

Conspiracies in Old English – the case of *h*

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It has long been agreed that various processes which constitute the phonology of a language are not accidental concatenations of isolated “facts” but form a network of interrelated and/or mutually-dependent phenomena (e.g. Kisseberth 1970, Kager 1999). This paper is an attempt to establish system-internal relatedness among various instances of *h*-deletion in the early history of English. I argue that the apparently disjunctive occurrences of fricative deletion, given in (1) are determined by constraints on syllable structure, on the one hand, and by the requirement to adjust to constraints on voicing, on the other. The functional unity of these processes is stated in terms of Optimality Theory (Prince and Smolensky 1993).

- (1) a. in the coda of a stressed syllable (followed by an unstressed syllable with a voiced onset), e.g. *hēah* (adj) ‘high vs. *hēaness* (n) ‘highness’, *pleoh* (n) ‘danger’ vs. *plēolic* (adj) ‘dangerous’
- b. in stressed syllables in postnuclear position (followed by a voiced offset), e.g. *þwēal* ‘bath’ from earlier **þweahl* (cf. Épinal Glossary *thuachl*)
- c. in historical compounds, e.g. *þūshund-þūsund* ‘thousand’, *Ælfhelm-Ælfelm* (name)

The prosodic system of early Germanic languages favours moraic trochees, that is left-headed bimoraic feet built of one heavy syllable (C \bar{V} , CVC(C)) or a sequence of two light ones (CVCV(C)). The tendency to maintain bimoraic syllables is particularly prominent in West-Germanic languages, for example in Old English, where a number of quantitative phonological changes led to the adjustment of syllable weight (Dresher and Lahiri 1991, Lass 1994, Kiparsky 1998). The bimoraic principle coincides with the preference for simple onsets: given a VCCV string the optimal syllabification pattern in Old English is VC.CV. Conflict between the two constraints on syllable well-formedness arises in the case of $\bar{V}C_1C_2V$ where the first vowel is long. The adjunction of C_1 to the coda results in an overheavy, trimoraic syllable. If, by way of avoiding an overheavy structure, C_1 is syllabified to the second syllable an undesirable complex onset is created. While some Germanic languages, like Gothic, adjoin C_1 to the coda tolerating an overheavy syllable, others, like Old English activate some adjustment procedures, such as deletion, to guarantee the required prosodic structure (see Kiparsky 1998). This paper shows that *h*-deletion may be analysed as a response to satisfy the prosodic requirements of the system.

In some cases, exemplified here by *pleoh* ‘danger’ ~ *plēolic* ‘dangerous’, fricative deletion coincides with compensatory lengthening. Hence, although the underlying association between the melodic and the moraic tiers has been changed, the input prosodic structure remains unaffected. Therefore, reasons for segment loss must be sought elsewhere. The driver for the change is a constraint on voice agreement: voiceless *h* is deleted in the context of voiced segments. In fact, this proves to be a common denominator of the examples from (1a-b). Interestingly, the segment undergoes deletion in exactly those places where other Old English fricatives get voiced. Thus, deletion and voicing may have been two faces of a general weakening process (cf. Lass 1994: 76). The fact that *h* escapes Old English Fricative Voicing may indicate that in terms of relative chronology deletion preceded voicing. An alternative interpretation presupposes that synchronically the input to Fricative Voicing may have been limited to anterior segments. The latter interpretation additionally provides a

principled explanation for the behaviour of non-anterior /ʃ/, which, like *h*, escaped voicing in Old English.

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