

NOTES ON CONSONANT GROUPS IN LATE OLD ENGLISH

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0. “Die große Worthäufung verbietet eine phonologische Komplexität, d. h. starke Konsonantenhäufung,” writes Vladimír Skalička (1964:112), the founder of the Praguian linguistic typology,¹ about isolating languages. “Die Sprachen des isolierenden Sprachtyps sind eher vokalisch, wenn das hier auch nicht im gleichen Maße gilt wie beim polysynthetischen Typus. Diese Sprachen müssen daher als stark vokalisch bezeichnet werden.” It is the aim of the present article to survey the main tendencies in the structural variety of consonant groups in Old English — a language with a rich inventory of consonant groups both within the bounds of a single morpheme and at the morpheme juncture² — in its later stages, before the major typological transformation of English from inflection to isolation in Early Middle English (EME).

1. In what follows we will concentrate on the synchronic status of consonant combinations in Late Old English (LOE), with the understanding that many of the processes and variations considered below are continuations of older trends in the language. Our main focus will be on the developments in weak (post-stress) syllables, a prime site of long standing for deletion of short vowels, cluster simplifications and other processes. We will be concerned only with increase or decrease in the structural presence of consonant groups, as the scope of the article does not permit a quantitative analysis of their frequency and distribution. Within the broad category of ‘consonant groups’, we shall distinguish between consonant combinations, i.e. occurrences of consonants in contiguous neighbourhood at morpheme junctures, and consonant clusters, i.e. sequences of segments normally forming a major syllable constituent.

2. Phonological processes affecting the occurrence of consonant groups in the structure of LOE words can be classified into those that essentially increased the complexity of consonant clusters and combinations (2.1.), and those that had a decreasing effect on their complexity (2.2.).

¹ Cf. e.g. SKALIČKA – SGALL (1994).

² Cf. e.g. PILCH (1970: 66–72).

2.1. Among the former processes, the most persistent ones were gemination (2.1.1.) and syncope (2.1.2.).

2.1.1. Gemination, which was at its functional prime in Proto- and West Germanic (WG), continued as a consistent process throughout the Old English period. It worked in close collusion with syncope (2.1.2.): consonants doubled after a short syllable when the syncope of vowels had brought them before *r* and *l*, thus re-creating conditions which caused doubling in WG, as in Late West Saxon (LWS) miccle (micel, 'great'), butor (butere, 'butter'). Doubling also occurred after a long syllable, which had probably been shortened, and almost exclusively only after *r*, as in LWS tuddre (tuddor, tūdor, 'progeny'). Apart from these two conditioned phonological processes, gemination could arise by syncope (when syncope deleted a vowel between two identical consonants), metathesis and assimilation, or through addition of an ending, suffix or, in compounding, of a lexeme beginning with a consonant (identical to the preceding one). A specific and morphologically limited source of LWS gemination was doubling before *-ra* of the comparative and *-re*, *-ra* of the strong adjectival inflection (wīddre; wīd, 'wide').

2.1.1.1. Gemination competed with a tendency to reduce triple consonant clusters (2.2.2.) and with a trend to stem isomorphism, based on the analogy with uninflected forms [wīdre rather than wīddre on association with wīd; hēar(r)a (previously simplified from hēahra, cf. 2.2.3.) > hēahra again; hēah, 'high'] and having a blocking effect on syncope (2.1.2.2.). The competition was often concealed by spelling — especially in LWS, where forms with doubled consonants were more common.

2.1.2. Syncope, which caused the loss of a vowel in medial unaccented syllables, operated in the language from prehistoric times and continued throughout the Old English period. The medial vowel was freely dropped after short syllables, when the loss caused a group consisting of consonant + *l* or *r* to arise: yfle (yfel, 'evil'); micle, ætgaðdre (ætgaðdere, 'together'), dyslic (dyselic, dysiglic, 'foolish'), medmian (medemian, 'allot'), opnian (openian, 'to open').³ Disyllabic forms could appear as monosyllables (or, when inflected, as disyllables rather than trisyllables): cyln (cylen, 'kiln, oven'); byrl (byrel, 'hole'), weolc (weoloc, 'cockle'), clerc (cleric; 'cleric'). Furthermore, complex consonant clusters arose in monosyllables created by the loss of an unaccented vowel after a short syllable before a consonant group (ofst, 'haste'; world). In LOE, syncope achieved a more sweeping effect by occurring also after long syllables, both in originally open (bōcre, 'scribe'; dēoffic, 'devilish') and closed syllables (fulhtere, 'baptizer'; ærndian, 'to go on errand').

2.1.2.1. Diachronically, syncope, a phonological agent of complex motivation,⁴ represented a major source of consonant clusters and combinations [cf. e.g. sceafba vs. sceafoba ('shaving'; < *-abō), gōdne ('good'; < *gōdanōn)], which were, in their turn,

³ A similar loss between other consonants was more sporadic (fremde, 'foreign'; egsa 'terror', circe, 'church') and its forms mostly appeared beside forms with preserved medial vowels.

⁴ LASS (1994) treats it as a force aiming to "maximize certain apparently 'preferred' foot-configurations" (p. 102); HICKEY (1986) sees it determined, apart from phonological factors, by word-class status and by inflectional/derivational nature of the suffixes and their semantic relevance.

often subject to simplification (cf. 2.2.2.). Synchronically, syncope promoted rich inflectional and derivational allomorphy [awles (awel, 'hook'), lifre (lifer, 'liver')], a constitutive feature of typological inflection.

2.1.2.2. Lack of syncope seems to have been caused — apart from syllable weight and its distribution in the word — by a tendency to stem isomorphism within a morphological paradigm (aweles beside awles on association with the nom. sg. awel) and by a tendency to avoid awkward or illegal consonant groups. The latter tendency can be demonstrated by numerous examples: gen. pl. of the adjective frecne ('terrible') had the form frecenra in the gen. pl., where the syncope was blocked by the illegality of the cluster which would have arisen had it taken place (*frecnra); similarly, the medial syllable was not syncopated in the inflected forms of efes ('eaves'), geogub ('youth'), etc., where contiguity of consonants was avoided even at a morpheme juncture. Similarly, where the heavy syllable would end in a consonant cluster with a final liquid, such as in hyngrede ('hungered'), there was normally no syncope.⁵ This propensity to resist illegal consonant groups had important morphological corollaries: originally trisyllabic \bar{o} -stem nouns of the type firen ('crime'), feter ('fetter'), cylen, spinel ('spindle') rejected *-u* in the nom. sg. while they generally retained the medial vowel but syncopated it elsewhere, e.g. firen (*firenu, *firn) but firene, firne in oblique cases.⁶

2.1.3. A more sporadic source of consonant combinations was the intrusion of a consonant between a nasal or an *s* and a liquid or nasal [LWS examples: *mt* > *mpt* (æmtig > æmptig, 'empty'), *sl* > *stl* (ondryslic > ondrystlic, 'terrible'); the new consonant agreed with the preceding one in place of articulation and with the following sonorant in voice].

2.2. Among the phonological processes that decreased the complexity of consonant clusters and combinations, the most significant processes included epenthesis (2.2.1.), simplification (2.2.2.) and assimilation in consonant groups (2.2.3.).

2.2.1. Epenthesis created a persistent variation in OE, apparent from the very earliest texts. In later texts, there was a marked tendency to develop *i* or *u* in a group consisting of a consonant and an approximant (*j*, *w*), such as in hergas > herigas (here, 'army'); myrgb > myrigb ('joy'); beadwe > beaduwe (beadu, 'battle'), in order to break up an awkward consonant cluster. Similarly, epenthesis or syllabification took place in a consonant cluster created by a dropping of an ending: cf. e.g. ceastru > ceaster ('town') and other \bar{o} -stems with *l*, *m*, *r*, *n* before the inflexions. In LWS, *e* arose before *-re*, *-ra* of the strong adjectival and pronominal declension (sumere, bissere). Connecting vowels in compounds and derivations of the type bærefōt ('barefoot'; \bar{a} -stem determinants), goldefrætwe ('golden ornaments'; long \bar{a} -stem determinants) and nihtelic ('nocturnal'; consonant stem determinants), which should phonologically

⁵ In Northumbrian, where syncope appears to have been permitted (cf. HOGG 1992: 228), a syllabic liquid arose: hyngerde.

⁶ *Firn* existed as an uninflected form, cf. CAMPBELL [1983, § 589 (5)]. — A similar situation obtained e.g. with the \bar{a} -stems of the type lungol.

be lost, may also have been due to an effort to avoid complex or illegal consonant combinations.

2.2.2. Simplification of double consonants mainly stemmed from the loss of stress in heavy medial syllables resulting from adding *-ne*, *-re*, *-ra*, *-lic*, *-nes*, *-dōm* (and other syllabic inflectional and derivational segments) before 900: *gylden~~ne~~* < *gyldene* ('golden'), *æftera* < *æfterra* ('second, next'), *dīgelic* < *dīgellic* ('secret'); low stress demonstrative forms *pi~~se~~s*, *pi~~su~~m*, etc. After fully accented syllables, simplification was much rarer: *geleāful* (< *geleāfful*; 'faithful'), *lateow* (< *latteow*, 'leader'). After another consonant, simplification was the phonological norm, even in full compounds: *geornes* (< *geornnes*, 'desire'), *wildēor* (< *wilddēor*, 'wild beast; deer'). In triple consonant groups, simplification generally took place in late texts though it was often concealed by conservative spellings under the influence of simple or etymological forms (e.g., *fāmnhādlic* vs. the more frequent *fāmnhādlic* ('virginal') on association with *fāmn~~e~~*, 'virgin').⁷ Certain regularities in this process of loss existed, such as that a stop consonant was more likely to be lost than a fricative or a sibilant, and that groups of three phonologically unlike consonants were only sporadically reduced in Old English (e.g. LWS *myr~~h~~b* > *myrb*).

2.2.3. Assimilation in complex consonant clusters and combinations occurred throughout the Old English period, often in double consonant groups created by syncopation and most typically involving devoicing (*rīde~~b~~* > *rīd~~b~~* > *rīt~~b~~* > *rīt*, 'he rides'; *geogu~~ð~~* > *gioh~~ð~~*, 'youth'; examples with no previous syncope: *blī~~b~~s* > *bliss*, 'bliss'; *hrefn* > *hremn* > *hrem(m)*, 'raven'). Variation of syncopated and/or assimilated forms and forms based on paradigm analogy (due to the tendency to stem isomorphism) had considerable morphophonemic significance, giving rise to alternative stem-shapes [*bepæc~~ð~~* > *bepæh~~ð~~* (*bepæcan*, 'to deceive')].

2.2.4. Minor and less frequent processes in the category of 2.2. included dialectally limited regressive r-metathesis (*worhte* > *wrohte*, 'worked') and changes of specific consonant clusters in onset (LWS *sprecan* > *specan*, 'to speak'; *prætig* > *pætig*, 'tricky, sly'), after a post-stress vowel (*ærndian* > *endian*) and in medium stress positions (e.g. compounds in *-ærn*: *cweartern* > *cwearten*, 'prison').

3. Without a quantitative analysis of the frequency and distribution of consonant groups, which in itself has profound limitations owing to the chronological and dialectal characteristic of the Old English corpus, it is impossible to obtain a clear picture of the fluid panorama outlined above. However, on the whole it seems that there was neither a dramatic decrease nor increase in the complexity of consonant groups in LOE. The language showed marked sensitivity to awkward consonant clusters and heavy combinations. The variation in consonant groups was due to a competition of two major tendencies. One represented the general diachronic trend towards an ever shorter word form, operating at the LOE stage in weak syllables mainly through syncopation and increasing the complexity of consonant groups. The

⁷ Spellings that do show simplification in triple consonant groups may "be assumed to represent 'spoken English' of the Anglo-Saxon period" (KLAEBER 1903: 245).

other aimed to decrease this complexity, frequently by adding vowels and thus making the word form longer. At the same time, the latter tendency often tended to reduce allomorphy, achieve isomorphism in the stem and establish a distinct phonological boundary between parts of the word (a feature which was not characteristic of typological inflection). The cumulative effect of these contradictory processes in consonant groups helped to increase the opacity of the morphophonemic system as the language approached a major typological reshaping. Progressive typological isolation would in time favour a smaller functional load of consonant groups.⁸

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Poznámky ke konsonantickým skupinám v pozdní staré angličtině

Résumé

Ve světle Skaličkovy postulátu o relativně nízkém funkčním využití skupin konsonantů v izolačních jazycích článek fonologicky hodnotí fonetické procesy, které ovlivňovaly strukturu konsonantických skupin v pozdní staré angličtině, tj. v předvečer zásadní typologické přestavby angličtiny z jazyka převážně flektivního v jazyk převážně izolační.

⁸ Cf. ČERMÁK (2003).