ALLITERATION AND SOUND CHANGE IN EARLY ENGLISH

This study uses evidence from early English verse to reconstruct the course of some central phonological changes in the history of the language. It builds on the premise that alliteration reflects faithfully the acoustic identity and similarity of stressed syllable onsets. Individual chapters cover the history of the velars, the structure and history of vowel-initial syllable onsets, the behavior of onset clusters, and the chronology and motivation of cluster reduction (*gn-, kn-, hr-, hl-, hn-, hw-, wr-, wl-*). Examination of the patterns of group alliteration in Old and Middle English reveals a hierarchy of cluster-internal cohesiveness which leads to new conclusions regarding the causes for the special treatment of *sp-, st-, sk-* in alliteration. The analysis draws on current phonetically-based Optimality-Theoretic models. The book presents valuable new information about the medieval poetic canon and elucidates the relationship between orality and literacy in the evolution of English verse.

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Abbreviations

Sources

ASPR	*Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*
Beo	*Beowulf*
BM	*The Battle of Maldon*
Brb	*The Battle of Brunanburh*
Chr	*Christ*
Cln	*Cleanness*
CP	*Cura Pastoralis*
Dan	*Daniel*
ECL	*An Exhortation to Christian Living*
EETS	Early English Text Society
El	*Elene*
Exo	*Exodus*
Gen	*Genesis*
Guth	*Guthlac*
Jg2	*The Judgement Day II*
Jln	*Juliana*
Jud	*Judith*
LAEME	*A Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English*
LALME	*A Linguistic Atlas of Late Middle English*
LB/Lag	*Lagamon's Brut*
MA	*The Alliterative Morte Arthure*
MB	*The Meters of Boethius*
MED	*Middle English Dictionary*
MerT	*The Merchant's Tale*
Mld	*The Battle of Maldon*
Mnl	*The Menologium*
O&N	*The Owl and the Nightingale*
ODEE	*The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*

OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary*
P	*The Metrical Psalms of the Paris Psalter*
Parl	*Parlement of the Thre Ages*
Phoen/Phx	*The Phoenix*
PP/PPl	*Piers Plowman*
ROA	Rutgers Optimality Archive
Sea/Sfr	*The Seafarer*
Siege	*The Siege of Jerusalem*
SGGK	*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
SnS	*Solomon and Saturn*
Vesp	*The Vespasian Psalter*
W Pal/WP	*William of Palerne*
W & W	*Wynnere and Wastoure*
WA	*The Wars of Alexander*

Languages and linguistic terms

△	difference
a.	*ante*
AL	Anglo-Latin
c.	*circa*
C	consonant
DEP	Dependence
EME	Early Middle English
F	non-sibilant fricative
FNC	Function Word
Gmc	Germanic
Goth	Gothic
GVS	Great Vowel Shift
IO	Input–Output
IPA	International Phonetic Alphabet
LEX	Lexical Word
LOE	Late Old English
ME	Middle English
ML	Medieval Latin
ModE	Modern English
MS	manuscript
Norw	Norwegian

O	obstruent
OCP	Obligatory Contour Principle
OE	Old English
OHG	Old High German
OT	Optimality Theory
PPh	Prosodic Phrase
PrW	Prosodic Word
R	sonorant
RP	Received Pronunciation
S	sibilant
SON-SEQ	Sonority Sequencing
V	vowel
VP	verb phrase
WS	West Saxon

Preface

The history of poetry is also in part a history of the language in which it was created. This book uses evidence from alliterative verse to explore the development of some important phonological features of Old and Middle English. The assumption behind this approach is that both conformity to a metrical template and linguistically circumscribed preferences govern the distribution of forms in verse. The patterns found in early English alliterative compositions provide a valuable resource for the reconstruction of the contemporary language. In a field as heavily raked over as English historical linguistics is, it is surprising and exciting to find a cache of often unrecorded and definitely unanalyzed primary data. For Old English, the only full-length study of alliterative patterns is Classen (1913), and he restricts himself to vowel alliteration. Schumacher (1914), on whose pioneering survey Oakden (1930, 1935) relies, is the only systematic account of the patterns of alliteration for a large sample of Middle English alliterative verse. This work augments the early philological findings with new material, incorporating the information gleaned from verse into new accounts of the histories of particular segments and structures. In addition to yielding fresh insights into the specific attributes of early English, the reconstruction and interpretation offered here is useful as a test for the applicability and viability of current linguistic models.

The volume represents one part of a much larger project intended to cover the interplay between language and verse throughout the history of English. Half way through the project it became clear to me that extending the data coverage and analysis to syllable-counting verse and reaching beyond the end of the fourteenth century was impractical and would destroy the coherence of the current study. The re-shaping of the metrical conventions in post-Conquest England which resulted in the emergence of a new metrical blend of native and continental models, is too complex an issue to be integrated within the self-standing tradition of alliterative versification. This large topic, as well as a more detailed verse-based analysis of vowel length and syllable weight, word and phrasal stress, is postponed, optimistically, to a later date.

The material I have drawn most extensively on spans about eight centuries, roughly from the second half of the seventh century to the end of the fourteenth century. My goals are both diachronic, to clarify some recalcitrant issues in the history of English phonology, and synchronic, to relate the information to other properties of the contemporary language. Each chapter thus attempts to place the philological testimony in the context of a broader chronological setting, making references to earlier and later stages of the language, and drawing on philological and typological evidence outside the confines of alliterative verse.

The book starts with two background chapters. Chapter 1 addresses the social and linguistic setting of alliterative verse in Anglo-Saxon and Medieval England, emphasizing the connection between alliteration, oral delivery, and pre-silent reading. This particular acoustic aspect of early art verse makes it a good source for reconstruction of the properties of language. Chapter 2 introduces topics that are directly relevant to the case studies in the rest of the book. It addresses the prosody–meter interface and justifies the assumptions regarding stress assignment and the metrical structures found in Old English, early Middle English, and fourteenth-century alliterative verse.

Chapter 3 is the first concerted effort to show that alliterative evidence has been unduly neglected in writing the phonological history of the language. The analysis of the verse data prompts a reassessment of velar palatalization. The hypothesis pursued here is that underlyingly contrastive /tʃ/ or /ʃ/ did not exist in English until after *c*. 1000. It is also argued that the phonemic split of early OE [ɣ] into /j/ and /g/ and the merger of the voiced palatal fricative [j̬] with the pre-existing /j/ occurred around the middle of the tenth century.

Chapter 4 is an inquiry into the status of the stressed syllable onset in the history of English. Although it has been rejected by many leading twentieth-century scholars, the hypothesis defended here is of long standing: Old English vowel alliteration relied on epenthetic glottal stops in the onsets of vowel-initial stressed syllables. It is proposed that a filled ONSET constraint was active in the phonology of Old English. The requirement was relaxed in Middle English under the prosodic and structural influence of Romance loan phonology. Nevertheless, the preference for a filled stressed syllable ONSET survives in Modern English. The account is substantiated with evidence not just from Old and Middle English alliteration, but also from spelling, from the occurrence of procliticization, and from typological studies of similar phenomena in other languages.

Chapter 5 attacks an old dilemma: what makes /sp-, st-, sk-/ different from other onsets? In descriptions of Old English alliteration this issue is usually handled by declaring the initial sibilant 'extrametrical,' an 'appendix' of some

sort. These and other proposals regarding cluster behavior are discussed and rejected. The approach adopted here relies on the insight that sibilant + voiceless stop clusters are the only type of complex stressed syllable onsets in which the first perceptual burst comes at the stop-vowel boundary. This acoustic cohesiveness motivates the convention that disallows splitting of /sp-, st-, sk-/ in Old English alliteration.

Chapter 6 presents a set of new philological data on the alliterative behavior of initial consonant clusters in Middle English. The hypothesis these data are intended to test is that Middle English cluster alliteration (/sm-/ : /sm-/, /br-/ : /br-/, /fl-/ : /fl-/ etc.) is not random. The choices are controlled by the degree of perceptual cohesion within the clusters. The combined results from the patterns found in several fourteenth-century compositions suggest a scale of cohesiveness topped by /st-, sp-, sk-/, followed by *s*+sonorant (/sl-, sn-, sm-, sw-/), followed by stop+sonorant (/pr-, br-, tr-, dr-, kr-, gr-, pl-, bl-, kl-, gl-, tw-, dw-, kw-/). Fricative-sonorant clusters (/fl-, fr-, θr-/) appear to be perceptually least cohesive. Additional factors motivating group alliteration are the size of the lexical pool from which matching pairs can be drawn, the semantic adaptability of words to a broad range of contexts, and possibly the 'alliterative rank' of particular lexical items, a notion that this chapter seeks to enrich.

Chapter 7 presents new philological data on the use of unstable onset clusters in verse. The alliterative practice in Middle English contradicts the hypothesis that the relative dating of the reduction of the onset clusters /gn-, kn-/, /hn-, hl-, hr-, hw-/, /wl-, wr-/ is a function of the consonantal strength of the onset components. Instead, the proximate mechanism for the simplification is lack of cohesion for the velar and labiovelar clusters. Reduction of /hw-/ is attested in the South from the twelfth century; it is the longest 'undigested' phonological change in the language. Its survival or re-emergence cannot be related to the cluster's sonority profile. The evidential basis on cluster reduction comes primarily from Middle English verse, but the chapter draws also on spelling data from the on-line *Middle English Dictionary*, and data from the yet unpublished *Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English*.

As a philological contribution the book records a core set of data relevant to the structure and behavior of stressed onsets and provides a methodology which can be applied to Medieval sources not covered in this study. The claims made here are therefore amenable to further empirical testing. The study is also an effort to combine traditional philological work with linguistic analysis informed by the currently popular model of Optimality Theory. An important correlation that I have attempted to highlight throughout the book is that the evidence found in verse is evidence for the surface acoustic properties of the

contemporary language. While specific formalizations are a product of the times, it is hoped that the appeal to replicable phonetic information will create a more permanent basis for the discussion and explication of onset issues and related philological facts and phonological changes in English.

It is a pleasant duty to acknowledge the institutional, collegial, and personal debts incurred in the course of writing this book. A University of California President's Fellowship in the Humanities gave me a year of immersion in the huge literature on early English verse and allowed me to learn more linguistics. The UCLA Research Council has helped with the travel to the archives of the *Middle English Dictionary* in Ann Arbor and the *Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English* in Edinburgh, Scotland. The award of a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship for 2000–2001 and the UCLA English Department's generous supplement to the Fellowship allowed me a blissful block of quiet time for research and writing without which the book might have been another decade in the making.

Among the numerous colleagues to whom I owe thanks, I would like to single out in particular Thomas Cable, Robert Fulk, Richard Hogg, and Roger Lass, who have not only been the perfect professional role-models, but have actively supported this project since its inception. The influence of their research will be obvious throughout the book, and while I do not expect them to agree with the proposed analyses, I hope that they will see my efforts as a recognition of the importance of their contributions to the study of English historical phonology and meter.

I have also benefited from exchanges with many colleagues who have listened, supplied advice and useful references, and shared information: Birgit Alber, John Anderson, Ricardo Bermúdez-Otero, Derek Britton, Hoyt Duggan, Heinz Giegerich, Meg Laing, Anatoly Liberman, Chris McCully, Frances McSparran, Catherine Ringen, Rick Russom, and Joe Salmons. My association with two outstanding groups of people at UCLA, the Medieval and Renaissance faculty and graduate students in the English Department, and the phonetics and phonology faculty and graduate students in the Department of Linguistics, has been most helpful. Bruce Hayes and Donca Steriade have created an energizing environment of intellectual pursuit and commitment. While the book was in its first draft, I had the opportunity to read and discuss the work of their doctoral student Heidi Fleischhacker, whose ongoing research on cluster cohesion has influenced the analysis in chapters 5 and 6.

An early version of the analysis developed in chapter 5 was presented at the Sixth Germanic Linguistics Annual Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in April 2000. Different versions of chapter 6 were presented at the thirteenth

biennial meeting of the Dictionary Society of North America in May 2001 and the fifteenth ICHL in August 2001. I am grateful to the audiences at those meetings for comments and challenges. Some of the data and the arguments in the discussion of the palatals and the velars in chapter 3 were first presented in my paper "Velars and palatals in Old English alliteration," in *Historical Linguistics 1997*, ed. by Monika Schmid, Jennifer Austin, and Dieter Stein (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1998), 269–291. The current chapter is a significantly revised version of the initial hypothesis. A much shorter version of chapter 4 was published under the title "Syllable ONSET in the history of English," in the volume *Generative Theory and Corpus Studies: A Dialogue from 10 ICEHL*, edited by Ricardo Bermúdez-Otero, David Denison, Richard Hogg and Chris McCully (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000), 498–540. I am grateful to the editors at John Benjamins and Mouton de Gruyter for permission to include some of the material here.

Special thanks to Andy Kelly, always there to keep one in awe of the vastness of Medieval studies, listen to alliterative laments, and pull out the right volume from his shelves in an emergency.

At Cambridge University Press a very long time ago Judith Ayling encouraged me to start thinking of a "blue book" project. Kate Brett inherited the project and has been wonderfully motivating and patient, putting up with my numerous delays and crises, while organizing timely anonymous refereeing when I needed it. I am deeply grateful for this generous and friendly support.

Thanks to Robert, whose intolerance of shoddy argumentation slowed down the project. Thanks to Robert, whose impatience with alliteration and prolixity speeded up the project. Thanks to Robert, who read the final draft sneezing and coughing and complaining that you can take a Slav to English, but you can't make her put the comma in the right place.