Using Dialectal Evidence to Determine Date and Provenance of Literary Compositions:  
A Case Study of Beowulf

The study of Anglo-Saxon literature has long made use of linguistic evidence to better understand the origins of specific works and literary traditions, and the epic poem Beowulf has especially received much attention in this respect due to its renown. The poem’s date and place of composition can only be definitively narrowed to somewhere in Britain, sometime between the seventh and eleventh centuries, although paleographical, historical, linguistic, and other evidence can be used to argue for a more specific date and/or provenance. For example, the distribution of the diphthongal forms eo and io within Beowulf and its implications for Beowulf’s dialectal origins have been widely studied. However, despite substantial previous research, scholars have yet to conduct a comprehensive study of the distributions of eo–io forms among the texts of the Nowell Codex (London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv) and analyze their implications for the study of Beowulf’s dialectal origins. The purpose of this paper is to begin to fill this gap by producing an analysis of eo–io distributions and other dialectal forms in each of the Nowell Codex texts and providing linguistic evidence that scribe A was more faithful to his exemplars than was B. The discussion of the scribes’ relative accuracy will be followed by an analysis of the implications of this evidence for the dialectal origins of Beowulf.

The Anglo-Saxon diphthongs ēo and io developed from Proto-Germanic *eu and *iu, respectively (Sievers §40). There was presumably a stage during which Anglo-Saxon initially acquired the forms eu and iu before the second element of the diphthong became o, although few of these forms are attested and the ēo and io forms appear even in the earliest extant writings (Campbell §275). The short diphthongs eo and io are derived from PGmc *e and *i, respectively, by either breaking or back umlaut (Sievers §39). It is worth noting that diphthongs homophonous to ēo and io arose independently by way of contraction, e.g., trēo from PGmc *treṷō (Sievers §113-114, Campbell §120); and diphthongs ēo and io also developed from palatal diphthongization, e.g., gēo-/gio- from PGmc *iū (Sievers §74, Campbell §172). However, given that all historic forms were realized as ēo and io by the time that the vernacular was being used in written texts, distinctions need not be made among these separately derived forms for present purposes.

Of particular interest is the fact that these diphthongs developed differently within each dialect of Anglo-Saxon. In Northumbrian, eo and io developed as distinct diphthongs which were, by and large, not interchangeable (Campbell §293). In West Saxon and Mercian, however, io began to merge with eo in the late ninth or early tenth century, and the diphthongs had more or less collapsed into eo by the late tenth century (Campbell §294-296, Kuhn §2.20). In Kentish, the merger occurred in the opposite direction, beginning around the early ninth century, so that eo merged with io by way of raising by the end of the tenth century (Campbell §297). These dialectal developments are traced in Figure 1 below.

The distribution of these diphthongal forms in Beowulf is particularly interesting to scholars studying the poem’s dialectal origins because of the inconsistent treatments of these forms by the two scribes. The A scribe uses io only 11 times in 87 manuscript pages, while the B scribe uses io 115 times in 53 manuscript pages. The 11 instances of io in the A scribe’s transcription are all etymologically correct, i.e., they developed from PGmc *iu. The B scribe, however, often uses io for *eu as well as for *iu. Most scholars have interpreted this discrepancy as indicative of a difference in the scribes’ faithfulness to an exemplar from which they copied, arguing that either the A scribe or the B scribe is more accurate in his transcription. Both positions have implications for the dialectal origins of the poem.

Table 1 below summarizes the distribution of io forms throughout the texts of the Nowell Codex, distinguishing between etymological and unetymological io. An isolated study of these forms, however, is not sufficient to make robust claims about the relative accuracy of the scribes’ transcriptions. By examining other dialectal forms in every text of Nowell Codex, we find that the A scribe of Beowulf was by and large faithful in his transcriptions, which suggests that 11 instances of io in the A scribe’s part of Beowulf may therefore be attributed to the original exemplar rather than to scribal influence.
Figure 1: A timeline showing the development of the diphthongs eo and io in the major dialects of Anglo-Saxon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Christopher</th>
<th>Wonders</th>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Beowulf Scribe A</th>
<th>Beowulf Scribe B</th>
<th>Judith</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>io &lt; *iu</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>io &lt; *eu</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total # of io</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: A summary of the distribution and etymology of io forms within the texts of the Nowell Codex.

Thus, the dialect of the original Beowulf exemplar preserved a distinction between eo and io. However, if Beowulf was composed in the late seventh or eighth centuries, the distribution of eo and io forms does not reveal much about the poem’s dialect, as at that point in time, all dialects of Anglo-Saxon had more or less of a distinction between the diphthongs. If the poem originated in the ninth century or later, however, the few etymological survivals in the A scribe’s part of Beowulf (and therefore in the exemplar generally) suggest that a Kentish origin is doubtful, since a ninth-century Kentish exemplar would display not only more io < *iu forms, but probably io < *eu forms, as well. A tenth-century date of composition would likely rule out a West Saxon and possibly Mercian original, since the collapse of io into eo occurs in these dialects during this time and is essentially complete by the end of the tenth century, although Sisam (1953:92) claims that a small number of io forms survive in late Mercian, so an Anglian provenance is still possible.

The analysis presented above aims to provide a better framework for understanding the significance of the Beowulf scribes’ divergent treatments of eo and io diphthongs within the poem. The case of these diphthongs has received significant scholarly attention because of the obvious differences in their treatments by the A and B scribes, but it is just one example of the many dialectal features available to scholars as evidence about the poem’s origins. The analysis presented here may be used in more comprehensive syntheses of dialectal evidence to further the understanding of Beowulf and Anglo-Saxon literature more broadly.

References