What Old Frisian Can Tell Us about the History of i-Umlaut across West Germanic

Joseph C. Salmons

INTRODUCTION

In Germanic historical linguistics, and perhaps in historical linguistics generally, there is a clear and longstanding bias toward the oldest data, and perhaps even toward data from ancestors of the languages with the most widely spoken modern descendants. As a result, relevant data from languages like Old Frisian have at times been ignored by scholars making far-reaching claims about Germanic. While Old Frisian is robustly attested only much later than Old High German, Old Saxon and Old English, it can nonetheless fill in critical pieces of broader West Germanic linguistic history, as Smith shows in her comparison of Old Frisian ‘vowel balance’ to patterns of syncope and apocope in Old Saxon, Old English and Old High German. When it comes to i-umlaut, Germanic historical linguists might expect to find virtually nothing, given the salient and early general fronting of /a/ in Frisian, as well as the early unrounding of the reflexes of mid and high umlaut outputs.

In this paper, I argue that Old Frisian data can provide decisive support for one of two competing views about the unfolding of West Germanic i-umlaut. One view sees umlaut as having arisen extremely early, well before...
the dawn of directly recorded Germanic linguistic history, even Proto-Germanic, while the other view dates umlaut back to the dialectal period, ca. 7–8th century C.E., just before the emergence of our earlier extensive written documents in Germanic. I aim to show that Old Frisian evidence underpins the latter view, namely that umlaut was an emphatically dialectal phenomenon, in line with its traditional dating in Old Frisian and across West Germanic. Umlaut cannot date back to earliest Germanic, as argued by many in the classic American Structuralist tradition (Antonsen, Penzl, others). This paper thus brings the chronology of Old Frisian sound changes to bear on Germanic umlaut, following conservative and virtually theory independent assumptions about Frisian linguistic history. More importantly, it adds a distinct new type of argument to the debates over Germanic i-umlaut, namely from relative chronology, and does so in a theory-neutral way.

After a brief sketch of the two just-noted and fundamentally opposed views of umlaut (§1), I recapitulate some generally accepted points of Frisian phonological history (§2), showing that Frisian palatalization of velar stops had to pre-date the rise of even allophonic umlaut. In §3, I briefly outline arguments that changes in low vowels must have preceded umlaut, and that monophthongization of West Germanic *ai and *au almost surely did as well. §4 concludes.

While what follows may be largely a case of stating the obvious to Frisianists, the evidence reviewed here and its implications for a widespread view of umlaut across Germanic seem remarkably unknown among the broader community of Germanic linguists, at least on the topic of umlaut, and this, I hope, shows how Old Frisian data can be directly important for Germanic comparative linguistics.

1. Two Competing Views of Umlaut

For present purposes, let us distinguish three approaches to how umlaut unfolded, with Twaddell’s structuralist view chronologically in the center, flanked by earlier traditional or pre-Twaddellian views on one side and post-Twaddellian views on the other. I will focus on the Twaddellian or American Structuralist view of umlaut, and how it compares to a newer post-Twaddellian or ‘Wisconsin School’ view. The turning point at b, Twaddell’s note of 1938, anchors an analysis of Old High German umlaut firmly in classic phonemic theory, rigorously distinguishing the behaviour of conditioned or allophonic variants from the behaviour of independent phonemes. Whereas many earlier views had assumed that umlaut had unfolded gradually, one very direct implication of Twaddell’s groundbreaking article

---