

Book Review

Katerina Somers. 2024. *How to create an early German scriptus: The literization approach to historical German syntax.* (Open Germanic Linguistics 9). ISBN: 9783961104871 (ebook), 9783985541164 (hardcover), 272 pp. €0 (ebook), €35 (hardcover).

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Katerina Somers opens *How to create an early German scriptus* by inviting us to take the perspective of someone who has just decided to commit their ninth-century East Franconian dialect to parchment for the first time. “To be frank,” Somers writes (p. 1), this Frank must be “a bit of an oddball”: in a world where literacy is synonymous with Latinity, what would be the point? Once committed, though, even before any ink hits the page, our Frank would be faced with a range of choices to make in order for their oddball vision to become a reality. Somers’s thesis is that our records of early German are shaped far more by the practical exigencies of this LITERIZATION process than scholars of historical syntax have been willing to admit, and that this has far-reaching consequences for our analysis of those records.

1 Summary

The book’s introduction lays out what it means to consider the history of German¹ from the point of view of literization, that is, what resources individual writers deployed in order to construct a SCRIPTUS, or new written variety. Somers contends that analysts of the language(s) of earlier German texts, particularly in the structuralist and generative traditions, may have unwittingly approached these texts through present-day literacy-tinted glasses, and thus claimed to recognize structural properties that in fact are artefacts of analysis. Chapter 2 elaborates on this theme by framing what is perhaps the most widespread current approach to early German syntax – based on the idea that factors such as Latin influence and metrical effects are confounds that should ideally be eliminated – as a “deficit approach” to the evidence. Central to this chapter is a critical discussion of Fleischer (2006), a work that is particularly explicit about the desiderata involved in this approach. The implication is that, in ruthlessly eliminating traces of Latinity or orality in search of

¹ Somers rejects the traditional dichotomy of High versus Low German, or Old High German versus Old Saxon (p. 10, p. 15).

the one true native-speaker competence grammar of early German, scholars (perhaps unwittingly) find themselves on a path well-trodden by nineteenth-century Romantics on a quest for purity.

Chapter 3 expands upon the argument for viewing early German texts as the product of a conscious, creative process of literization in the Carolingian context: “each writer (or team of writers) must work out for themselves what shape their scriptus should take. This is not to say that their vernacular linguistic intuitions do not inform this process. They certainly do. However, analyzing the early German *scripti* cannot be a simple matter of identifying some underlying grammatical system that fed into them. That is, the principle of historicity reminds us that the early literizers were multilectal and multilingual, just as today’s speakers are. Different syntactic patterns will characterize different varieties of the exclusively oral varieties of early German, as they do modern varieties” (p. 75). Section 3.2 outlines this context and explores how it shaped the literization of the *Tatian* and *Isidor* translations as well as Otfrid’s *Evangelienbuch* and the *Heliand*. Section 3.3, meanwhile, provides a conceptual framework in terms of Koch and Oesterreicher’s languages of immediacy and distance.

Chapter 4, which shares its title with the book as a whole, centres on Kloss’s concept of *ausbau* as it is applied to the creation of early *scripti* – though it draws on Koch and Oesterreicher’s elaboration of the concept more than on Kloss’s own version. Somers argues that the literization process has structural consequences, most notably i) an increasing differentiation in the availability of subordinator types available, ii) an increase in hypotaxis at the expense of parataxis, and iii) a rise in the use of nominalizations. This is due to the dual pressures of memory limitations and the fact that writers, unlike speakers, may be separated from their notional interlocutors by quite some physical and temporal distance.

The aim of Chapter 5 is to illustrate the interplay between individual literizers’ conscious choices and the linguistic resources available to them by means of an in-depth analysis of two ninth-century gospel harmonies, the *Heliand* and Otfrid’s *Evangelienbuch*. Somers argues that both texts are, in different ways, the product of their literizers’ embeddedness within the Latinate tradition of literacy, and provides ample evidence for this conclusion from the texts themselves. In the process she argues persuasively against Haferland’s (2010) claim that the *Heliand* poet was illiterate. In Chapter 6, then, Somers turns to what came before literization, drawing on comparative evidence from the American language Seneca and from the *Hildebrandslied* to make the case for a grammar of elaborated orality. The ideas developed here build on work by Wallace Chafe (e.g., 1994) on the structure of spoken language in terms of intonational units.

Chapter 7 is an extended argument that clauses, rather than being an inherent structuring principle of human language, are a stylistic solution on which early

literizers converged; spoken language is structured into discourse units, not clauses. Buttressing this argument is evidence that the early grammarians to whose texts the Carolingians had access – Donatus and Priscian – did not operate with any concept of a clause that is comparable to the modern one. While the present-day analyst can certainly identify clauses in texts such as the *Hildebrandslied* if they put their mind to it, Somers questions whether the exercise is likely to lead us any closer to cognitive realities. Chapter 8 then concludes with a summary of the book's main thrust: that the literization approach to historical German syntax is a promising alternative to structuralist and generative pursuits, and that it invites a revisiting of texts and practices that are too often marginalized or overlooked.

2 Evaluation

Erudite and forceful, this book puts forward a powerful counternarrative to dominant contemporary approaches to historical syntax. It deserves to be read well beyond German studies; the perspective Somers adopts, while based on evidence from early German textual witnesses specifically, has implications for our understanding of early vernacular texts from all across Europe, and to some extent beyond.

Somers's invitation to historical syntacticians to question the methodological and ideological foundations of our work is a welcome one, especially in a time in which far-right rhetoric buoyed by uncritical readings of older scholarship is widespread. She is right to remind us that there is no single early German grammar, and right to remind us that there is no *a priori* reason for us to discard some of the linguistic practices that we see in the early texts while fetishizing others. The stated target of much of Somers's critique is structuralist approaches (see e.g., p. 27 and Chapter 8), with generative syntax viewed as a flavour of structuralism (p. 20). But structuralism as a school of thought is associated primarily with the first half of the twentieth century, and a better candidate for the origins of some of the unpalatable intellectual directions Somers describes is the zealous nation-building organicism of the Grimms and their contemporaries one hundred years earlier (which she discusses on pp. 13–14; see also Morpurgo Davies 1998: 86–88), with its connotations of linguistic progress and decay. Moreover, while the notion of a language *qua* entity above and beyond individual language acquirer-users is central to structuralism (as in Saussure's *langue*, a “social fact”), generative syntax dispenses with this idealization in favour of a notion of I-language, or competence, which is staunchly individual. As Lightfoot (1991: 162) puts it, “The grammar of Old English ... is a convenient fiction permitting the statement of certain generalizations and ignoring certain types of variation. It no more exists than there is such a real object as the French liver, the American brain, or the Irish wit.” One can – and should – ask for whom such

idealizations are “convenient”; and in practice diachronic generative syntacticians have been surprisingly reluctant to move beyond it. But there is no principled incompatibility between diachronic generative syntax and the recognition that early literizers were multilectal, with diverse linguistic resources at their disposal.

It is true that the focus in diachronic generative syntax has typically been on elucidating competence(s) at the expense of performance, as Somers states (pp. 8–9). She maintains that a “strict competence-performance binary” (p. 9) obscures many of the most interesting and salient facts about early German texts. But another perspective on this is conceivable for those who, like me, are unwilling to abandon the competence-performance distinction. Even if understanding competence is the end goal and performance factors “mere” confounds, serious engagement with these factors is needed in order to distinguish which is which in our historical texts, and that entails developing a serious understanding of exactly the process of literization that is the focus of Somers’s book. For that reason, among many, it would be unwise for diachronic generativists to ignore it. Either way, substantial empirical work is needed on the effects of conceptual orality and literacy on syntactic phenomena. A recent example of a researcher rising to this challenge is McCarley (2025), who finds a strong correlation between subject pronoun expression and level of conceptual orality in a historical corpus of Latin American Spanish.

Somers refers to (what she characterizes as) the structuralist position as a “deficit approach” (e.g., p. 27). That is, in dismissing artefacts of the literization process as simply bad data, structuralists are treating as deficient what is actually just different. It is striking, though, to see the language of deficiency used repeatedly in the book to characterize exclusively oral varieties: these exhibit “functional shortfalls” (pp. 8–9) and “apparent deficiencies” (p. 87), such that they “required further development” for use in written contexts (p. 75). Somers is rightly critical of the extreme position of scholars like Ong (2012) who hold that literacy is the key to unlocking humans’ higher cognitive faculties, a naively progressivist analysis (see her discussion on pp. 101–102). Yet a central pillar of her argument, laid out most clearly in chapters 3 and 4, is that early Germanic vernaculars simply did not have the linguistic resources to meet the exigencies of the new situations of communication-at-a-distance that literization made available: they were faced with a “structural gulf” (p. 96), and hence “each early literizer must innovate linguistically in order to create a written language that can function in these new contexts ... *a simple medial transfer of an oral vernacular into a written one will not suffice*” (p. 84; emphasis original).

An alternative way of looking at this, which I would maintain is at least as compatible with the evidence, is that the competences of these early literizers had already made available the ingredients for the vernaculars to function in these new dislocated situations. This is best illustrated by means of an example to which Somers

devotes substantial discussion in the book (Chapter 4): the use of hypotaxis. One of the properties that Koch and Oesterreicher understand as syntactic *ausbau*, and which Somers also adopts as such, is an increase in subordination (p. 111). In general, this is a narrative over which much ink has been spilled, while the empirical basis of arguments in either direction has been tenuous at best. Somers is at pains to distance herself from the culturally chauvinist stance of Sweet and his contemporaries who maintain that the development towards greater use of subordination is a marker of the change from primitive to sophisticated societies. Crucially, she notes, following Harris and Campbell (1995: 308–310), that languages that have never been literized also display syntactic subordination (pp. 113–114, p. 195): *ausbau* does not create hypotaxis, though it may facilitate it. But at the same time she points out that Harris and Campbell's rejection of any link between hypotaxis and literization is not based on arguments or data.

To this I would add that the classic narrative of a diachronic increase in subordination is also not based on arguments or data. Fortunately, data is now available (see Walkden 2024, 2025), and its implications for the literization account are mixed. On one hand, the evidence for a relation between increased use of subordination and texts that are further from conceptual orality is quite clear: in the history of English, for instance, diaries show relatively little use of subordination, whereas statutes exhibit rather a lot. This is entirely consistent with the findings of scholars such as Chafe that written language has more subordinate clauses than spoken language, and that within written language this distinction has an analogue in the conceptual dimension (Walkden 2024: 26). On the other hand, drawing on data from diachronic corpora of seven languages, Walkden (2025) finds no evidence for an increase in hypotaxis over time. Overall, the picture seems to be one in which speakers and writers (as well as, presumably, signers) across time draw upon the varied linguistic resources that their competences make available to them in different ways depending on the situation, rather than developing brand new structures from scratch. As Somers emphasizes, these speakers are *multilectal*, in the sense that their linguistic usage is not just a reflection of purely mechanical pressures such as short-term memory – though such factors undoubtedly do play a role (see e.g., p. 176) – but also their knowledge that different structures are more appropriate in different communicative situations (on which see for instance Wiese 2024). Nothing about this picture is incompatible with the competence-performance distinction, and nothing about it requires us to take a deficit approach either to the early German data or to the linguistic resources of early German language users.

Ultimately, the success of a counternarrative like the one developed in this volume will probably depend mostly on the range of facts it allows us to explain. In early German, null subjects are more common in main clauses than in subordinate clauses. This fact cannot straightforwardly be explained as a consequence of transfer

from Latin, as Axel (2007) has pointed out. Somers suggests (p. 67) that, rather than reflecting a medium-neutral property of early German grammar(s) as proposed by Axel, this is due to the process of literization: *scriptus* creators decided to use the presence of a subject pronoun as a marker of the distinction between matrix and subordinate clauses. This account raises various questions: why, for instance, did literizers choose to mark subordinate clauses with subject pronouns and leave matrix clauses unmarked, and not vice versa? And are there any other traditions of literization in which parallel practices are adopted, which would provide indirect supporting evidence for such an account? Questions such as these will be central in evaluating the explanatory success of the literization-based model of early German syntax.

In conclusion, this is a well-crafted and thought-provoking contribution to the historical syntax literature. The production standards of the book are also high: only very few typos are to be found, indicating both the high quality of Somers's prose and the efficacy of Language Science Press's community proofreading model.² Otfrid's oddball *Evangelienbuch* is still provoking scholarly discussion over a thousand years after it was written. Whether this book will be as lucky, only time will tell; but I think it is worth a read.

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² However, “gramamtica” (p. 123); “singluar” (p. 167); “with you spear” (p. 183); “Hanveung” for “Hanvueng” (p. 192); “in line most” (p. 227).

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