

ÆLFRIC'S HOMILIES AND INCIPIENT TYPOLOGICAL CHANGE IN THE 12th CENTURY ENGLISH WORD-FORMATION

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0. Any search for signs of change in early English word-formation is bound to start from a general paradox. On the one hand, the history of English is traditionally considered to provide a neat example of a language in typological progression from inflexion to isolation (in terms of Prague School Typology¹). On the other hand, the nature of the early English textual record does not provide a neatly organised, continuous and consistent reflection of language change in progress. This is mostly due to varying and altogether sparse quantity as well as uneven distribution of manuscripts in time and space – so much so that linguists looking for comparable texts across the early centuries have only a handful of textual resources at their disposal. Among those available for the transition period between Late Old and Early Middle English there are copies of Late Old English homiletic prose produced in the course of the 12th century.

1. The present paper offers an empirical probe into a selection of these texts – three homilies by Ælfric of Eynsham and their Early Middle English copies in a collation. The aim of the probe is to trace symptoms of incipient typological change in the word-formation by comparing the originals and the extant copies of the three homilies that stand about 150 years apart. The change is assessed within the framework of the Prague School Typology as developed primarily by Vladimír Skalička, Petr Sgall and Jaroslav Popela for the morphological level, with the main emphasis on word-formation in relation to the slowly changing structure of the English vocabulary.

2. The three texts chosen for analysis are the following:

- Ælfric's homily *De octo uiciis et de duodecim abusiis huius seculi*: the Old English text in Cambridge Corpus Christi College, MS. 178, edited by Morris (1867, 1868/1988: 101–119) along with its Middle English copy of Lambeth MS. 487; the Middle English copy of Cotton MS. Vespasian D.XIV edited by Warner (1917: 11–19); henceforth referred to as Text 1;
- Ælfric's homily *In die sancto pentecosten*: the Old English original edited by

¹ Other linguists of the Prague School, who worked in other than a typological framework, such as Bohumil Trnka and Josef Vachek, were content to use a mere binary opposition of synthesis vs. analysis.

Clemoes (1997: 54–64); the Middle English version of Lambeth MS. 487 edited by Morris (1867, 1868/1988: 87–101); henceforth referred to as Text 2; Ælfric’s homily *De initio creaturae*: the Old English original edited by Clemoes (1997: 178–189); the Middle English version of Cotton Vespasian A.xxii edited by Morris (1867, 1868/1988: 217–231); henceforth referred to as Text 3.

The texts represent a corpus of c. 10,000 words altogether. So far, these homilies – particularly the versions that are part of the Lambeth collection – have been extensively researched for scribal tradition, phonology, morphology and syntax, but not, to the best knowledge of the author, for their word-formation patterns.

2.1. Although generally taken to have been produced by skilled and careful scribes, the texts do exhibit significant changes ranging from spelling innovation and sound change to replacements due to lexical mortality. In other words, their scribes, for all their faithfulness, can be seen as responding to differences between the language of their exemplars and the English of the time, in an effort to meet two ends at once: to produce a faithful copy which would be, at the same time, fully intelligible to the readership of their day. Even though stylistic choices and modifications motivated by clarification, amplification and embellishment must be allowed for, the consistency of some of the differences in word-formation between the Old and Early Middle versions of the homilies suggests that indeed we deal here with processes symptomatic of diachronic change in progress.

2.2. The source texts rank among typical products of the transitional period in that they encompass both linguistic features that are traditional and features characteristic of innovation. Most innovative linguistically is Text 1. In the words of its first editor, it not only “transliterates”, but also “translates” (Morris 1867, 1868/1988: ix) consistently, to keep up with incipient language change. Text 2, on the whole more traditional than Text 1, primarily reflects shifts in phonology (phonetic erosion) and morphology (analogical levelling and loss of endings). Text 3, while being the most traditional with respect to language change, can be considered the most innovative as a preacher’s revision of the Old English original, with numerous cuts and amplifications made in order to get across a clear theological message.

2.3. The linguistic profile of the Early Middle English versions is most prominently marked by changes in phonology and morphology. In phonology, phonetic erosion regularly affects the most weakly stressed, i.e. final, syllables, with heavy impact on the build-up and regular representation of morphological paradigms. The inflectional endings tend to undergo the process of levelling and subsequent loss, with the long-term effect of reinforcing the isolating character of the sentence, as in Ex. 1:

Ex. 1: OE *seo is wyrtruma ælcere wohnyse* > *heo is more of elchere wohnesse* (“it is the root of all perversity”) (Text 1)²

² Interestingly, in a high number of cases where the ending is retained, there is a tendency to maintain an unequivocal formal representation, one-to-one mapping between function and form, such as in the 3rd person sg. ind. where the previously syncopated syllables tend to be re-established, thus disturbing

Syntax of the Early Middle English copies is generally rather conservative: it appears slow to react to the changes in phonology and morphology and displays only sporadic word-order shifts, as in Ex. 2 (with the affected finite verbs forms underlined):

Ex. 2: OE *namon þa to ræde ... þæt hi sumne dæl heora landes wurpes æthæf-don... > EME *Heo nomen heom to þam rede þet heo walden sum of heore ehte etholdan* (“they took counsel together to withhold some of their goods /from the apostles/”) (Text 2)*

The most remarkable feature of lexical innovation in the Early Middle versions of Ælfric’s homilies is a delayed arrival of loanwords. Both borrowings from Norman/Old French and Old Norse are extremely rare, such as OF *cachepol* (“toll-collector”) replacing OE *tollere*; OF *prede* (“pride”) superseding OE *ofermettu*, and ON *gersume* (an ON loan of late OE date; “wealth”) ousting OE *feoh*. With the slow appearance of loanwords, lexical replacements typically involve an exchange between items of Germanic origin and Old English date.

Some of these replacements reflect, as far as it is possible to tell, conscious stylistic and lexical choices, as in the following: *wyrcean* > *maken* (Text 1), *wyrcean* > *don* (Text 2); *bebeodan* > *hatan* (“to order”, Text 2); *cweðan* > *seien* (Text 1, 2); *goldhord* > *ehte* (“wealth”, “possessions”; Text 3).

Occasional lexical changes may be due to misunderstanding on the part of the scribe or redactor, resulting in a semantic shift, as in the change of *unearfæstlice* “ignobly” into *u/nlageliche* “unlawfully” (Text 1), or Ex. 3:

Ex. 3: OE *þa wurdon hi onbryrde* “they were incited” > EME *þa iturne heore mod* “their mind was turned” (Text 2)

Finally, the Early Middle English copies also exhibit, though in rare instances only, what seem to be shifts due to differences and varying emphases in the interpretation of the original, as in Ex. 4:

Ex. 4: OE *þa wæron ealle on annysse* “they were all unanimous” > *and þa weren alle mid sibsumnesse* “they were all in peace” (Text 2)

Lexical changes that do seem to be due neither to mere stylistic or lexical preferences nor to differences in the interpretation of the original texts may be considered to reflect – along with the obsolescence of the original Old English items, which in itself is likely to have been caused by a number of possible causes of both an external and internal nature – changes in the word-structure that may exhibit the interconnectedness of word-formation and lexical structure, so typical of inflexional languages.

the widespread inflectional allomorphy, as in *tæcō* > *tæcēd*, *towyrpō* > *to-werpeō*, *byrð* > *berēd*; *onliht* > *onlihteō*. Indeed, the motivation for this may be morphological in order to establish a greater degree of iconicity, but equally it may be due to mere scribal interference (Dieter Kastovsky, personal communication).

3. The principal typological tendencies at work in the word-formation of the Early Middle English Ælfrician copies can be characterized as 1. affix loss/replacement; 2. decrease in the introflexional build-up of the word-structure; 3. a tendency towards what might be described as a less informed word-structure; and 4. growing sensitiveness of the word-structure to consonant clusters and consonant combinations. Tendencies 2–4 are clearly interconnected.

3.1. The processes of affix loss/replacement have the long-term result of reducing the inventory of affixes and decreasing the productivity of the productive ones. The loss of a suffix may be tied to the loss of its lexical vehicle, as in Ex. 5:

Ex. 5: OE *god yrsige wið eow* > EME *god iwurðe wrað wið eou* (“God shall be angry with you”) (Text 1)

The loss of the OE verb *yrsian* “be/become angry”, derived from the noun *yrre* (“anger”) by means of the suffix *-s-* (plus the infinitival suffix *-ian*), in the Early Middle English version seems due primarily to the demise of the suffix.³ The loss of the verb in its turn results in the rise of an isolating EME structure, based on a copula (furnished with receding inflexional features) and an adjective.

The loss of an affix may have diverse functional motivation. One such motive is semantic change, as in the OE verb *forgyfan* (“to give”, “to forgive”), which discards the prefix in association with the former of its primary senses, thus becoming synonymous with *gyfan*. In other cases, the process of affix loss may strike at the very heart of typologically inflexional Old English morphology, as in the case of a number of agentive nouns in the Early Middle English homiletic versions: nouns such as *cum-a* (“visitor”) or *wit-a* (“wise man, counsellor”) lose their affix which originally functioned both as a derivational suffix and a grammatical ending⁴ and come to be ousted by lexical replacements (*cum-a* > *gest*) or periphrastic noun phrases (*wit-a* > *wise mon*). In yet other cases, the loss of an affix appears to be due to formal impoverishment of the inventory of endings in the system of receding inflexion. Thus, the dative noun phrase *to byrgene* (“for burial”) comes to be replaced by the infinitive *to buriene* (“to bury”), a change marking the demise of the nominal suffix *-en*⁵, which becomes, in Early Middle English, formally identical (“synonymous” in terms of Prague School Typology) with the suffix of the infinitive.⁶

3.2. The decrease in the introflexional build-up of the word-structure is a feature that paves the way for typological isolation in that it reduces allomorphy, establishing

a higher degree of isomorphism in the stem, and sets up a more distinct phonological boundary in the structure of the word. Thus, in Ex. 6:

Ex. 6: OE *þonne byð his eard geyrmed for oft* > EME *þene bið his erd ihened oft* (“then his land will be impoverished very often”) (Text 1)

the OE verb *yrman* (“impoverish”; also *ierman*) may be seen as losing ground due to the fact that its derivation from the adjective *earm* (“poor”, “miserable”) involves the introflexional and long unproductive mechanism of *i*-mutation (cf. the OE word-family *earm*, *ierman/yrman*, *ymdo* “misery, poverty”). In contrast to that, the EME scribe has chosen as a synonym of *yrman* the verb *henan* which involves no such phonological interchange (cf. OE *hynan* : *hyndo*). This is a general tendency in the Middle English period: in the long run, English consistently discards introflexion as a structural means of inflectional and derivational morphology. Forms based on introflexional mechanisms – most notably *i*-mutation and ablaut – become lexicalized, marginalized or extinct altogether (such as is the loss of reduplication in cases like the OE verb *ofgangan* (“receive”), which is in the Early Middle English copy rendered as *ofga*).

3.3. Such changes and modifications are also linked to the tendency 3, namely the propensity of the Early Middle English word to have a less informed (“low relief”) structure, i.e. such as is generally shorter, composed of fewer segments, and more clear-cut. This is exemplified by the OE verb *ge-un-rot-s-ian* (“to become troubled, discontented”) which the early Middle English scribe renders in two ways – as *sorg-ian* and as *ben sari*. Another example of the same tendency is provided by the change of the *-ot* suffix in the OE noun *þeow-ot* (“service”, “servitude”) for *-dom* in the EME *þeow-dom*. The latter suffix is part and parcel of the OE inventory but it is significant that at this time it prevails over *-ot* for being more agglutinating, i.e. syllabic, unequivocal⁷ and less prone to phonetic erosion, than its competitor.

3.4. Finally, there appears to be in the Early Middle English copies and rewritings of the homilies by Ælfric a number of instances that reflect growing sensitiveness of the EME word-structure to consonant clusters and consonant combinations. Though often difficult to assess against the welter of spelling forms, two tendencies seem to be operative here. One manifests itself in the simplification of consonant clusters through the ultimate loss of a consonant, as in OE *bloSTMa* > EME *bloSMa*, OE *riHTLæcan* > EME *riHLechen*, OE *aNDSete* > EME *aNSete* (with affected consonant groups capitalized). The other tendency is manifested by simplification of consonant clusters by vowel insertion (anaptyxis), often on the basis of morphological analogy (e.g. with the nominative or some such prototypical ending), as in OE *forligre* > EME *forligEre*, OE *syngian* > EME *synEgian*; OE *wiglung* > EME *wigElung* (with the inserted vowel capitalized). Although opposing in their results, the two tendencies jointly display the sensitivity of the Early Middle English word-structure to consonant clusters and

³ Petrified in the later history of English in marginal forms such PDE *cleanse*.

⁴ This was the case in Early Old English; by the Late Old English stage, the *-a* formant had ceased to perform the role of a suffix, cf. Kastovsky (1992).

⁵ This suffix, performing the function of denoting instrument or process, becomes lexicalised in later English, cf. e.g. PDE *burden*.

⁶ The gradual undermining of the affix status in the Early Middle English copies is further reflected in the spelling vacillation of various affixes, affixes and affixless forms, affixes and prepositions, as, for example, in OE *mid þam ilcan lichaman þe he on þrowode* which comes to be replaced by EME *mid þan ilce licama þe he onþrowode* (“with the same body in which he suffered”).

⁷ Cf. the formal resemblance and functional proximity in Old English of the suffix *-d* (with alternants *-þ*, *-ot*, *-oð*, *-ed*) to the suffix *-ðu*, etc.

combinations – at a time when the word-structure appears to be striving for a shorter, isomorphic and less informed shape. The point needs much further elaboration but this sensitivity appears to be in accordance with Skalička's (1964) typological observation that the progression of a language from inflexion to isolation favours an increasingly smaller functional load of consonant groups.

4. The Middle English word has been aptly described as torn between domestic and foreign, spoken and written, traditional and innovative domains. Against the backdrop of this competition, developments in derivational morphology appear to be less progressive than those in inflectional morphology. In the typology of Early Middle English word-formation, decreasing introflexion goes hand in hand with diminishing inflexion. Derivation as a word-formation strategy begins to employ fewer prefixes and suffixes (this decrease is to be compensated by borrowing later in the Middle English period from Romance). Affixes tend to be of a more agglutinating nature. Lexical mortality has a devastating effect on a vocabulary organized on the etymological principle (Mathesius 1939–40) or associative principle (Kastovsky 1992), i.e. a vocabulary intimately linked to derivational morphology.⁸ All in all, the processes described in this but preliminary empirical probe testify to small, slow, gradual but perceptible beginnings of such typological changes as are reflected in the Early Middle English Ælfrician texts.

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⁸ Isolating (Mathesius 1939–40) or dissociated (Kastovsky 1992) word families are typical of isolating languages (such as build on opaque formations with few or obscured formal correspondences).

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Rané příznaky změn ve středoanglickém tvoření slov a jejich odraz v raně středoanglických opisech Ælfricových homilií

Resumé

Studie je empirickou sondou do raně středoanglických opisů tří pozdně staroanglických homilií Ælfrice z Eynshamu, jež náleží k okruhu nečetných, a tedy vzácných textových svědectví o historické proměně angličtiny mezi jejím starým a středním vývojovým obdobím. Tyto texty studie analyzuje z hlediska prvních příznaků slovtvorných změn, a to v metodologickém rámci pražské jazykovědné typologie. Počínající proměnu slovtvorby a slovtvorné stavby slovního tvaru shledává zejména ve čtyřech vývojových okruzích: 1. ústupu, resp. náhradě některých afixů, především afixů méně aglutinační povahy; 2. oslabení podílu introflektivního principu na stavbě slovního tvaru; 3. slabším ztvárnění slovního tvaru, který je tak obecně kratší, méně členitý a s jasněji vyhraněnými vztahy složek vůči celku; 4. vzrůstající citlivosti slovního tvaru vůči konsonantickým skupinám a seskupením.