On syncope in Old English

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Abstract. Syncope in Old English is seen to be a rule which is determined by syllable structure but furthermore to be governed by a set of restricting conditions which refer to the world-class status of the forms which may act as input to the syncope rule, and also to the inflectional or derivational nature of the suffix which are added also to the precise phonological structure of those forms which undergo syncope.

A phonological rule in a language which does not operate globally is always of particular interest as the conditions which restrict its application can frequently be recognized and formulized, at the same time throwing light on the nature of conditions which can in principle apply in a language’s phonology. In Old English a syncope rule existed which clearly related to the syllable structure of the forms it did not operate on but which was also subject to a set of restricting conditions which lie outside the domain of the syllable. The examination of this syncope rule and the conditions pertaining to it is the subject of this contribution.

It is first of all necessary to distinguish syncope from another phonological process with which it might be confused. This is epenthesis, which appears to have been quite widespread in late West Saxon, as can be seen in the following forms.

(1) a. woruld ‘world’
    b. cylen ‘kiln’
    c. meoloc ‘milk’

The second vowel in the above forms is a svarabhakti vowel which arises due to a sonorant and a further obstruent following upon one another in the same syllable rhyme underlyingly.

A surface restriction in late West Saxon disallowed such sequences in syllable-final position so that a vowel was introduced in the offending sequence, rendering an original monosyllable from disyllabic (see Hickey 1985 for a full discussion of the triggering factors for epenthesis). The later loss of this vowel (compare the Modern English forms in (1)) cannot be interpreted as syncope (as Campbell 1959: 159-160 sees it), but simply as the reversal of epenthesis with the relaxation in English phonotactics.

The second distinction it is necessary to draw in this connection is that between diachronic and synchronic syncope. It is obvious from any observation of the Germanic languages that unaccented medial vowel loss has occurred (along with other types of phonetic reduction) throughout the history of English and had done so by the Old English period. Comparative evidence (see Brunner and Sievers 1965: 131ff. and
Luick 1941: 113ff. for general remarks on English in relation to the other Germanic languages) can be used to show various reductions such as:

(2) a. *daeglič* cf. OHG *tagalih* ‘daily’
    b. *hatte* cf. Gothic *haitada* ‘is called’

(Campbell 1959: 143)

which are not to be subsumed under those to be considered here.

1. The manifestation of syncope in Old English

Synchronic syncope in Old English can be compared with that found in present-day languages. Take for example the case of Modern Irish. Irish functions well as a reference point for syncope as the phenomenon underlies no non-phonological restrictions. The qualification ‘non-phonological’ is important here as the occurrence of syncope is determined by whether the cluster which arises on syncope is legal with regard to the phonotactics of Irish.

(3) a. *focal* ‘word’
    b. *foclóir* ‘dictionary’
    c. *iomair* ‘play-IMPERATIVE’
    d. *iomraid* ‘I play’

It is important to note here that if syncope is possible in Irish then it always occurs: there are no cases where it is not implemented.

The syncope rule in Old English however is more complicated. As in Irish it is triggered by suffixation. Consider the following examples:

(4) a. *dryhten* ‘lord-NOMINATIVE’
    b. *dryhtnes* ‘lord-GENITIVE’
    c. *finger* ‘finger’
    d. *fingras* ‘fingers’

It looks from this as if Old English has a straightforward rule deleting an unstressed vowel when it becomes word-internal on suffixation. But a variety of other forms shows that the situation was not quite so simple:

(5) a. *fugol* ‘bird’
    b. *fugelas* ‘birds’
    c. *nicor* ‘monster’
    d. *nicoras* ‘monsters’

The generalization which can be drawn from this has been stated often: Quirk and Wrenn (1955: 21-22) formulated it quite precisely, Lass (1984: 250 ff.) offers a brief discussion of it. The condition on syncope is as follows: if a noun stem (the stressed syllable with noun forms) has a long syllable rhyme then syncope occurred; if however the rhyme is short then no syncope was found. Here a long rhyme is by definition one which has either a long vowel and a short consonant or a short vowel and two consonants. The lack of syncope can thus be interpreted as a type of syllable
quantity preservation rule: when the stem syllable is light (has a short rhyme) no vowel loss occurs. It is incidentally irrelevant for the present discussion that this rule was not always kept to. Not infrequently there are instances of nouns with light stems which show syncope. What is of interest here is that the lack of syncope is by far and away most common with such light-stem nouns (Campbell 1959: 226).

2. The scope of the syncope rule

The restriction on syncope just mentioned is of a phonological nature. However not all possible forms which meet the structural description of the syncope rule, or that for the non-application of syncope, behave in the manner which one would expect from the forms in (4) and (5).

(6)  a. *snotor* ‘wise’
    b. *snytrian* ‘to be wise’
    c. *snytru* ‘wisdom, cleverness’

In this particular case one could appeal to the relative chronology of derivations like those in (6 b + c) from (6 a): these were obviously not synchronic derivations in late West Saxon as can be seen from the change in value of the stem vowel on suffixation (/o/ > /y/). To test the scope of syncope in late West Saxon one must examine synchronic suffixation in this period. One of the clearest types of suffixation in Old English is adjectival inflection. Many adjectives are disyllabic with a short unstressed vowel in the second syllable.

(7)  a. *biter* ‘bitter-NOMINATIVE’
    b. *bitre* ‘bitter-GENITIVE’
    c. *wacor* ‘wakeful-NOMINATIVE’
    d. *wacre* ‘wakeful-ACCUSATIVE’

The above forms are comparable in their phonology with those in (5) where no syncope is found. Furthermore those adjectives which are monosyllabic in their uninflected form do not show an unstressed vowel between stem and ending.

(8)  a. *gram* ‘fierce-NOMINATIVE, MASCULINE’
    b. *gramne* ‘fierce-ACCUSATIVE, MASCULINE’
    c. *gramra* ‘fierce-GENITIVE, PLURAL’

The conclusion which suggests itself from this observation is that the syncope rule is bound to the (lexical) class of noun but does not apply to adjectives. One can now expand one’s material to see what situation obtains elsewhere in Old English. With verbs the syncope rule is found to hold. Heavy stem syllables show syncope while light ones are attested without syncope.

(9)  a. *wuldor* ‘glory’
    b. *wuidrian* ‘to glorify’
    c. *lytel* ‘little’
    d. *lytlian* ‘to diminish’
One interpretation of this data is to see syncope as occurring only within certain word classes. According to this view syncope would apply within the major lexical class ‘noun’ and ‘verb’ but not within the lexically minor class ‘adjective’.

The consideration of further aspects of syncope suggests another interpretation of the rule’s operation in Old English. Looking at syncope from the point of view of the morphological status of the elements involved in the process one can arrive at a different hypothesis. Consider the simple distinction between base form and suffix. Here I use the term ‘base form’ to refer to the uninflected form in its entirety. Thus nicor in (5c) is a base form, i.e. this includes the unstressed vowel of the second syllable. Syncope is caused in each case when a suffix is added to a base form. If this suffix simply has the function of a case ending and in addition applies to a base form of a minor lexical class then phonetic reduction (here: vowel deletion) takes place. This would account for the syncope in (7) and the lack of it in (5) and (9f+h). Furthermore one could argue within this view of syncope that the greater the semantic relevance of the suffix involved the less the probability of syncope taking place. With adjectival inflection the semantic relevance of the individual suffix is slight, as the grammatical category indicated by the suffix, e.g. accusative, genitive, etc. is frequently redundant, as the article or the syntax of the sentence already identifies the grammatical category unambiguously. There is one area where adjectives undergo inflection and where the semantic load carried by the inflection is considerably higher than with case inflection: in adjectival comparison. When one now turns to Old English comparative forms one finds that the lack of syncope with light-stem syllables would seem to hold (Quirk and Wrenn, 1955: 35-36).

The last of the above forms shows the fortition of the final /u/ of the base form to /w/ before the vocalic suffix for the superlative and is thus not to be seen as connected with syncope. Equally the phonotactics of Old English must be appealed to to account for apparent exceptions to the rule whereby syncope always applies when the stem syllable rhyme is heavy.

Here the syncope is blocked by the illegality of the cluster /fɔnə/ which would have arisen if it had taken place.

When one proceeds to the area of derivation then one is forced to reflect further on the conditions for syncope. In order for syncope to either occur or not occur
not only does the stem of a base have to conform to a certain syllabic pattern, but the second unstressed syllable must do so as well. To see what is meant here consider the following forms:

(12)  a.  *taelful*  ‘numerous’
     b.  *lufsum*  ‘lovable’
     c.  *snotorliċ*  ‘clever, wise’

All of these forms are derived from a lexical base plus a non-inflectional suffix. The respective bases are:

(13)  a.  *tael*  ‘number’
     b.  *lufu*  ‘love’
     c.  *snotor*  ‘wise’

With (12b) one notices that the final /u/ has been lost on suffixation. The condition on syncope which refers to the second unstressed syllable of the base form now becomes evident: this syllable must be closed; if it is not then the vowel is deleted so that a light-stem syllable alone is not sufficient to block syncope. One can now revise the view of forms like those in (10d-f) (cf. other adjectives like *nearu* ‘near’ which behave similarly) whereby they do not undergo syncope because of the light-stem syllable. The blocking of syncope in the comparative of such forms is due to the identical consonant (/r/) in stem final position and in the suffix (although syncope does occur if the non-syncopated form would be tetrasyllabic, cf. (10b) above). A greater degree of generalization is achieved if one views the apocope of final vowels in derivational processes as part of the syncope process. By doing so one would render superfluous the reference to the morphological status of the suffix in connection with syncope. The position of adjectives would however still dictate that one take account of lexical class in the formulation of the syncope rule.

3.  **Apparent vowel insertion**

It was specified at the outset that epenthesis and lack of syncope should be kept strictly apart as they have different phonological motivations and that epenthesis was not to be treated within this examination of syncope. Nonetheless it is necessary to mention a certain phenomenon which is evident in Old English and which might suggest that there is not only syncope and lack of syncope but also a process of vowel insertion which would support the view that lack of syncope is not just the absence of syncope but an active process in itself. Consider first of all the following forms:

(14)  a.  *niht*  ‘night’
     b.  *nihtegale*  ‘nightingale’
     c.  *cilď*  ‘child’
     d.  *cilďahyrde*  ‘educator’
     e.  *čeap*  ‘buy’
     f.  *čepeumann*  ‘vendor’  (Pilch 1970: 109)
It would appear from a comparison of the forms in (14a, c and e) with those in (14b, d and f) that an unstressed vowel has been added to the first part of each of the compound nouns. This is indeed the case, but it does not however have anything to do with the syncope being looked at here. If one looks at various other derived forms in Old English then one ascertains that vowel insertion only occurs when compounds are formed. Where a derivational suffix and not another lexical element is added to a stem no such inserted vowel is found. Indeed just the opposite is the case: a final vowel in a base form is deleted on derivational (non-lexical) suffixation, see (12b) above. The occurrence of vowel insertion in compounds is not entirely regular and may have a variety of sources. These range from simple insertion in (14b and f) to the morphological motivation of the vowel in a form like

(15) \textit{Englalond} \quad \text{‘England’}

where the a is a genitive plural ending, to the non-deleted final vowel of the base-form in

(16) \textit{yrremōd} \quad \text{‘anger’}

where deletion does not take place as the second element of the derived form is lexical (cf. (12b) above).

References

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