SECTION TWO

LANGUAGE AND DATING
L1 INTERFERENCE IN THE EDITING PROCESS:
FELIX LIEBERMANN, THE GESETZE AND
THE GERMAN LANGUAGE

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Since its publication a hundred years ago, various aspects of Liebermann’s edition of the Anglo-Saxon law-codes have been criticised, ranging on the one hand from his handling of the textual transmission and his division of the codes into chapters to, on the other hand, misspellings and the use of sometimes cryptic ad-hoc abbreviations. This essay takes a different slant. Rather than produce a list of what, from a present-day point of view, may be perceived as “inadequacies”, I will try to reach a more explanatory level. Looking at examples of punctuation, capitalisation and emendation as well as at some of Liebermann’s translations and linguistic explanations in the Gesetze, the Wörterbuch and the Sachglossar, I claim that, due primarily to his German-language background, particular meanings were created in the edition—meanings that are not linguistically encoded in the Old English original. This phenomenon is sometimes called the “language trap”, and its effects can be traced in the handling of the Anglo-Saxon law-codes from the Quadripartitus to the present day. Arguing for a different approach, I advocate that modern editors should concentrate primarily on the linguistic—rather than the pragmatic, inferred or perceived—meaning of their text(s), and above all that they become more linguistically aware of the role that their native language (L1)—with all its structures and conventions—plays in the editing process.

1 Editors’ note: This paper was presented at the Liebermann centenary conference held in London in 2008. Subsequent medical problems prevented Dr Schwyter from turning his oral presentation into a polished written version. The editors felt, nonetheless, that Schwyter’s contribution was important to this collection. Although they have, to the best of their ability, prepared the paper for publication, the reader must remember that this essay does not necessarily represent what would have been Dr Schwyter’s own finished work. Any errors or infelicities should thus be laid at the door of the editors.