Notes on Obscured Compounds in Old English

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Abstract
The paper attempts to survey the processes of obscuration in Old English compounds (i.e. the changes gradually transforming their compound status into simplexes) and to categorize them. These diachronic developments are presented as related to the word-formational status of compounding in the Old and Middle English period and placed in the larger framework of the typological reshapement of the word-structure in the history of English.

0. From a diachronic viewpoint, obscured compounds[1] are products of phonological and morphological lexicalisation that may go hand in hand with semantic isolation. In obscured compounds "entwickeln sich ein oder beide Bestandteile lautlich anders als die entsprechenden Simplizia, so daß ihre ursprüngliche Gestalt verwischt wird und der Zusammenhang mit den Simplizia abreißt" (Sauer 1992: 85). As a concept, obscured compounds are well established in diachronic studies of English word-formation and phonology. Though linguistic analysis of obscuration in Old and Middle English compounds must necessarily proceed from their attested historical spellings and though some obscured compounds may indeed be no more than regular, full-fledged compounds in a peculiar orthographic disguise, the process of obscuration is not to be understood simply as a change in spelling over time. Neither should it be assumed that obscuration is directly associated with sense development: compounds that have, for one reason or another, become obscure need not in any way hamper communication by becoming unintelligible to the speakers of the day. Rather, obscuration is a descriptive term used to capture a noteworthy aspect of lexicalisation processes in language by historical linguists, who are equipped with means of comparison and reconstruction and thus able to ascertain the rise of a moneme status in words whose original structure was compounded.

1. The records of the earliest stages in the development of individual Germanic languages are notoriously scanty but the evidence we possess suggests that early processes of obscuration may well have predated the first records. That obscuration in compounds has been part and parcel of the historical development of English since its Middle stage has been amply demonstrated but, surprisingly, there seems to be as yet no account of the situation in Old English (OE). What follows is an attempt to fill this gap.

1.1. The starting point of the present analysis was the discussion of obscuration processes in Early Middle English (EME) by Hans Sauer; his sample of ca. 110 obscured compounds gleaned from EME texts (Sauer 1992: 85–86, 345–364) provided valuable comparative evidence.

1.2. The present sample, containing nominal and adjectival compounds of undisputed origin and (at least partially) obscured status,

has been derived from Bosworth-Toller's *Dictionary* and checked for variant spellings against the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* (see Table 1 below). The method of adopting a reverse order – proceeding from lexicographical to textual evidence – is due, apart from practical reasons (Sauer's was a full-scale study of nominal compounding in EME), to the fact that most OE texts are impossible to date.

1.3. Both the OE and EME samples consist of diverse items both lexically and semantically, with the exception of the inclusion in the OE sample of words in *efen-* ('even-') and in the EME sample of the names of days. The latter – along with two other types of nomination, personal (*e.g. Hrōþulf < Hrōþwulf, Ælfred < Ælfrēd*) and place names (*Gloucester < Glēawceaster, Warwick < Wæringwic*), that have been in the history of English a frequent target of obscuration[2] – reveal a structural link between the second element weakened in an obscured compound by reduced stress and a kind of mechanical, slurred pronunciation of such lexico-semantically specific formations.

2. Just like at later times in the history of English, the motivation of the obscuration processes in OE compounds is likely to have been complex but the primary conditioning of the lexicalisation was phonological. In most cases, the obscuration stemmed from two sources: the assumed weakening of the second element of the compound and bimorphemic consonant cluster simplification.

2.1. The types of obscuration reflected in the OE material are as follows:

A. weakening of the second element of the compound due to the loss of secondary stress, causing modification of the vowel or diphthong (shortening, monophthongisation);
B. loss of an unaccented vowel after a short syllable before a consonant group (which mostly results in a monosyllabic structure with a consonant cluster);
C. simplification in the bimorphemic consonant cluster (*Kompositionsfuge*)
1. loss of *-h-* (voiced glottal spirant as the initial consonant of the second element), along with compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel;
2. loss of *-w-* (initial consonant of the second element);
3. loss of *-n-* (final consonant of the first element);
4. loss of -h- between a vowel and voiced consonant;
   a. along with lengthening of the preceding vowel or diphthong;
   b. along with smoothing of the preceding diphthong;
   c. along with both lengthening and smoothing;
5. dropping of a middle consonant in the bimorphemic cluster;
6. assimilation (mostly regressive), often resulting in C7;
7. double consonant simplification after another consonant and a fully accented syllable;

8. double consonant simplification after a fully accented syllable; D. shortening of a vowel before a double consonant cluster.[3]

The resulting, obscured forms comprise a small corpus (ca. 50 types)[4] of varying analysability, from relatively transparent formations to highly opaque structures, depending on the degree to which the (sub)types of obscuration combined in each particular case.

Table 1

obscured form[a]	full form	historical record	low frequency in OE: obscured/ full	type of obscuration[b]	other potential factors
ælpig ('single')	ānlīpig (< *ān + hlēap-)	OE, ME	–/+	A, C1	
ēnitre, æwintre ('one year old')	ānwintre	OE	+/+	A, C2	
beorhthwīl ('moment')	bearhtmhwīl	OE	–/–	C5	interference with *beorht-* ('bright')?
bern, bere(r)n ('barn')	bereærn	OE – ModE	+/–	B	
durere ('folding door')	durhere	OE	–/–	C1	
earmrēad ('arm-ornament')	*earmhrēad	OE	hapax	C1	
efen-, em-, emn-, enne- ('even-') /emniht ('equinox'), efelaste ('everlasting')/	efen-	OE, some OE, ME	+/+	B, C6, C7	
elboga, elmboga ('elbow')	elnboga	OE – ModE	–/–	C6, C5	
ēorod, ēored ('troop')	*eoh + rād	OE	+/0	A, C4a	
fēondulf ('criminal')	*fēond + wulf	OE	hapax	C2	
fulluht ('baptism')	fullwiht	OE – ModE († fullought)	–/–	A, C2	
fultum ('help')	fultēam	OE, ME	–/–	A	
furlang, furlung ('furlong')	*furh + lang	OE – ModE	–/0	C5	

gebyrtīd ('time of birth')	gebyrdtīd	OE	–/–	C5	
gewyrtūn ('garden')	*gewyrttūn	OE	hapax	C7	
hēadorhund ('deerhound')	*hēahdēorhund	OE, ME (header)	–/0	A, C4	
heardra ('mullet'?)	heardhara	OE	+/–	A, C1	
hefelþræd ('thread for weaving')	hefeldþræd	OE, ME	–/–	C6, C7	
hīred, hīrd ('household, retinue')	*hīwræd	OE – ModE († hird)	–/0	A[c]	? interference with ON form *hirð*
hlāford ('lord')	hlāfweard	OE	–/+	A, C2	
hwīlende ('transitory')	hwīlwende	OE	–/+	C2	confusion of suffixes *-wende* and *-ende*
īfig ('ivy')	*if-hīeg	OE – ModE	+/0	C1a	
lāreow ('teacher')	*lārþēow	OE, ME	+/0	A, C6, C7	
ladteow, latteow, lateow ('leader')	lādþēow	OE, ME	+/+	A, C6, C8, D	
lēahtūn, lēhtūn ('herb garden')	*lēactūn	OE	+/0	C6	semantic attraction by *lēah* ('meadow')?
līcuma ('body')	līchama	OE, ME	–/+	A, C1	
nēh(h)ebūr ('neighbour')	nēahgebūr	OE – ModE	–/–	C6	
nēowest, nēwest ('neighbourhood')	*nēahwest, -wist	OE	–/0	C4, C4b	
nosterl ('nostril')	nosþyrel	OE – ModE	–/+	A, C6	
orceard ('orchard')	ortgeard	OE – ModE	–/–	C6[d]	
racetēah ('chain, fetter')	racenttēah	OE, ME (later only in north. dial.)	+/–	C3, C7	
scyldrēþa ('shield, phalanx')	scyldhrēþa	OE	–/–	C1	
wælrēow ('cruel')	wælhrēow	OE	+ / +	C1	confusion of forms *hrēow* ('sorrowful'); *hrēoh, rēow* ('rough, troubled')

wēocsteall ('sanctuary')	wīgsteall	OE	–/–	C6	
wēofod ('altar')	wīgbed (<*wīoxbed)	OE, ME	+/+	A, C4b	
wildēor, wildor ('wild beast')	wild(e)dēor	OE, ME	+/+	C7	
world ('world')	woruld, worold	OE – ModE	+/+	B	semantic obscuration of 2nd element with the suffix *-eld*?
wimman ('woman')	wīfman	OE – ModE	+/+	C6, D	
wyrtruma ('root')	wyrttruma	OE	+/+	C7	

[a] For limitations of space, only the most typical/frequent forms are given.
[b] In complex cases, the numerical sequence does not necessarily follow the order of the individual developments.
[c] For the form hīred, cf. Campbell (1959: § 120, n. 2).
[d] Followed by assibilation.

3. The evidence of obscuration processes in OE compounds prompts the following observations of a more general nature:

(1) Though obscuration in compounds is a process that has been taking place in the history of English continually, the transition from Late Old to Early Middle English – a period when profound phonetic, morphological and sociolinguistic changes were transforming the structure of the English word and when there existed no regularised spelling to exert conservative influence on its form – appears to have been a particularly favourable time for obscuration processes in compound words. In Old English proper, the obscuration processes had – in comparison to the evidence available for EME – only small beginnings.[5] The number of obscured compounds in the OE corpus is small in terms of both types (less than 50) and tokens; on the other hand, it seems safe to assume that the real extent of the OE data may have been obscured by consistent etymological spellings and strong correcting associations with the corresponding simplex(es), prevalent in the language of the period.

(2) Those records of the OE obscured compounds that can be dated with some precision show that there was a growing tendency towards obscuration in late OE.

(3) Where there existed a variation between the obscured and full forms, the former appear to have been scarcer.

(4) Some of the types of obscuration appear to have been frequent (A, most subcategories of C), some very rare (B, C3, C8, D). Several types were more directly related to the morphological structure (A, C1–C3), others seem to have been insensitive to it. Most developments classified under B and C were probably related to the obscuration effected by A.

(5) A comparison of the OE and EME data reveals a significant overlap both in the mechanisms of obscuration and the lexical items affected by them: the history of quite a few obscured compounds listed by Sauer predates the EME period. The main differences, as was to be expected, are a greater proportion of obscured compounds with a shortened determinant in EME as well as a higher number of compounds whose obscuration is based on the loss of a final *-n* in the determinant.

(6) The greater degree of obscuration is achieved, like in EME, through combination of phonological developments (e. g. *lateow*).

(7) The most frequent type of obscuration in both sets is based, in one way or another, on bimorphemic consonant cluster simplification.

(8) Lexico-semantic factors are likely to have intervened but almost without exception there is insufficient evidence to ascertain the nature of the process. Such conditioning applied only in exceptional cases while in others, where equally applicable, it did not. More importantly, arguing for semantic factors of obscuration moves in a circle: the only evidence we seem to have of semantic conditioning rests on an irregular phonetic/phonological behaviour of the items in question.[6]

4. Processes identical with or similar to the obscurations in the *Kompositionsfuge* characterise incipient simplification of consonant clusters at morphemic junctures, mainly in derivations (cf. e. g. *geonlic* ('young') < *geonglic, hēalic* ('high') < *hēablic, hēanes* ('highness, height') < *hēahnes, æwerdla* ('injury') < *æfwerdla, embȳdig* ('anxious') < *embhȳdig*).[7] Together, they can be seen as a manifestation of growing insensitivity in the language to the word-formation structure of the word. Even more importantly, these developments represent one of the numerous facets of the incipient typological reshapement in English by contributing to the gradual decrease of consonant clusters – a tendency marking, as is the case of Old and Middle English, the transition from a predominantly inflectional language system to a system characterized by an increasing presence of isolating features.[8]

5. How does the history of obscured compounds in Late Old and Early Middle English relate to the development of compounding in the two periods? How do the obscured compounds tie in with the typological restructuring of English?

5.1. Basic contours of the history of compounding from OE to ME are now well known. Essentially, there existed a continuity of compounding patterns from the one period to the other. In purely quantitative terms, however, the transition phase saw a decline in the productivity of most of these inherited patterns. The decline is seen as due to three major reasons: first, compounding as a highly productive word-formation strategy in OE was closely linked with the poetic language whose tradition came to be largely abandoned soon after the Norman Conquest. Second, the ME period witnessed a gradual decrease in coining compounds as loan-formations inspired by Latin models and manifested in OE prose; third, a number of compounds came to be replaced by simplexes borrowed

primarily from French (for a convenient summary of these processes, cf. Sauer 1992: 719–22).

5.2. In most general terms, obscured compounds are a marker of ongoing lexicalisation processes, a permanent feature of diachronic wear and tear in language. For example, just as compounds naturally rise from syntactic combinations, so they may suffer attrition by being transformed into mere derivatives (by reinterpretation of the determinatum into a suffix) or, as in the present case, into monomorphemic structures (by the process of obscuration). In this diachronic tug-of-war between the drifts in language towards greater complexity and simplification, respectively, formations such as obscured compounds may then paradoxically testify to the productive status of compounding at the given moment in the life of a language. In other words, to paraphrase one characteristic feature of the polysynthetic type in Skalička's typology, the more numerous compounds become in a language system, the less relevance may be attached by the speaker to their respective structural parts. Moreover, in the transition between OE and ME, such obscuration processes no doubt had a specific sociolinguistic facet: this was a period when many lexical items, both compounds and simplexes, fell into oblivion or became lexicalised and structurally isolated simply because they never gained access to the written page.

5.3. In this transitional period, interestingly, processes such as the rise of obscured compounds do not seem to have had a structural parallel in grammar even though compounding as a word-formation strategy came to be, in the somewhat later history of English, closely associated with grammatical developments (see below). However, by this time in the history of English such parallels between word-formation and grammar were lacking because processes of grammaticalisation of word-formation devices in the word structure inherited from the Indo-European times had long been at an end. In EME, the dynamics of the grammatical development centered around the changing character of the ending and its relation to the word base (stem). This dynamics is manifested by e. g. increasing disuse of morphonemes, by decrease of synonymy in the endings, by loss of contrast in unaccented syllables, by massive analogical levelling as well as by the fact that inflectional, non-syllabic endings were giving way to endings that were more loosely attached to the stem (i. e. syllabic and therefore more agglutinative ones).

5.4. The quantitative representation of the inherited compounding patterns increased in the ME period again when grammar and word-formation had been finally divorced from the inflectional principle as their structural mainstay. This was when tendencies towards an invariable base and a monosyllabic word structure prevailed – with an important typological corollary of a weakened contrast between the morpheme and the word – and when allomorphy had been largely abandoned as a construction device. The former two developments in particular had strengthened the systemic link between compounding as a polysynthetic feature and the new isolating framework of English (as isolating languages do not generally form new words by compounding).[9]

6. Our evidence of OE and ME is far from complete. In the light of the evidence we possess of these corpus languages, obscured compounds may be seen, on the one hand, as a "morphological peculiarity" (Sauer) in the story of early English compounding, on the other hand as a typical manifestation of lexicalisation, a feature inseparable from the normal functioning of a natural language. As such, and in contrast to compounding as a major word-formation strategy, they can have but little typological relevance: they are a modest marker of the tendency towards the break-up of etymological families whose presence distinguishes the word-formation of predominantly inflectional languages or diachronic periods from those characterized by predominant isolation. It may be then only natural that the numbers of obscured compounds grow in the later history of English, aided no doubt by the growing number of written records.

Abbreviations

EME Early Middle English
Gmc. Common Germanic
LOE Late Old English
ME Middle English
ModE Modern English
OE Old English

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(Endnotes)

[1] Also verdunkelte Komposita (Koziol, Sauer); disguised compounds (Sweet, Götz); coalescent compounds (Ullmann); amalgamated compounds (Kennedy, Pyles); ex-compounds (Leisi); reduced compounds (Hogg).

[2] Neither type has been included in the OE sample presented below; place names are marginally present in the EME sample.

[3] Götz (1971) notes shortening of the (vocalic) nucleus in the first element of the compound due to the following geminate consonant, consonant cluster or due to the position of the nucleus in the antepenultima.

[4] The present corpus is bound to be incomplete: first, it is based on the record of Old English represented by Bosworth-Toller's *Dictionary* with no regard to its later *addenda*; second, the identity and origin of some OE candidates of obscuration can no longer be ascertained with reasonable precision, not least because spelling variation in some cases (including etymological respellings) makes it very difficult to distinguish between developments that merely affect spelling and those that transform sound.

[5] Even very heavy (bimorphemic) consonant clusters remain intact by the LOE times, cf. e.g. *for-gnidennys* ('tribulation'), *fōt-þweal* ('washing of the feet'), *gnorn-hof* ('prison'), *grind-tōþas* ('molars'), *grist-bitian* ('gnash the teeth'; cf. EME grisbitien), *lēofwende* ('kind, loving'; cf. EME leowinde), *hearg-weard* ('temple-warden'), *swefel-þrosm* ('sulphurous smoke'), *fæðm-rīm* ('fathom'), *feorh-cwealm* ('slaughter'); though – again – a certain amount of variation may be obscured by etymological spellings and other regularising factors, such as productivity of a lexically specific compounding pattern, e.g. the predominantly poetic compounds with *gūþ-* ('battle-') as the first element. – The opposite process, i.e. analogous reformation that would generalise an obscured variant within a pattern, appears to have been only marginal, cf. the formations with *em-* (< *efen-*, 'even-') in the first element of the compound. Also, Old English shows a rather conservative approach to (bimorphemic) consonant clusters in loanwords, notably those borrowed from Old Norse /in contrast to EME where obscuration in compound loanwords was much more frequent (cf. Sauer 1992:359-364)/.

[6] Cf. e.g. Campbell's comment (1959:§461) that the glottal spirant *h* which arose in compounds of Germanic coinage could disappear before voiced sounds unless the compound still had full meaning /as in *Hēaberht* vs. *hēahburh* ('chief city')/, or his discussion of the differences in the development of Gmc. **ai* dependent on the relative chronology of semantic obscuration in compounding and derivation (§ 355 ff.).

[7] Cf. Čermák, J. (2004).

[8] Cf. Čermák, J. (2003); this quantitative study of consonant clusters, based on a sample from Wulfstan's homilies and from the *Ancrene Wisse*, proves Skalička's thesis that isolating languages prefer a relatively low presence of consonant combinations in discourse; moreover, it shows that a significant decrease of consonant clusters from LOE to EME bears no direct relationship to the syllabic structure or word-formation status of words comprising the text.

[9] The structural dovetailing of compounding and the systemic status of an invariable base is evident in ModE as well, perhaps most readily from the notorious difficulty of distinguishing between compounds and syntactic combinations. – It is also interesting to note that isolation – as the only one of the five Prague School types of language – did not play a significant role in the predominantly inflectional system of OE grammar and word-formation. This fact also corroborates Skalička's observance on inflection as a relatively weaker typological principle in contrast to isolation.