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DIALECTAL AND IRREGULAR FORMS

IN BEOWULF

by

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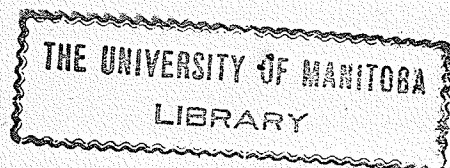


TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
I. A brief survey of the G. S. Dialects.	1
II. Characteristics Common to the Different Dialects and Features Peculiar to each.	14
III. Examples of the Characteristics Common to the G. S. Dialects as found in "Beowulf".	54
IV. Irregular Forms in "Beowulf" requiring special Explanation.	88
Concluding Note.	109

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CHAPTER I

A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE OLD ENGLISH DIALECTS.

Language develops by being spoken not written. As the common experiences of men grow need for expression grows and language gradually develops. As mankind is spread far and wide over the whole globe and cut off from each other by geographical situation of necessity there is a vast difference in their common experiences; and as there is little or in some cases no intercourse one with another different languages develop. The more remote and isolated a country is the more individual is its language; and the less intercourse there is between countries the more dissimilar do we find their tongues. Just as the different languages develop so develop different dialects within a language. For "the difference between a language and a dialect is one of degree and not kind."

As different languages, then, have grown because of men's isolation one from another so dialects grew. For to quote from Sweet "the unity of a language can be kept up only by free and uniform intercourse between all the members of the community which speaks the language." (Sweet, - New Eng. Grammar, Part I, p. 201). If a community then has grown so large that intercourse between all parts is no longer possible, then the language of that community will begin to vary. Each section of the community will begin to have its own individual use of that language, and will begin to develop pecul-

larities of sound and structure, and not coming into contact with other sections of the community whereby these peculiarities might be worn off, they develop until we find several dialects have arisen and are often almost not understood in the most widely separated sections. If communities are separated too, and isolated by geographical or political situations all the more readily will dialects arise, and the more estranged the communities the greater the difference of dialect. Or if foreign tribes, as often happened in history, settle in a new country still more readily will different dialects result. These dialects may rise and fall in importance until one for various reasons will finally gain supremacy over the others and become the standard for the others.

Dialects, then have arisen very naturally and to try to do away with them, as some suggest, would be quite impossible. Not only is it impossible but to lose the dialects would mean a serious loss to the study of a language. For instead of forms being corrupt as they are often regarded they are generally more correct than the modern form. Through them many an old word is preserved which otherwise would be lost. Skeat says "There is no limit to the good use to which a reverent study of our dialects may not be put by a diligent student." (From - English Dialects from 8th Century to Present Day - p. 7) So every literary language has had its dialects, and to quote from Skeat again "will continue to have them in secluded districts though they are at the present time