

A typological and quantitative perspective on consonant groups in late Old and early Middle English

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0. Isolating languages prefer a relatively low presence of consonant combinations in discourse, write Prague School typologists, particularly Vladimír Skalička.¹ This property distinguishes isolating languages from languages of a predominantly agglutinative and, to a lesser extent, inflectional type. The present paper offers a quantitative perspective on some structural characteristics of consonant groups in Early Middle English, i.e. the period through which English changed more rapidly and extensively than at any later time, acquiring a number of isolating properties in the process. Within the framework of the Prague School typology, the following quantitative analysis aims to compare the situation in English at its final inflectional stage, generally considered rich in consonant combinations,² with its changing format after the year 1200 when growing typological isolation should, in accordance with Skalička's hypothesis, exert a restrictive influence on the frequency and distribution of consonant clusters.

1. The analysis is based on a 'pragmatische Stichprobe' (Altmann–Lehfeldt 1973:78) of three of the eschatological homilies by Wulfstan (d. 1023) – *De Temporibus Antichristi*, *Secundum Marcum* and *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* (edition Bethurum 1957: 128–142, 255–76) for Late Old English (LOE);³ Early Middle English (EME) is represented by a sample from the *Ancrene Wisse* (c. 1225) (edition Tolkien 1962: 92–108; from the passage on temptation on ff. 47b – 56a: 'Ne wene nan of hehe lif' ... 'to on of ham seouene').⁴

1.1. Despite some significant differences of topic and register, the texts are strictly comparable. All of them centre on the general theme of awakening moral consciousness in the listeners and/or readers at whom they were once directed. Both use rhetoric for moral purpose and combine it with a personal voice of public address.⁵ While Wulfstan's homilies (*W*) are written in a conventional West Saxon with few dialectal features and characterized by a thorough anglicisation of their author's sources, *Ancrene Wisse* (*AW*) is perhaps the most notable specimen of an early post-Conquest, very conservative, literary standard language exhibiting strong links with Late Old English literary prose.

2. Both the LOE and EME samples comprise 5,020 words, with the exclusion only of clauses quoted in Latin. The phonological and morphological analysis, which is principally conservative to the effect of disregarding in the *Ancrene Wisse* sample degemination and schwa loss on the grounds of their being only incipient processes, aims to relate the presence of combination clusters to the syllabic structure (cf. Table 1 in 2.1.), the word-formation

status of the texts (Table 2), and the morphemic status of consonant groups in them (Tables 3 and 4).

2.1. As is evident from Tables 3 and 4 below, the quantitative analysis of the EME sample reveals a significant decrease in the presence of consonant combinations as compared to the three homilies by Wulfstan: monomorphemic clusters show a 27 per cent decrease, whereas the occurrence in the sample from *Ancrene Wisse* of bimorphemic consonant groups is lower by 44 per cent. Interestingly, this marked difference appears to be due neither to changes in the syllabic structure prevalent in the samples (such as the increase in monosyllables or decrease of trisyllables, cf. Table 1), nor to shifts in the relative presence of derivation and compounding in the analysed texts (cf. the relatively low decrease of derivatives in *AW*, apparent from Table 2).

Table 1. Syllabic structure

| | W | % | AW | % |
|-----------------|------|-------|------|-------|
| number of words | 5020 | 100 | 5020 | 100 |
| monosyllables | 2563 | 51.06 | 2905 | 57.87 |
| disyllables | 1624 | 32.35 | 1567 | 31.22 |
| trisyllables | 635 | 12.65 | 435 | 8.67 |
| tetrasyllables | 184 | 3.67 | 104 | 2.07 |
| pentasyllables | 14 | 0.29 | 8 | 0.16 |
| hexasyllables | – | – | 1 | – |

Table 2. Word-formation status

| | W | % | AW | % |
|------------------------|-----|-------|------------------------|-------|
| derivatives | 770 | 15.34 | 523 | 10.41 |
| compounds | 154 | 3.06 | 124 ⁷ | 2.47 |
| loanwords ⁶ | 21 | 0.41 | 236 (22 ⁸) | 4.70 |

Table 3. Morphemic status of consonant groups in the homilies by Wulfstan

| morphemic status / syllabic structure | 1– and 2–syllables | 3–syllables | 4–syllables | 5–syllables | Total |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------|
| monomorphemic | 1667 (74%) | 429 (19%) | 141 (6%) | 13 (0.6%) | 2250 |
| bimorphemic | 271 (41%) | 238 (36%) | 131 (20%) | 15 (2%) | 655 |

Table 4. Morphemic status of consonant groups in the *Ancrene Wisse* sample

| morphemic status / syllabic structure | 1– and 2–syllables | 3–syllables | 4–syllables | 5–syllables | Total |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------|
| monomorphemic | 1285 (77%) | 285 (17%) | 87 (5%) | 5 (0.3%) | 1662 |
| bimorphemic | 196 (53%) | 112 (30%) | 54 (15%) | 5 (1%) | 367 |

3. It has been shown elsewhere (Čermák, forthcoming) that Late Old English appears to have been showing marked sensitivity to awkward consonant clusters and heavy combinations. From the present quantitative analysis it follows that English did indeed, in its typological progression from inflection to isolation, favour a smaller functional load of consonant combinations in discourse. A lot more research is needed to explain the motivation of this intriguing aspect of English in a diachronic perspective. However, when one observes the splendid consonantal masonry of morphemic junctures in LOE and EME word forms,⁹ it is tempting to think that it was precisely these heavy consonant combinations that may have once functioned—along with the tendency to a shorter and therefore less expressive word structure, homonymic clashes and other factors which historical linguists have long been aware of—as a potent factor in the rampant lexical mortality of the Early Middle English period.

Notes

- ¹ 'Die große Worthäufung verbietet eine phonologische Komplexität, d. h. starke Konsonantenhäufung. ... Die Sprachen des isolierenden Sprachtyps sind eher vokalisches, wenn das hier auch nicht im gleichen Maße gilt wie beim polysynthetischen Typus. Diese Sprachen müssen daher als stark vokalisches bezeichnet werden' (Skalička 1964:12). To my knowledge, there is as yet no quantitative study testing this typological hypothesis on the material of English.
- ² For the presence of consonants and consonant combinations in the phonological system of Old English, cf. e.g. Pilch (1970: 66-72).
- ³ To balance the impassioned ring of *Sermo Lupi*, the most famous homily by Wulfstan has been coupled with another two, both written in a much more subdued tone.
- ⁴ A systemic, rather than textual, diachronic comparison of consonant combinations in English would be of little worth because the phonotactics of Modern English syllables as they pertain to consonantal onsets and codas does not differ significantly from those in Old English, cf. e. g. Gimson (1980: 237-53).
- ⁵ Cf. e. g. the recent assessment of *Ancrene Wisse* as a literary document existing 'both as a study text for "a number and a diversity of readers" and also in a matrix of oral and aural practice among its audiences' by Johnson – Wogan-Browne in the representative *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (1999:116), partly in reference to Millett, B. (1993) 'Women in No Man's Land: English Recluses and the Development of Vernacular Literature in the 12th and 13th centuries' in Meale, C. M. (ed) *Women and Literature in Britain c. 1150–1500*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 17, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 86-103.
- ⁶ Due to the low presence of loanwords in the text and also with regard to the often unclear status of 'word' in (Early) Middle English, no attempt was made to classify the loanwords into derivatives and compounds. On the concept of 'word' in Middle English, cf. e.g. Burnley, D. 'Lexis and Semantics' in Blake, N. (ed) *The Cambridge History of the English Language Vol. II. 1066–1476*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 409-499.
- ⁷ Forty-six of the compounds in the *Ancrene Wisse* sample were adverbial in nature, such as *perto*.

- ⁸ Twenty-two of the compounds in the *Ancrene Wisse* sample were found to be of Old Norse or Continental Germanic origin, which further limits the possibility of a structural interference due to Romance phonotactic rules.
- ⁹ To illustrate this variety as well as the restrictive influence the historical development from LOE to EME seems to have had on it, a mere survey of bimorphemic combinations in *W* and *AW* will do:

W: (a) biphonemic: bb, bl, t♣h, t♣n, db, dd, df, dg, dh, dj, dk, dl, dm, dn, dr, d♣, dw, d□, fd, fl, f□, {d, xd, xj, xt, x□, xw, jf, jn, jr, j□, jð, kd, kx, kl, kn, kr, k□, ld, lf, lg, l{, lk, ll, lm, ln, lr, ls, lt, l□, lð, ml, mr, m□, mð, nb, nd, nf, ng, nh, nj, nk, nl, nn, nr, n♣, nw, pt, rb, rd, rf, r{, rh, rl, rx, rn, rr, rs, rl, r♣, rt, r□, rð, rw, sb, sd, sj, sl, sm, sr, st, sw, tf, tj, tm, ts, tt, □f, □l, □n, □t, □□, ðl, ðr, ðð, vd, vl, vr, wl, w□, wð; (b) triphonemic: dbr, dsp, xbr, xst, xtl, xtn, xtw, jsl, jxw, lbr, ldr, ld♣, lxr, lxw, lkl, lt♣r, lt♣n, ldg, ldj, ldr, lfn, lxd, lxr, lxw, lpj, lsw, mp□, nbr, ndl, ndn, ndr, ngs, ng□, nkn, nkr, nkt, nk□, nsl, nsn, nsw, ntr, nwr, pnj, rdl, rft, rgr, rxl, rxt, rx□, rxð, rxw, rmt♣, rmð, rk□, rml, rm□, rmð, rnd, rnl, rnm, rn□, rsp, rst, rsw, r□f, r□♣, rðd, rðr, rwd, sbr, sxw, stl, txl, txw, tst, twr, ðbr, wbr; (c) tetraphonemic: ls + br, rd + sw, rf + kw, rt + gr; (d) pentaphonemic: ld + str.

AW: (a) biphonemic: bs, t♣l, db, dd, df, dl, dm, dn, dr, d♣, dw, fs, ft, f□, xl, xn, xr, xt, kb, kn, ld, lð, lx, ll, ln, lr, lt, lð, lw, md, ml, mm, mn, mt, nd, nf, ng, nh, nk, nl, nn, np, nr, ns, nt, n□, nw, pm, pn, rb, rd, rf, rg, rh, rj, rk, rl, rn, rx, rj, rl, rr, rn, rs, rt, rð, rw, sd, sf, sh, sk, sl, sm, sp, ss, st, sw, ♣l, tl, tn, tr, ts, tt, □l, ðð, vd, vr, ws, wð; (b) triphonemic: dsp, dst, fdr, ftn, ftr, xtl, xtr, lxn, lsw, mpt, nt♣t, ndf, ndl, ngr, ngt, ng□, ngð, nkf, nkl, nsk, nsl, ntf, ntr, nwr, pbr, rdr, rxt, rxw, rxð, rkn, rst, rtl, rtr, r□♣, rðr, sjr, str, st♣, sxw, wbr; (c) tetraphonemic: lt + sm, ld + sm, rld + l.

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