

Syncope in West Saxon Verbs and Adjectives: Some Morphological Complications

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The inflectional morphophonology of Old English is not representative of the straightforward analyses provided in traditional grammars such as Campbell's (1959) *Old English Grammar*. The behaviour of high vowel deletion provides support for specific kinds of interaction between phonology and morphology, in contrast to traditional philological theories in which all sound change is expected to proceed in a regular manner, with exceptions being considered to be analogical and separate from any phonological conditions. In this paper I will be exploring some of the problems that arise when attempting to give a phonological account of syncope in West Saxon. Syncope is traditionally defined as a weight-driven process, removing the high unstressed vowels of open syllables when preceded by a heavy stressed syllable.

In the verbs of Early West Saxon syncope is extremely variable, showing both over- and underapplication. Contrary to the pattern permitted in other word classes, syncope may even apply in closed syllables or after a *light* stressed syllable. The behaviour of adjectives is distinct from that of the verbs, for example, in adjectives the syncope of vowels in closed syllables never happens. We already see, therefore, morphological conditioning within the dialect, with the distinction between verb and adjective coming into play in addition to syllable weight. Furthermore, in certain adjectives the removal of a medial or final vowel is possible as a weight-driven repair process, but only one may proceed. Interestingly, the choice between apocope and syncope comes down to morphological gender, rather than any phonological consideration. For example, in a disyllabic word with a heavy root syllable such as *hālig* 'holy', the nom/acc.pl.neut. form in *-u*: [ω[.hɑ:̄:].li.ju.] will face deletion due to the emergence of an unfooted syllable. Since two unfooted syllables are evident, we must ask which one will be deleted. In the adjectives of the West Saxon dialect, a nom/acc.pl.neut. adjective such as *halig* will show syncope: [ω[.hɑ:l].ju.] whereas a nom.sg.fem. adjective, *which provides exactly the same prosodic conditions* will show apocope: [ω[.hɑ:̄:].lij.]. The analysis must therefore account for this discrepancy. I will also consider the issue of accounting for a system in which closed syllables may be targeted in verbs but not adjectives.

Within Optimality Theory, there have been a number of ways suggested of dealing with such morphophonological phenomena, including morpheme specific constraints (Anttila 2002) and cophonologies, where a master hierarchy is proposed with certain constraints ranked variably. These variable rankings will affect the morphological categories in question (Bermúdez-Otero & McMahon 2006). I will discuss the wider implications of such theoretical accounts, as well as their benefits in describing the issue at hand.

References

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