

## **“Variation and change in Gothic”**

### **Abstract for the general public**

As the oldest well attested member of the Germanic branch of Indo-European, the Gothic language enjoys a rich tradition of scholarship stretching back over 200 years. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed a veritable flood of important contributions, including new grammars and textbooks, along with impressive advances in Germanic and Indo-European linguistics. Nevertheless, numerous gaps remain in our knowledge of Gothic grammar on all levels, both synchronic and diachronic. Furthermore, remarkably few scholars have directed their attention to variation within the Gothic corpus in comparison to other older Germanic languages such as Old English, with the result that most nonspecialists today are exposed only to a normalized form of the language.

This project aims to address this gap by examining a set of features involving synchronic and/or diachronic variation in Gothic. These features may be divided into three categories: those reflecting prehistoric variation and change, such as the presence and absence of Verner’s Law alternants or exceptions to so-called “breaking” of the short high vowels *i*, *u* to *ai* [ɛ], *au* [ɔ]; phonological and morphological variables, such as phrase-internal voicing of word-final fricatives or raising of the long mid vowels *ē*, *ō* to *ī*, *ū*; and finally syntactic variables, such as the rendering of Greek genitive absolute constructions as dative absolutes or *at* + dative phrases. The methods to be applied are those standard in historical and comparative linguistics, such as the Comparative Method and establishment of a relative chronology of sound changes. In addition, the project will employ multivariate analysis to identify patterns of textual occurrence and correlations with phonological, pragmatic, or other factors. The collection of tokens for each variable will be greatly aided by the existing word concordance and digitization of the entire Gothic corpus.

The significance of the project extends far beyond the confines of Gothic itself to the whole of Germanic and Indo-European linguistics as well as variationist sociolinguistics. First, it will contribute to a more nuanced, realistic understanding of the Gothic actually spoken by Wulfila and his contemporaries as a dynamic system in the process of change that, like all human languages past and present, exhibited variation of all kinds: phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical. Second, it will promote statistical methods, including variable rule analysis, as essential tools for the study of variation in premodern languages and thereby reintegrate the study of Gothic and other “dead” languages into the field of variationist linguistics. Finally, the insights into the grammar of Bible Gothic will clarify its relation to poorly attested languages of the Migration Period such as Ostrogothic, Vandalic, and Burgundian, which per recent research did not make up an “East Germanic” subgroup in phylogenetic terms, but nevertheless remained for centuries in close contact in the Late Antique Mediterranean.

The results will be presented at major international conferences in the field and published as a series of scholarly articles in leading journals of Germanic and Indo-European as well as historical and variationist linguistics, natural candidates being the *Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics*, *Folia Linguistica Historica*, and *Language Variation and Change*. Upon conclusion of the project, a full-length monograph will be submitted to a prestigious academic publisher, most likely Oxford University Press or the newly formed De Gruyter Brill.