heafodbeorg, beadugrima*
spear	– *þræcwudu*
mail	– *breostnet, hringloca*
arrow	– *hildenædre*
battle	– *æscþracu, ecgplega, garræs, lindplega*[9]

Figure 2. Metaphorical extensions of Old English military terms

This can be used as a pretext for a discussion of Anglo-Saxon customs and beliefs, pointing to their war-oriented culture on the one hand, but also as an illustration of their linguistic creativity on the other.

Another way in which the teacher can raise his students' interest in the subject is through the **choice** of source texts. On the surface it would appear that Old English literature offers a very limited range of topics, many of which are beyond the average student's field of interest. Yet, there are some true gems to be found which need only a slight adjustment. By being selective about the texts, the teacher can adjust his course to his students' cultural background (Fisiak 2005). For instance, Polish students can be presented with the account of Wulfstan's voyage to Truso and then asked to identify the places visited by him. A similar task can be conducted among students from Scandinavian countries with the use of Othere's voyages or fragments of *Beowulf*. Another example is the description of the elephant in Ælfric's homilies on Maccabees (Lee 1999):

[500]   (...) *Ylp is*
          ormæte nyten (mare þonne sum hus), eall mid banum
          befangen binnan þam felle butan æt ðam nauelan, & he
          nafre ne lið. Feower & twentig monða gæð seo modor
          mid folan, & þreo hund geara hi libbað (gif hi alefede
[505]   *ne beoð); & hi man mæg wenian wundorlice to gefeohte.*
          Hwæl is ealra fixa mæst, & ylp is eallra nytena mæst; ac
          swaþeah mannes gescead hi mæg gewyldan.(...)[10]

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[9] Literally: 'war-icicle', 'head-mountain', 'war-mask', 'violence-wood', 'breast-net', 'ring-lock', 'war-serpent', 'spear-violence', 'blade-play', 'spear-storm', 'shield-play'. TOEO marks most of these as 'poetic'.

[10] "Elephant is an enormous animal (bigger than some houses), all surrounded with bone inside the skin, apart from navel, and it never lies down. The mother carries her calf for 24 months, and lives 300 years (unless it is injured); and it can be wonderfully accustomed to battle. The whale is the greatest of all fish & the elephant is the greatest animal; yet humans can tame it cleverly."

Rather than ask students to simply translate the passage, the teacher can erase all instances of *ylp*, then have the students analyse the text (with the help of a dictionary) and guess which animal is described. Apart from typical linguistic analysis, the activity can serve a more didactic purpose, as it can help debunk the myth of Anglo-Saxons as primitive and unsophisticated people and engender appreciation towards their culture. Surely, most students would not expect to find an Anglo-Saxon writer describe such an exotic animal as the elephant. This extract is also perfect for illustrating the mechanisms of human cognition. Not seeing the animal in person and having limited information about its appearance, Ælfric envisioned it as "*eall mid banum befangen*", metonimically ascribing the most salient feature of the elephant – its tusks – to the whole body.

As a matter of fact, the analysis of source text need not be limited to translation. Whenever the teacher feels that a given narrative text has a noticeable plot, he can prepare a reading comprehension exercise involving e.g. **skimming**, **scanning** or **matching** to ensure the understanding of the text.[11] By choosing e.g. the story of "The Fall of Adam and Eve" (Genesis 3), the teacher can draw on the students' background knowledge, as most of them (if not all) must have encountered it. Thus, the narrative can be divided into a number of passages, the students' task being to arrange them in the right order as they translate it. The text itself provides an opportunity to discuss the changes in English vocabulary. For example, the word *wer* is no longer used and can be found only in one compound – *werewolf*. Its meaning corresponds both to Mod.E. *man* and *husband*.[12] Interestingly, this duality can be also seen in the word *wif*. Thus, in the following passage (Crawford 1969):

[4] Ða cwæð seo nædre eft to ðam wife: „Ne beo ge nateshwon deade, ðeah ðe ge of ðam treowe eton.[13]

The word in question could be translated into Mod.E. as *woman*, whereas in the following passage a more accurate translation would be *wife*:

[8] Eft ða ða God com and hi gehyrdon his stemne, ðær he eode on neorxnawange ofer midne dæg, ða behydde Adam hine, and his wif eac swa dyde, fram Godes gesihðe onmiddan ðam treowe neorxnawonges.[14]

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[11] Needless to say, such activities are sensible on condition that students do not stop to check every second word in the glossary. Therefore, they make sense for more advanced students.

[12] Cf. Polish *mąż* (husband), whose archaic meaning – 'man' can sometimes be found in certain fixed phrases, e.g. *mąż zaufania* ('man of trust').

[13] "Then the serpent said again to the woman: "You won't be dead at all, if you eat from that tree."

The lack of clear delineation between *man-husband* and *woman-wife* may be an indication of how important the social roles of men and women were for mediaeval people. Namely, it could be argued that one would become a 'true' *man* (*woman*) only having married.[15] Another noteworthy example of polysemy is the use of the now obsolete *nyten*, which corresponds roughly to Mod.E. *animal*, as in:

[1] Eac swylce seo næddre wæs geapre ðonne ealle ða oðre nytenu ðe God geworhte ofer eorðan.[16]

However, when it is juxtaposed with *wildeor*, its meaning is narrowed down to 'domestic animal':[17]

[14] God cwæð to ðære næddran: „For ðan ðe ðu ðis dydest, ðu bist awyrged betweox eallum nytenum and wildeorum. Ðu gæst on ðinum breoste and etst ða eorðan eallum dagum ðines lifes.[18]

Finally, the name of one of the main protagonists, i.e. *nædre*, is an interesting example of misanalysis. Its Mod.E. counterpart – *adder* – is pronounced and spelled without the initial *n*, which, over the course of history, has drifted away from the word to the indefinite article usually preceding it.[19]

The use of modern methodology and technology need not be limited to text analysis. While discussing **grammar** the teacher can make use of a number of **on-line courses** and **textbooks** on Old English, both during presentation and practice. Websites like, e.g. M. McGillivray's *English 401: Old English Language and Prose Literature* (2004) or *Old English Aerobics* (1999)[20] contain interactive gap-filling exercises, in which the results are given on the spot, thus providing the students with instantaneous feedback. A few websites devoted to Old English contain audio samples of Anglo-Saxon texts. These can be used in

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[14] "Afterwards, when God came and they heard his voice, where he walked in Paradise after noon, then Adam hid himself, and his wife also did so, from God's sight in the middle of the tree of Paradise."

[15] In fact, a similar overlapping of meanings can be observed in Mod.E.. Thus, both the *OED* and *MED* cite 'husband' and 'wife' among the meanings of *man* and *woman*, respectively, though *MED* marks both meanings as 'informal', while the *OED* as 'dialectal'.

[16] "Moreover, the serpent was more deceitful than all other animals that God created upon the earth."

[17] The word *nyten/nieten* also meant 'cattle' in O.E. (*ASD*).

[18] "God said to the serpent: "Because you did this, you will be cursed among all creatures and animals. You will walk on your breast and you will eat earth for the rest of your life."

[19] The change occurred in M.E., between 1300 and 1500 (the *OED*).

[20] The website contains exercises which are a supplement to *The Introduction to Old English* by Baker (2003).

the discussion of Old English phonology. While listening to the recording, students can follow the tape-script and mark particular sounds. The teacher may also wish to employ a self-discovery technique and ask students to find information on particular aspect of grammar themselves. Another advantage of such websites is that students can study outside the classroom. The Internet also gives students an opportunity to use the language of the past creatively, e.g. through participation in projects like *Awritan on Englisc*, an **electronic discussion group** designed for writing and communicating in Old English.

Finally, the teacher can employ ICT while introducing the historical and cultural background of the history of English language, thus promoting learner autonomy. Among the obscene amount of web pages devoted to the history and culture of the British Isles, those run by **re-enactment groups** deserve particular praise. Created by enthusiasts, such sites not only offer a detailed account of English history and culture, but also recreate the daily life of the past. For example, while visiting *Regia Anglorum* internauts can find out what Anglo-Saxons ate, what they wore, how they fought and where they lived. During the class, the teacher can organise a webquest, in which different groups of students are to find information on particular aspects of Anglo-Saxon life and report it back to the class.

Conclusion

Recognising the need for improvement in teaching *historical linguistics*, there are numerous ways in which *contemporary methodology* and *technology* can be integrated into *linguistic analysis*, thus enhancing the course. The benefits of such measures are twofold: they can increase the efficiency of the teaching process and help rebuild the reputation of historical linguistics among students. It is by no means claimed that the activities proposed are ground-breaking; ICT has already taken root in ELT, and the use of visual aids, warmers, scanning, etc. has a well-established tradition in contemporary methodology. However, the fact that the pedagogical side of historical linguistics still much too often lags behind other subjects, partially due to the teachers' passivity, provides a powerful argument for a serious consideration of the ideas presented in this paper.

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