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A REPLY TO SCHMALSTIEG

In two recent issues of *Baltistica* I find myself mentioned critically by Professor Schmalstieg¹. His article seems to be a direct answer to an article of mine, but the first time, in his review of Vols. II and III of Mažiulis' Prussian Dictionary, struck me as both gratuitous and insulting. The object of his oblique attack is basically an article I published 17 years ago, defending the usefulness of the spelling in the major monuments of Old Prussian². After composing a rather caustic reply to his two attacks, I discovered that in a third piece in *Baltistica* XXXIII (1)³ Schmalstieg is generous in his praise of my work. Under these circumstances, I will try to clarify my position regarding Old Prussian with as little bitterness as possible.

Schmalstieg is well-known for his views attacking the reliability of the spelling, and he seems to take personally any attempt to defend the spelling. Unlike the older generation of scholars, who seemed to want to explicate philologically every obvious scribal mistake, in my work I have tried to work out a general approach to the graphetics that could yield some interesting models, while recognizing, of course, that the writers, *whatever* their linguistic background, were not trained at the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Since I published Levin 1982, which proposed a methodology for evaluating the usefulness of the spelling, while making it clear that I was not suggesting that the spelling was necessarily *phonemically* accurate, Schmalstieg has in several different venues defended his position without a response from me, since I believed and still think that my arguments speak for themselves and need no further defense. I have also been content to remain silent since so many Balticists have privately told me that they agree with me. However, in his review of Mažiulis Schmalstieg attacks me in a way that a colleague with more learning than my own describes as outrageous.

¹ V. Mažiulis, Prūsų kalbos etimologijos žodynas, II–III (Review W. R. Schmalstieg, – Blt XXXII (2), 249–256); Old Prussian orthography: statistics vs. common sense, – Blt XXXIII (1), 5–13.

² Graphology and sound change in Old Prussian, – Papers from the 5th International Conference on Historical Linguistics (Current issues in linguistic theory, XXI), Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 201–210.

³ Pietro U. Dini, Le lingue Baltiche... (Review W. R. Schmalstieg), 123ff.

Schmalstieg's arguments have always been *ad hominem* and anecdotal – never directly addressing my points. For many years he attacked me by attacking Transformational-Generative Grammar, until, hopefully, he finally has been convinced that I am as much opposed to the Chomskian enterprise as he. Now he attacks me by attacking Logical Positivism. I am sorry to disappoint him, but I am not a logical positivist, and hardly know how to describe that system. If one wants to assign me to a school, consider me a neo-Praguan. Now it seems, in order to discredit me, Schmalstieg must discredit the whole idea of statistics and the use of mathematical methods. The people who own gambling casinos believe in statistics; the gamblers who leave their money in casinos believe in gut feelings. Actually, mathematical reasoning **is** common sense, and I'm sure that Schmalstieg uses the sort of mathematics-based reasoning I used in my article every day, when, for example, he elects to fly in a plane or ride in a car on an express highway.

Schmalstieg claims that there are too few cases to permit a statistical analysis. That depends on the degree of accuracy one claims. I never claimed that the probabilities approached the levels of reliability found in some sciences, but there are certainly more items to work with in the OP corpus than in some medical experiments that test new drugs. Even a statement about the distribution of spellings that claimed 75 percent probability should be of interest to Prussianists. Many published opinion polls use fewer informants than the relevant items in the OP corpus, always of course with the degree of reliability published. In fact, Schmalstieg has overlooked a fair criticism, that we do not give the actual calculated degrees of reliability for the claims we make. This would take more training in statistical methodology than I possess. I confess that I relied on common sense and my gut feeling when I argued for the significance of numbers of the spelling variants.

So his whole argument against our (mine, Inoue's, Kortlandt's) appeal to numbers is an attempt to save this old claim of his, that the spelling is so bad that one can make anything of it one will. Rather than confront my arguments directly, Schmalstieg makes much of the usages of German clergymen trying to write Latvian in Latvia. Although I am not familiar with that material, I do not doubt Fennell's conclusions, and would hope to come to the same conclusions, with the same material. But Schmalstieg takes it on faith that the situation in Prussia *must have been* the same as in Latvia, but there is no basis for such an assumption. The encounter and interaction of British settlers in New Zealand with native Maori were quite different from their encounters and interaction with aborigines in Australia, despite the proximity in space and time. The difference was in the natives they encountered.

Indeed, we know the encounters were different in Prussia and Latvia because the outcomes were so different. So the parallel with the Latvian experience cannot be assumed *a priori*; one must offer serious factual arguments if one wants to claim the Latvian situation as a proof case. After all, though Schmalstieg refers to Protestant clergymen and illiterate Prussian peasants, some of those peasants went to college – cf. Schmalstieg’s discussion (*Baltistica* XXXII (2) 250) about that famous Prussian peasant Kopernik, as well as the possible provenance of the Basle epigram. The very fact that the 2nd Catechism is “corrected” argues for feedback from native speakers, who perhaps were bold enough to point out mistakes. Are there any Latvian texts described as “corrected” by their authors? Again, regarding Latvian, S. makes much of the failure of Germans to distinguish the two mid front vowels, using *e* indifferently. But no-one is claiming that a single Prussian spelling conceals two phonemes; rather, the issue is whether *different* spellings represent different phones or not. Native speakers are often content with the same graph for two different phonemes – cf. English *th*.

With all his appeal to American college students’ and Soviet provincial waiters’ grammatical errors, Schmalstieg has never addressed the key point I made in that notorious article – that the many curious *consistencies* of spelling for the same morpheme – even without *phonemic* consistencies (in other words, like English spelling) – argued for the beginning of development of a *school* or tradition – not a German clergyman haphazardly writing down the utterances of a Prussian peasant. Schmalstieg ignores this argument except to repeat that consistencies may be consistently wrong – of course, if one is looking for a phonemic transcription, but that was not my argument.

In his *non sequitur* reference to me in the Mažiulis review, he parodies my position, suggesting that my approach could logically lead to denying that OP was a Baltic language! Of course, it is precisely my and others’ approach of taking the spelling *seriously* (NOT necessarily as phonemic, of course) that constrains our hypothesizing and permits the taxonomic placement of OP in its West Baltic group. Ironically, Schmalstieg himself accepts the basic validity of the readings for his purposes, although he repeatedly emphasizes the total incompetence of the German recorders⁴. After all he accepts that the OP pronominal system was different from

⁴ Curiously, in his review of Mažiulis, Schmalstieg still claims to believe that the author of the Elbing Vocabulary was a “German relying on his incomplete knowledge of Old Prussian...” Apparently he is oblivious to the problem of the large and sophisticated specialized vocabulary of the Elbing, pointed out by me and others many years ago. Most people would be hard-pressed to come up with all the terms represented, even in their native language!

East Baltic; he doesn't reject *stesmu* as a real form, although written down by incompetent German clergy. (Why not throw out *every* Old Prussian spelling, and *correct* it with an EB form...and declare OP an EB language!?)

Unfortunately, Schmalstieg seems to want it both ways. For example, his well-known hypothesis of the two phonological systems⁵ must be based on some idea that the spelling system(s) are reliable enough to support such an analysis, but if anyone else proposes a phonological or morphological analysis based on the spelling he is soon reminded by Schmalstieg that of course the spelling is too unreliable to really support any such inference. In pointing out the too slavish devotion of the pre-war generation of scholars to the spellings in the monuments, Schmalstieg has made a valuable contribution, but let us not forget that we can learn from others' mistakes – even the mistakes of 16th Century scribes.

⁵ He neglected to mention that it was I who pointed out to him that Labov's work provides support for the phonological systems he proposed. I have also agreed with and defended his model of the two systems, and remain in agreement with it.