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## NON-ROOT-INITIAL ICTUS ON NATIVE WORDS IN OLD AND MIDDLE ENGLISH POETRY

### **Abstract**

Primary word-stress in Germanic languages is generally defined as root-initial. This placement is considered decisive in the metrical shape of native poetic creations, with a tendency for placing prominence where linguistically plausible. However, notable exceptions can be traced in Middle English poetry, with ictus in certain native words falling on a derivative suffix or the second element of an obscure compound rather than the root. The present paper discusses possible reasons for the divergences on the basis of a sample of major poetic works. Focus is placed on the diachronic development from Old to Middle English. Firstly, a discussion from the point of view of linguistic prosody is included, with attention devoted to the possibility of non-weak stress in Old English falling on all heavy, bimoraic syllables. Secondly, semantic aspects are analysed, with focus on the possible impact of incomplete grammaticalization of certain morphemes. Finally, French influences are noted.

### **1. Non-root-initial ictus in view of the linguistic foundations of poetic metre**

Recent studies concerning historical stressing patterns in English, such as Minkova (1996: 95), Russom (2002: 306) or Dresher – Lahiri (1991: 264), frequently argue for the vital role of a connection between linguistic and poetic metre. An earlier publication by Kuryłowicz (1976: 66), states that the metrical principles of Old English poetry should be treated as “transpositions of linguistic rules”. This correspondence, which implies that poetic accentuation should never contradict principles of linguistic stress, can be employed in the analyses of Old English phonology.

It is to be expected that the same relation should apply in the case of Middle English verse. Poetic metre should not stand in opposition to phonological principles, especially in the case of medieval verse forms which did not strive for innovation, but rather for the preservation of established traditions. Nonetheless, Middle English poetry displays certain divergences from expected accentuation patterns with considerable frequency.

**Table 1.** Selected forms showing irregularities in *The Canterbury tales*: data based on *The Riverside Chaucer* (Benson 1988)

	<i>-dom</i>	<i>-ship(e)</i>	<i>-hod/ -hed(e)</i>	<i>-ing/ -yng/ -ung</i>	<i>also</i>
all occurrences	33	33	45	763	120
iambic pattern & unstressed Germanic root	4 12.1%	4 12.1%	5 11.1%	127 16.6%	101 84.2%

The typical stress in all the instances in Table 1 would be root-initial and left-bound, of an essentially trochaic shape. It is found both in Old and Modern English and agrees with Campbell's general statement as to the placement of stress in Old English. The latter should also be an accurate description of homogeneously Germanic word forms in Middle English.

The primitive Germanic language developed a stress accent which fell upon the first syllable of all words, and this is in essentials preserved in all the Germanic languages. Thus in Old English we find the stress on the first syllable in all simple words, and in most compound words. (Campbell 1959: 30)

Campbell's statement, which generally amounts to the stress being root-initial and left-bound stands in agreement with Middle English verse structure in most cases.

- (1) Middle English verses with regular accentuation (based on *The Riverside Chaucer*, Benson 1988)

/ x

*-dom*            The wisdom of an heap of lerned men (*General Prologue*,  
1.575)

/ x

*-ship*            How that in lordshipe is no sikernesse (*Monk's Tale*,  
1.2240)

/ x

*-hed(e) /-hod*    Thy godhede, that I may been oon of thyne (*Knight's Tale*,  
1.2381)

/ x                      / x

-ing/ -yng            Of prikyng and of huntyng for the hare (*General Prologue*,  
1.191)

/ x

also                    Myn herte is also mowled as myne heris (*Reeve's Prologue*,  
1.3870)

However, the percentages in Table 1 testify to the relatively frequent occurrence of opposite, iambic patterns. Some of the latter are shown below.

(2) Iambic accentuation pattern in Germanic words (based on *The Riverside Chaucer*, Benson 1988)

x /

-dom                    To been avysed, greet wysdom it were (*Pardoner's Tale*,  
1.690)

x /

-ship                    Ful sooth is seyde that love ne lordshipe (*Knight's Tale*,  
1.1625)

x /

-hed(e)/ -hod        And of manhood hym lakkede right naught (*General Prologue*, 1.756)

x /

-ing/ -yng            Ther koude no wight pynche at his writyng (*General Prologue*, 1.326)

x /

also                    A Somnour and a Pardoner also (*General Prologue*, 1.543)

The stressing patterns in item (2) are at odds with what we would expect in terms of the agreement between linguistic and poetic accentuation. In disyllabic words derivational suffixes as well as the second element of a compound receive stress whereas the root morphemes are placed in non-ictic positions.

## 2. Impact of Old English origins and syllable weight

It should be noted at this point that recent theories, including Drescher – Lahiri (1991), Fulk (1992), Suzuki (1996) or Russom (1998) postulate a somewhat more complex system of accentuation for Old English. Many linguists argue that it is not morphology, but rather suprasegmental phonology that plays the crucial role in both poetic and linguistic stress assignment. Syllable weight is considered the decisive factor.

The role of syllabic quantity in Old English verse has been discovered quite early due to the phenomenon of resolution.

(3) / \ x / x  
frēowine folca (Beowulf, 1.430a)

The scansion in (3) shows three lifts and two drops. Lines of this shape, which occur quite frequently in Old English verse, appearing, e.g., in c. 12.5% first lifts of a-verses in *Beowulf* (Sievers 1983: 127), violate what is known as “the four-position requirement”, a principle postulated by Sievers (1983: 25), stating that each hemistich of Old English poetry needs to contain four metrical positions, two of which need to be primary lifts.

#### Sievers’s Five Types

(4) A	/	x	/	x
B	x	/	x	/
C	x	/	/	x
D	/	/	\	x
	/	/	x	\
E	/	\	x	/
metrical position	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>

Item (4) shows Sievers’s Five Types as being in accordance with the four-position requirement. A metrical drop can contain more than one unaccented syllable.

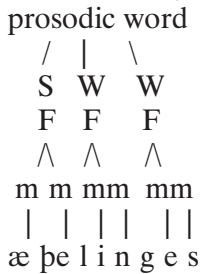
Along with the observation that the overwhelming majority of lifts are heavy, irregularities of the type listed in item (3) lead to the conclusion that ictus can be assigned either to a heavy syllable or a sequence of two syllables, the first of which is light. Thus the structure of the verse in (3) should be reinterpreted (cf Suzuki 1996: 175, Cable 2004: 149):

(5) / \x / x  
frēowine folca (Beowulf, 1.430a)

Mora counting across syllable boundaries, which constitutes the basis of resolution, attests to an additional level of representation within the prosodic hierarchy, placed below word-level but above syllable level. This tier is often employed in order to account for linguistic stress assignment in Old English and to explain certain complex phonological phenomena, such as High Vowel Deletion. Drescher – Lahiri’s (1991) theory can serve as a representative

example. Their “Germanic Foot” is essentially a moraic trochee erected above the syllable level, defined as a “binary, quantity sensitive left-headed tree whose left branch contains at least two moras” (Dresher – Lahiri 1991: 255).

(6) Germanic Foot (Dresher – Lahiri 1991)



The Germanic Foot can be used to establish the placement of both primary and secondary stress. Each foot, a necessarily bimoraic construct, receives stress, with the strongest being at the left edge. The last foot, although marked as bimoraic (contrary to principles of weight attribution, previously mentioned in the present paper, which would treat a –VC# syllable as light) is always subject to Final Destressing and thus does not, in fact, behave like a heavy syllable. This is in agreement with the frequent occurrence of half-lifts in words like that under item (6), falling on the middle, but not the last foot. Suzuki (1996) further argues for the possibility of as many as four levels of non-primary stress in Old English.

Returning to the issue of non-root initial stress in Middle English poetry, it is important to note that all the forms in Table 1 were bimoraic in Old English. They would therefore have received some degree of stress. Iambic pentameter does not allow for the gradation of stress, thus syllables which were assigned secondary or lesser stress in Old English were used in Middle English poetry as either drops or lifts. It appears that the latter possibility might still have been valid. This would correspond to the principle of ‘pertinacity’ postulated by Lahiri (2002), which states that rules tend to persist overtime with realizations subject to modification. It should also be noted that “archaic structures tend to persist in poetry beyond their shelf life in spoken language” (Kemenade – Los 2014: 229), therefore such a fossilization of certain aspects of Old English prosody is not improbable. Furthermore, a closer examination of the occurrences of a monomoraic suffix, *-ful*, in *The Canterbury tales* shows a different pattern of occurrence with regard to stress.

**Table 2.** Irregular accentuation in the context of mora-count: data based on *The Riverside Chaucer* (Benson 1988)

	-dom	-ship(e)	-hod/ -hed(e)	-ing/ -yng/ -ung	also	-full
all occurrences	33	33	45	763	120	153
iambic pattern & unstressed Germanic root	4 12.1%	4 12.1%	5 11.1%	127 16.6%	101 84.2%	1 0.7%

A syllable which has a short vowel as its nucleus and ends in a single consonant is usually considered monomoraic, unless followed by another consonant. This might explain the virtual non-occurrence of primary stress on the suffix *-ful* in Middle English poetry. The same seems to have been the case in Old English.

(7) The analysed items showing non-weak (i.e. primary or secondary) stress in Old English

- (a) -dōm      / \ x /  
 Wisdome heold (*Beowulf*, 1.1959b)  
 x x / \ x
- (b) -scipe      and se freondscipe (*Beowulf*, 1.2999b)  
 x / \ x
- (c) -hād      of childhade (*Elene*, 1.914a)  
 / / \ x
- (d) -ung      breost weorþunga (*Beowulf*, 1.2504a)  
 x x / x /
- (e) swā      ond gelaeste swa (*Beowulf*, 1.2990b)  
 / \ x /
- (f) -ful      sorhfullne sið (*Beowulf*, 1.1275a, 14)

The need for the morphemes (listed in the left column) in items (7a) to (7e) to receive some degree of stress is motivated by the four-position requirement. However, the derivational suffix *-ful* should be treated separately. It occurs nine times in *Beowulf* and is stressed three times, but the stress only occurs in the context of a following consonant. The other suffixes do not need to fulfill such a requirement, as they are inherently bimoraic.

### 3. Word-formation and semantics

Another aspect to be considered are issues of semantics and word-formation. The sample of irregular forms presented in Table 1 shows a marked

difference between the adverb *also* and the other forms. This apparently obscure compound occurs much more frequently in iambic shape in the analysed sample. It might be due to its second element actually being regarded (at least for poetic purposes) as bearing enough of a semantic weight as to be a possible carrier of primary poetic stress. *The Middle English dictionary* states that “Early Middle English has the phrase as well as the compound”, furthermore, some of the forms listed in the *Middle English dictionary* (MED) are quite transparent in terms of the compound elements.

(8) Listing of variants for *also* from the MED:

**also** (adv.) Also **alswo**, **alz(u)o**; **alswa**, **alsway**, **alsqua**, **alsa**; **elswa**; **alse**, **als**, **as**.

The stressing of suffixes such as *-dom* and *-hod/-hed(e)* might also be justified by a high degree of semantic weight being attributed to them, due to their frequent occurrence as separate words in Old English. Marchand (1969: 232) states that “combinations with *-hād* as a second-word were (...) compounds in Old English.” This state might have been fossilized in poetry, a medium which often uses somewhat archaic patterns.

However, a preliminary analysis of another suffix seems to disprove the link between the iambic patterns and the degree of semantic weight.

**Table 3.** Irregular accentuation in a semantic context

	<i>-dom</i>	<i>-hod/ -hed(e)</i>	<i>-ing/-yng/-ung</i>	
all occurrences	33	45	763	
iambic pattern & unstressed Germanic root	4	5	127	Gerund 83 (65.45%)
	12.1%	11.1%	16.6%	Present Participle 44 (34.6%)
non-iambic pattern	29	40	627	Gerund 397 (63.3%)
				Present Participle 230 (36.7%)

As shown in Table 3, the occurrences of the iambic pattern in gerunds and present participles seem to be more numerous than in the case of words with the suffixes *-dom* and *-hod/-hed(e)*. Furthermore, the ratio of the occurrences of gerunds to past participles remains virtually unchanged regardless of the stressing pattern. This would suggest that semantic weight is not a decisive factor in the appearance of the discussed irregularities.

## 4. Conclusions

Only tentative conclusions can be postulated due to the very limited scope of investigation thus far. A preliminary analysis seems to point to the possibility of a link between the seemingly irregular accentuation in Middle English and the recent theories of Old English prosody. It appears that the assignment of the varying degrees of non-weak stress to all bimoraic feet in Old English may have been partially fossilized in Middle English verse. Heavy Germanic syllables and their bimoraic equivalents, regardless of their morphological status, would still have been seen as possible carriers of stress.

Certain semantic and external factors may have contributed to the phenomenon of non-root initial stress on Germanic words in Middle English poetry. Thus far, no connection has been established between the semantic 'weight' of suffixes and their stressing patterns, but the accentuation pattern of the Middle English adverb *also* seems to have been affected by the contemporary transparency of its elements.

An issue unconsidered in the present paper is the question of the influx of French vocabulary, with its foreign stressing patterns. The introduction of French poetic metre and loanwords with foreign stressing patterns may have triggered, to some extent, the development of non-root initial stress in Germanic vocabulary. The matter certainly requires further investigation, although, as Kuryłowicz (1976: 66) points out, poetic metre should not normally contradict linguistic principles. Furthermore, Minkova (1996) discusses similar irregularities in the *Ormulum* and goes as far as to state that "the almost uniformly Germanic vocabulary (...) would preclude any speculations about prosodic influence from French or Anglo-Norman". Thus, regardless of whether external influences contributed to the irregularities, an ultimate rooting of the phenomenon in phonology is to be expected.

Further study and a broader scope of investigation are necessary to reach more decisive conclusions.

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