

## SIL Electronic Book Reviews 2009-024

### The Germanic languages

By Wayne Harbert

Cambridge Language Surveys. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xii, 509. ebook \$36.00, hardback \$115.00, paperback \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-511-26690-4 (ebook), 0-511-26690-1 (ebook), 978-0-521-80825-5 (hardback), 0-521-80825-1 (hardback), 978-0-521-01511-0 (paperback), 0-521-01511-1 (paperback).

Reviewed by René van den Berg  
SIL International

---

The Germanic languages occupy a special place among the world's languages. Not only has one member reached superstar status (the language of this review), but several other members of the group shine brightly as national languages (German, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic), each with a long written tradition as well as a voluminous annual literary production. By contrast, other family members are less radiant in various ways: Afrikaans, Frisian, Yiddish, as well as varieties of Dutch and German that can be (and often are) considered separate languages, but lacking an army and a navy are popularly perceived of as dialects. And then there is of course the long dead relative in the east: Gothic. Though only known from a fourth-century Bible translation, Gothic is extremely valuable for comparative purposes. All in all, Germanic is an old and interesting family by all accounts. It is therefore only fitting that the family (or actually subfamily, since it is a branch of the much larger Indo-European family) finally takes its proper place among the famous green series of Cambridge language surveys, where—somewhat paradoxically—it makes a very late appearance, years after the volumes on the languages of Australia, New Guinea, Korea, and the Amazon Basin have made their impact.

In this review I will outline the contents of this book, followed by some evaluative comments.

In Chapter 1 'Introduction' (1–20) the author states the purpose of the book, limits the scope of the topics to be discussed and presents a few remarks on the organization of the volume. This is followed by a brief but insightful discussion of the issues of convergence in central Europe. For example, all Germanic languages (except Gothic) form the perfect by means of *have* followed by a past participle. This so-called *have*-perfect is shared with all of the Romance languages, as well as Czech and some Balkan languages. Obviously, linguistic features such as these (and ten others that are listed) have spread across families and subfamilies, but Harbert warns that the notion of a 'Standard Average European' language which has been advanced must be regarded with caution. The chapter ends with a brief survey of the family, with notes on the status, history and numbers of speakers of the languages in each of the three major subgroups.

Chapter 2 ‘The Germanic lexicon’ (21–40) is a brief discussion of a number of issues that relate to the lexicon. These include borrowing, calque formation and nativization. It is interesting to read that English and Icelandic represent opposite poles on a spectrum: English has borrowed massively, while Icelandic has shown strong resistance to borrowing and has built neologisms on existing words, e.g. *útvarp* ‘radio’ (from *út* ‘out’ and *varpa* ‘throw’). The issue of gender assignment in German nouns borrowed from English is also briefly mentioned, enough to give the reader a taste. Other topics in this chapter are derivation, compounding, phrasal verbs and discourse particles.

Chapter 3 ‘The sound systems of Germanic: inventories, alternations and structures’ (41–88) provides a sketch of Germanic phonology, not on a language-by-language basis, but by topic. The section on segmental inventories discusses points such as the recent reanalysis of the traditional contrast between voiced and voiceless obstruents in terms of the feature [spread glottis], the wide variety of phonetic realisations of /r/ and the typical Germanic front rounded vowels and their origin. The section on suprasegmental phonology discusses syllable structure, restrictions on clusters, length, stress and word tone occurring in Scandinavian and Dutch/German border dialects.

Chapter 4 ‘The Germanic nominal system: paradigmatic and syntagmatic variation’ (89–269) is by far the longest in the book. This reflects both the complexities and the history of research in the area of nominal inflection (including its loss), articles, genitive phrases, adjectives and pronouns. The chapter ends with a detailed section on the external syntax of subjects, including subject agreement, an elaborate comparative analysis of ‘expletive’ subjects (such as *it* in “It is raining” and *there* in “There are problems”), several passive and middle constructions, as well as various raising constructions. Detailed attention is paid to subject raising constructions (“He seems to write fast”), accusative-with-infinitive constructions (“I believe him to be a good linguist”) and tough-movement constructions (“Gothic is tough to learn”).

Chapter 5 ‘The verbal systems of Germanic: paradigmatic and syntagmatic comparison’ (270–368) treats the intricacies of verbal inflection (weak and strong verbs and their respective histories), modal auxiliaries, developments in the expression of tense, passives and middle voice, nonfinite verbal forms (e.g. infinitives, participles, gerunds), verbal valency, complement and adjunct placement, as well as phrasal verbs. The author repeatedly points out how the loss of inflectional morphology (normally considered a simplification) in Germanic is off-set by the growth of periphrastic constructions, but also by, for instance, increased structural complexity in the semantics of modal auxiliaries.

Chapter 6 ‘The syntax of the clause’ (369–481) covers the following topics: sentence adverbs, negation, the syntax of the left-periphery (topics, the verb-second phenomenon and subject-verb inversion) complementizers, relative clauses, questions and topic constructions. This appears to be the area where the author has made and is making his most important contributions. The treatment of negation and relative clauses is especially rich and detailed.

From my perspective as an outsider to the field of Germanic studies, the book has the following strong points.

- It is a broad and thorough survey of Germanic, incorporating much of the most recent research on these languages, reflected in the 22-page bibliography.
- There is a wealth of information, with many sections offering fresh and succinct perspectives on old problems. Many interesting and little-known facts are unearthed, even about well-studied languages. I learned much about relative clause formation in Yiddish and Gothic, but also about the differences between weak, strong and clitic pronouns in Dutch (my mother tongue), various genitive strategies such as the prenominal periphrastic possessive construction (*Jan z'n kleren* 'John his clothes') and usage differences between the present future and the periphrastic future.
- A number of sections are highly relevant for descriptive linguists: pronouns, raising constructions, word order, negation, relative clause formation and discourse particles, to mention just a few. Discourse particles are extremely common in most Germanic languages, but strangely enough virtually absent in English. Sentences such as German *Wir sind ja alle Freunde* 'We are all friends (as you know)' and Dutch *Kom maar binnen* 'Please come in' convey attitudes and pragmatic nuances by means of the particles *ja* and *maar* which are virtually impossible to translate. The semantic-pragmatic categories discussed in section 2.3 of the book may well benefit descriptive linguists working on hard-to-pin-down particles in exotic languages.

However, I also note a number of weaker points.

- Various topics are sorely missing. First of these is a discussion of the number of Germanic languages. This is given as 37 on the back cover, but nowhere in the text are they actually listed. (The sixteenth edition of the *Ethnologue* gives the number as 48.) I also missed a discussion of the role of the Germanic languages in society, their writing systems and special symbols, intonation, prepositions and details on word formation. There is, for example, no mention of diminutive formation in Dutch, a gold mine both phonologically and semantically. An overview of proto-Germanic morphology and syntax would also have been helpful. The book's strength is obviously in the area of syntax, and because of its very succinct treatment of phonology and lexicon, a better title might have been *Comparative Germanic morphosyntax*.
- The lack of any maps in a volume such as this is almost unpardonable.
- Information on specific topics is hard to find. I know this is not a survey of individual Germanic languages, but simple look-up questions such as "Does Swedish (still) have strong verbs?", "Does Yiddish have front rounded vowels?", "Does Icelandic allow for stranded prepositions in relative clauses?" are nearly impossible to get answers to. Tables and charts showing the distribution of features across the various languages are sparse, while the table of contents stops at listing indented subsections, so that the 52 pages of section 6.5.1 'A typology of Germanic relative constructions' is treated as a single unit, whereas the actual text of that section is broken into a further 18 numbered subsections (e.g. 6.5.1.7.2 Stranding differences). This makes information retrieval much harder for the reader. The index only partially compensates for this.
- In a few areas the theoretical position taken by the author (Government Binding) is made explicit, though this never means a departure from the overall descriptive tone of the

volume. I do wonder, however, whether alternative approaches and solutions are available for phenomena such as the V-2 order and relativization, approaches which do not postulate extensive movement rules or the existence of an obligatory C node (Complementizer) or a TP (Tense Phrase).

- I would have liked the book to end with a concluding chapter, in which a kind of stock takes place. What remains to be done in Germanic linguistics? What are the areas in which there is no consensus? Where are the descriptive gaps? What are the unresolved issues? Some of these are mentioned in the text (e.g. the origin of the *have*-perfect), but a summary would have been very welcome.
- On a more mundane level, I was disappointed to see that the glossing of example sentences does not adhere to the normal conventions in the linguistic literature. Glossing of a highly inflectional language is awkward, but the glossing employed here seems to be some strange mixture of morpheme-by-morpheme glosses and a literal meaning. I will limit myself by giving just two examples from a single page (297), the first from Gothic (Romans 9:15), the second from Swedish.

(5.34)    gaarma            Panei arma  
             pity-1Sg.Pres   whom   pity-1Sg.Pres  
             ‘I will pity whom I pity’

(5.35)c. Jag ringer till di i morgen  
             I    call    you    tomorrow

The hyphens in the first example suggest a non-existent morpheme break in Gothic, while ‘whom’ is at best a translation equivalent of a fully inflected relative pronoun (accusative singular masculine). The obvious difference between *gaarma* and *arma* is not even reflected in the glosses. The second example has six words in the original, but four in the gloss line, leaving the reader to wonder what the exact equivalent of ‘you’ is.

- It was disconcerting to me to find a rather large number of errors in the Dutch example words and sentences. These include *komm* for *kom* (34), *mahtig* for *machtig* (173), *getanst* for *gedanst* (227), *uitgedraad* for *uitgedraaid* (313), *afmaaken* for *afmaken* (352), *heer* for *hier* (449), and *an* for *aan* (454). I can only hope that more care was taken in checking the data from other, lesser-known Germanic languages.

However, I don’t intend to end on a sour note. I truly enjoyed reading the book, and I’m sure I will return to several of the more detailed sections for ideas and references. The author has admirably drawn together an extremely large body of literature, added his own original research and presented his findings in a very readable fashion. I recommend it to anyone with an interest in Germanic linguistics or comparative syntax.