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THE STRASBURG OATHS : A PROBLEM OF ORTHOGRAPHIC INTERPRETATION

One of the major points on which scholars have declared the spelling of the French passages in the Strasburg Oaths to be ' archaic ' concerns the graphies adopted for tonic vowels in such forms as *savir*, *podir* and *amur*. The late Professor W. D. Elcock summed the question up as follows : ' ... the notation of half-close vowels, stressed and free, does seem to indicate a change, in that, corresponding to the Latin Ē, the scribe has written *i* (*savir* from SAPĒRE, *podir* from POTĒRE, *dift* from DĒBET, and probably *sit*, though this may be pure Latinism) and for ō he has *u* (*amur* from AMŌREM, *dunat* from DŌNAT). These graphies, however, set a problem. Far from being peculiar to the Oaths, they are abundantly represented in Latin texts written in France during the earlier part of the eighth century, before the Carolingian reforms. ' Citing such examples as *rigni* for *regni*, *plina* for *plena*, *tuttum* for *totum*, and *nubis* for *nobis*, he commented : ' Thus, while the use of *i* and *u* in the eighth century may well reflect the development of diphthongs *ei* and *ou* in current speech, its occurrence in the Oaths appears as no more than a reversion to traditional scribal practice. One may wonder why a scribe who could record accurately the diphthong *ei* in *dreit* did not record in the same way what was presumably the same sound in *savir* and *podir* [1]. '

The hypothesis that the *i* and *u* spellings constitute a reversion to earlier orthographic practice seems to be based on the tacit supposition that it is unlikely that a scribe would on his own initiative choose these symbols to represent diphthongs, and this in turn on the probability that the diphthongs in question were descending diphthongs. Thus *i* and *u* would, as phonetic symbols, correspond to the least prominent (unstressed) elements of those diphthongs, while as phonemic symbols they would encounter the obvious

1. W. D. Elcock, *The Romance Languages*, London, 1960, p. 340.

disadvantage of identity with representations of the vowels derived from tonic free ī and ū. What other explanations, then, are available than the scribe's continuance of an older orthographic tradition ? The two most obvious involve taking a different view of the vowels in question. One is to suppose that Latin tonic free ē and ō had given /i/ and /u/, a development otherwise unattested for this period. The other is to suppose that the half-close vowels had remained undiphthongized, as does e. g. R. A. Hall Jr. ' If the scribe had had /é^i/in */savé^ir/, he would have used the same graph *ei* for writing this word as he did for /dré^it/, or, had he used *i* for /é^i/, he would have written *drit* for /dré^it/. The simplest and most reasonable explanation for graphs like *savir, cum,* etc., is that the scribe heard phonemically simple vowels /é^/ and /ó^/ : if there was any incipient diphthongization... it could not have been phonemically significant or the scribe would have written *ei* and *ou*... [1]. ' The problem thus hinges on the question : is (phonemically relevant) diphthongization consonant with the scribe's apparent representation of the vowels in question as non-diphthongal ?

To this question modern experimental phonetics suggests an answer which Romance philologists may have overlooked. Put briefly, it is to the effect that the spelling of the Oaths is, in part at least, neither phonetic nor phonemic but ' sound-typological ' [2]. The hearer's intuitive classification of sounds may be based on attending to similarities and ignoring differences in a way which does full justice to neither the phonetic nor the phonological facts, but is nonetheless based on the phonological importance of certain phonetic features and, in its own way, consistent. In particular, diphthongs may fail, under certain phonological conditions, to be aurally discriminated as such.

It is instructive in this connexion to refer to H. Mol's observations [3] on the vowels and diphthongs of Dutch. He points out that the native speaker of Dutch does not ' hear ' the vowel of *mees* as a diphthong, although experiments show it to be phonetically diphthongal, beginning with an element [e] and ending with an element [i], the two separated by an element characterized by the vocalic transition from [e] to [i]. The explanation may be that the hearer's attention concentrates on the phonemically relevant first element and ignores the rest. However, a ' monolithic ' auditory impression

1. *Language,* vol. 29 (1953), p. 317-321. Cf. also *Language,* vol. 35 (1959), p. 24-25.
2. A. Rosetti, ' Son-type et phonème ', *Linguistics,* vol. 1 (1963), p. 58-59.
3. ' The relation between phonetics and phonemics ', *Linguistics,* vol. 1 (1963), p. 60-74.

may also be produced in cases when the transition appears to be phonemically relevant. In the vowel of Dutch *fijn*, the auditory impression made by the intermediate transitional section between [ɛ] and [i] is readily identified with that made by the complete sequence of three elements. Of the three, the first has the longest duration and might therefore be expected to be the most prominent, as in *mees*. But this long first element seems to be aurally " ignored '.

These facts suggest that a possible basis for intuitive sound typology of stressed vowels would be in terms of the phonetic characteristics of phonemically relevant transitions. One must bear in mind here the possibility that the phonetic realization of the /i/ phoneme in stressed syllables at the time of the Strasburg Oaths may well have been [ɔi] [1], and thus phonetically diphthongal in a way parallel to [ei]. The front mid and high stressed vowels would then fall into two classes : (i) characterized by a phonemically relevant transition to [i], and (ii) characterized by the absence of such a transition. Hence for a speaker of French in the ninth century, the salient fact about the vowel derived from Latin tonic free Ē might have been the transition (however short or unstressed) to [i], and it might accordingly count as 'an *i* sound ' (*i* sounds being those vowels falling into class (i) as defined above). Likewise the vowel derived from Latin tonic free Ō might count as ' a *u* sound '.

To suggest that such a classification underlies the orthography of the Strasburg Oaths is no more implausible than to suppose that it might appear justifiable to an unsophisticated English speaker's ear to spell *gate* as *geat* (cf. *peat*), if he were not unduly worried on any particular occasion by the embarrassment of homographs such as *seak* (= *sake* or *seek*).

If this explanation is possible, it becomes question-begging to describe the *i* and *u* spellings of the Strasburg Oaths either as ' archaic ' or as ' inaccurate '. For *savir* is, on this reckoning, on all fours with *dreit*, *i* and *ei* being merely alternative orthographic expressions of a uniform classification of stressed vowels. The former spelling merely selects as representative of the transition its characteristic terminal element. It is, paradoxically, the spelling *ei* which may be both ' archaic ' (showing in its redundant first graphy the etymological influence of Latin *directum*) and ' inaccurate ' (representing by a digraph what was aurally perceived as unitary).

Finally, if the interpretation proposed of a binary classification of mid and high stressed vowels is correct, we should ' expect ' the Strasburg Oaths

1. Cf. some realizations of modern English /i :/.

scribe to tend to adopt a uniform symbol for the second of the two classes, i. e. mid and high vowels characterized by absence of a transition to [i] or [u]. But this in fact appears to be just what he does, using *e* indifferently to denote the diphthong [iɛ] (*meon*) and a non-diphthongized half-open front vowel (*conservat, sendra, salvament*). Likewise we find *o* in varying cases where a stressed mid back vowel is characterized by absence of transition to [u] (*poblo, cosa, vol, pois*).

An internal consistency can thus be found which points to a basic sound-typology of stressed vowels showing five classes, arrived at as follows : ' low ' vs. ' mid/high ', the latter subdivided into ' front ' vs. ' back ', each of which is again subdivided according to presence or absence of a closing transition. To these five classes the scribe tends to assign the vowel symbols *a* (*salvar, avant*), *e* (*meon, conservat*), *i* (*di, savir*), *o* (*poblo, cosa*) and *u* (*amur, commun*).

Why should the scribe adopt this classification rather than any other ? There is, as it happens, an answer available which fits the historical phonetics of French very neatly. A preference for the classification outlined would be easily understandable if we supposed it to materialize just at a time and place where the French ' second diphthongization ' was conferring particular importance on the recognition of the type of vocalic transition discussed above as a phonetic cue.

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