

ANGLICA

An International Journal of English Studies

24/2

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Instances of Phonological Weight-Sensitivity in Early Middle English Poetry

Abstract

The present paper addresses the issue of heavy syllables and their special status in Early Middle English iambic poetry. The expected stress pattern for native vocabulary is essentially trochaic and left-strong, yet numerous non-root-initial heavy syllables appear to receive accent in literary works of the period. In Old English, the language relied on syllabic quantity to a great extent, both for poetic and linguistic accentuation. The question arises whether the apparent potential of heavy syllables for attracting poetic accent in Middle English might be a remnant of Old English weight sensitivity. Another issue to be addressed is the possibly different employment of heavy syllables (in ictic positions) in Early Middle English poems as opposed to later poetic works of the period.

1. Introduction: stress, accent and weight in Old and Middle English

Arguably the most characteristic feature of Middle English poetry is its preference for a novel type of metre based upon iambic feet. This leading pattern, which is the focus of the present paper is an alternating sequence of unstressed and stressed syllables. It constitutes a major departure from the shape of pre-Conquest alliterative verse. From a purely descriptive perspective, it appears to be a simplification: five (or more) Old English hemistich variants (postulated a.o. by Sievers 1885, 220) are now replaced with just one pattern. Yet, the relatively rigid new structure allows, in certain aspects, for linguistically unexpected choices of lifts (at this point it should be noted that the terms “metre”, “accent”, “ictus” and “lift” will be reserved for references to verse, while the terms “prosody” and “stress” will be employed in purely linguistic contexts). Item (1) below shows one such example from possibly the most famous Middle English verse composition, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (Furnivall’s 1879 edition of the *Ellesmere* MS).

(1) Ther koude no wight pynche at his writing (*General Prologue* 326)

The final accented syllable in item (1) does not seem a linguistically plausible candidate for accent. In a disyllabic item of native vocabulary left-bound root stress would be expected. As stated by Lahiri, Riad, and Jakobs (1999, 336) “Common Germanic primary stress invariably occurred on the root syllable, which in the vast majority of cases was the first syllable of a word.” In the case of compounds, stress was typically left-bound, as stated by Lass in item (2) below:

- (2) Compound stress rule: For any sequence [_XA, B], where X is a lexical category (...), A is strong and B is weak (Lass 1994, 90).

This is not to say that poetry always needs to slavishly follow linguistic principles, but it would also be unexpected for any poetic metre to completely disregard the principles of linguistic stress-placement. For Old English, Kuryłowicz (1976), Russom (1990) and Drescher and Lahiri (1991) postulate that verse structure is rooted in language (the same logic applies, in fact, to the relation between any poetic tradition and its language of origin; see, e.g., Korhonen 1994, 77). If it is also true, at least to some extent, for Middle English, the seemingly exceptional lifts of the type in preceding item (1) would need a linguistically grounded motivation. This does not necessarily mean, however, that they reflect an aspect of the contemporary prosodic structure of the language. The view presented in the present paper is rather that they are a remnant of an earlier morpho-phonological state, possibly fossilised in versification customs. This might be an instance of what Lahiri (2002) refers to as ‘pertinacity’, a principle whereby native output forms continue to surface despite changes in grammar.

The present paper proposes that apparent exceptions of the type in preceding item (1) might in part be due to the significance of syllable weight (possibly working alongside morphological factors) in the assignment of both stress and accent. Quantitative considerations of this kind have been postulated as crucial for Old English prosody by some, chief among them Drescher and Lahiri (1991). Even more widely, it has been postulated that an accented position in Old English verse requires a heavy syllable. This principle is significant not only for primary but also secondary accent, and possibly also lower levels of accent, postulated e.g. by Fulk (1992) and Suzuki (1996).

- (3) Secondary/tertiary accent in *Beowulf* (Ed. Kläber 1950)

- (a) ne ðæs wealdendes (*Beowulf* 2857a)
 (b) oftost wīsode (*Beowulf* 1664b)

The underlined syllable in item (3a) is thought to have received some level of accent, whereas that in (3b) would have remained unaccented. This can be established on the basis of Sievers’s (1885) requirement for four metrical positions

per hemistich and is a result of differences in syllable structure, primarily weight differences. The typical quantity distinction is presented in item (4) below.

(3) syllable weight

(a) heavy: VV
VC(.)C

(b) light: V
(VC#)

The present paper follows Drescher and Lahiri (1991), Lass (1994), and others in the supposition that syllables with a non-branching nucleus and no coda should be defined as light, whereas those containing a long vowel are heavy. Syllables with a short vowel followed by two consonants (one of which may belong to the onset of a following syllable) are likewise heavy. Word final -VC# syllables are an area of some dissent in literature with most agreeing as to their ultimately light quality in multisyllabic strings, this being either inherent or an effect of final consonant extrametricality (Drescher and Lahiri 1991). Lexical monosyllables which end in a single consonant are a somewhat problematic area and will be discussed later.

2. Early Middle English poetry as a subject of analysis

Quite numerous instances of linguistically unexpected ictus placement can be found in arguably the best known Middle English work written in an iambic metre, *The Canterbury Tales*. An example was presented in item (1). Such lifts seem predominantly limited to heavy syllables, with little regard to the morphological content of a given syllable (Kofos 2014, 39). Yet, the question arises as to the extent to which the major influx of Romance vocabulary might have affected the emergence of unusual accentuation patterns. The issue is, however, of decidedly lesser gravity when it comes to the earlier works of the period. The latter, furthermore, need not be treated as deficient in terms of metrical regularity. As Minkova (1996, 97) points out, the difference in adherence to a constant number of lifts between Chaucer and *The Owl and the Nightingale* is negligible, while the metre of the *Ormulum* is even described as monotonously regular (Hall 1920, 486). The possibility of erroneous results stemming from any ‘looseness’ of metre is further reduced by limiting the analysis to the strongest metrical positions, such as the rhyme. The study bears the additional advantage of dealing with works which are chronologically closer to the Old English period.

3. *Ormulum*

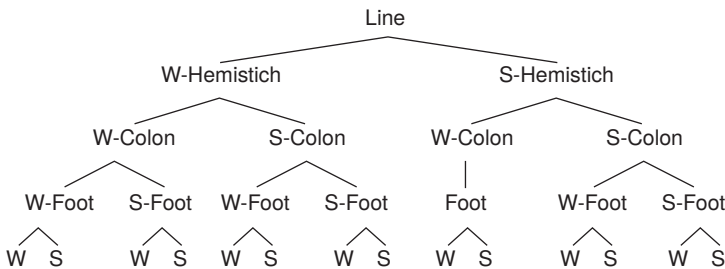
First to be analysed is *Ormulum* (Ed. Holt 1878), written in a consistent septinarius with a caesura after the fourth foot. Weight-sensitivity in Orm's metre is well documented line-finally.

- (5) Þiss boc iss nemmnedd Ormulum // Forrþi þatt Orm itt **wrohhte**
(*Ormulum* 1–2)

Each b-verse ends analogously to the one in item (5) above: with a heavy syllable followed by an additional, prosodically weak 15th syllable. Both positions, as noted by Minkova (103), display a high level of “prosodic rigidity.” Linguistically unacceptable accents are avoided in the strongest, 14th syllable.

According to Minkova (101) the second strongest position of the line is the accented syllable of the fourth foot (the right edge of the first hemistich). This fact is best displayed by means of a binary tree proposed for Orm's verse by Minkova, following a concept initially proposed by Hayes (1988, 222):

- (6) *Ormulum*: metrical structure (Minkova 101)



Given the structure in item (6) above, we would expect a high degree of rigidity for the fourth ictus, with a low probability of trochaic substitution. Yet, a significant number of morphemes placed just before the caesura are prosodically unexpected choices. Examples of such lines are provided below in item (7) and a full list of relevant morphemes appearing in the 8th position is provided in Table 1, with the number of instances indicated to the right:

- (7) Non-root initial and/or non-left-bound accent in the 8th position (Ed. Holt 1878)
- (a) To ledenn i clene ma33þ**had** // All hire lif till ende (*Ormulum* 2339–40)
- (b) Itt se33þ þatt Josæþ wass rihht**wis**, // & tatt iss tunnderstandenn
(*Ormulum* 2880–81)
- (c) Forr þatt wass wiss sellcup me**cle33c**, // & sellcup ædmodnesse,
(*Ormulum* 19217–18)

Table 1. *Ormulum*: irregularly accented morphemes in the 8th position

morpheme	instances				
-ærd	38	-gærd	1	-pit	1
-bæm	1	-gāng	3	-sæw (OE sēaw)	6
-blōd	1	-grund	2	-sōng	5
-bōc	26	-hād	6	-spel	9
-burh	1	-half	2	-stān	1
-chīld	4	-hūs	1	-stræm	1
-cūþ	1	-in / -īn)	28	-tīd	1
-daȝ	23	-ing	3	-tīȝ	23
-dōm	168	-ish	3	-trē	17
-drinch	6	-kin	27	-tūn	1
-ēr	2	-king	11	-uht	10
-fald	2	-lāc	3	-wal	3
-fast	4	-land/-lond	20	-warrd	4
-fir	1	-leik	53	-werc	5
-floc	5	-lēom	4	-what	3
-flōd	2	-lēs	19	-whīt	1
-flōr	1	-lī(che)	143	-word	11
-folc	1	-līf	2	-þēod	7
-fōt	1	-ling	3	-þing	10
-ful	13	-man/-men	29		
		-mōd	2		

Table 1 shows instances of suffixes and second compound-elements employed as the accent of the fourth foot. Spelling variants have been disregarded, while the MED or OED forms have been employed as the standard. The analysis was conducted solely for native vocabulary or hybrids where the relevant morpheme was of Germanic origin. Borrowings, including foreign proper names, have been disregarded. The morphemes in Table 1, serve as an ictus in the eighth position in 7.85% of a-verses. They constitute an apparent divergence from the prosodic principles stated earlier (cf. item 2), with a strong ictic position being filled either by a non-root morpheme or the right side of a compound. Yet, from a quantitative perspective, it is worth noting that the majority of the morphemes are heavy, even if we treat the controversial -VC# variant as light. The latter, constituting c.14% of the items listed in Table 1, are shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2. *Ormulum*: irregularly accented light morphemes in the 8th position

morpheme	instances
-da ₃	23
-floc (OE flocc)	5
-ful (OE -ful/-full)	13
-ish	3
-kin (OE cynn)	27
-man (OE mann)	29
-pit (OE pytt)	1
-spel (OE spell)	9

For some of the morphemes in Table 2 a quantitative motivation for appearing in an ictic position might not be etymologically unfounded. In Old English, five of the eight morphemes contained a geminate according to Bosworth-Toller and the OED (the doubled consonant is listed for most as the basic form, in the case of *-ful*, as an optional form). This might be an indication that they were, at an earlier stage, treated as *-VCC* syllables and thus considered heavy, in accordance with Hayes (1989) who points to the heavy quality of geminates. Thus, for the purposes of metrical accentuation, they might still have been perceived as proper candidates for an ictic position, even if they were no longer heavy from the perspective of contemporary prosody.

The suffix *-ish* occurs only in the word *English*. In this particular context, the MED points to the possible influence of an Anglo-French form: *Englais*. This might explain the acceptability of a foreign stressing pattern. Finally, the morpheme *-da₃* constitutes c.2.9% of the items in Table 1. It is a compound element which frequently functions as a separate lexical item, often alongside its employment in compounds, as in item (8) below.

(8) Þe seffnde **da₃** iss Ressted**da₃** (*Ormulum* 4186)

As a separate word, the morpheme *da₃* appears 154 times in accented positions and only twice unaccented. This might disprove the relevance of weight and advocate for a purely morphological approach to the principles of accentuation. However, certain weight-driven theories accommodate such instances, e.g. by postulating a different ordering of OT rules for function and content words, whereby the final consonant in lexical items is not extrametrical (Bermúdez-Otero 1996, 22). An argument of similar nature may also lie in the minimal shape of content words: *-VC#*, *-VV#* or *-VCV#*, a resolved variant, with two light syllables

equating to a heavy one, which contrasts with the lack of such requirements for function words (Suzuki 240). Thus, while the morphological aspect appears significant, it need not disprove a combined quantitative approach. Similarly in the case of word stress, morphological and phonological requirements are often combined.

Given that the majority of the morphemes in Table 1 are undoubtedly heavy and there appears to be some motivation for most of the exceptions to be treated as either etymologically or inherently heavy, it might be concluded that weight is a factor in the potential of syllables to carry accent, even a strong one such as the 8th position. If this were the case one might postulate a degree of continuity between Old and Middle English metrical structure in this respect. In Old English, as shown in preceding item (3), weight was a crucial factor in determining whether a syllable could receive some degree of accent. In alliterative poetry, a non-primary syllable would have typically received secondary or lesser degree accent. If heavy syllables retained their potential as carriers of ictus in Middle English, the choice was limited to a full ictus or a dip. Thus non-primary heavy syllables might have been viewed as non-preferred yet possible candidates for accentuation. A preference for their exclusion would have been most prominent in the metrically strongest positions.

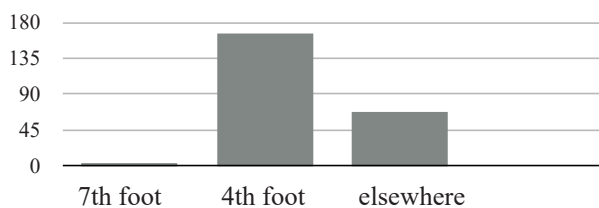


Fig. 1. *Ormulum*: *-dom* as an accented syllable

As seen in Figure 1, a suffix like *-dom* would largely have been excluded from the strongest 14th position (with just 4 occurrences in *Ormulum*), but it occurred frequently in the second strongest position (the 4th foot) and would also have been possible in other ictic positions (69 occurrences in *Ormulum*).

The analysis thus far encompassed all multisyllabic lexical items, including those of three and more syllables where root-initial, left-bound accent occurs alongside non-primary ictus, with an extra syllable serving as a dip in-between. Results confined to instances where root-accent is absent are shown below, in Table 3:

Table 3. *Ormulum*: Irregularly accented morphemes with no accompanying root accentuation

morpheme	instances
-cūþ	1
-daȝ	1
-dōm	3
-ēr	2
-fald	1
-gang	3
-hād	3

-hus	1
-in / -īn	28
-ish	3
-kin	22
-lāc	3
-leik	10
-lī(che)	12
-ling	1

-man	2
spel	9
-uht	10
-wal	2
-ward	2
-wīs	2

The morphemes in Table 3 are still considerable in frequency, although are a limited set of the items from Table 1, they still constitute c.15.7 % of occurrences in the latter. Moreover, a stressed root cannot belittle the fact that a non-primary syllable was seen as a suitable candidate for a metrically strong position. Therefore, the analysis should not be confined to the set in Table 3.

It should, however, be noted that while quantitative considerations seem grounded on the basis of diachronic data, the impact of morphological aspects cannot be denied.

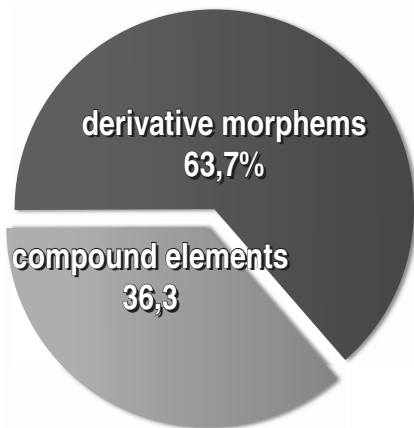


Fig. 2. The ratio of derivative morphemes to compound elements

As shown in Figure 2, the analysed morphemes are either compound elements or derivative morphemes with no instances of inflections. This seems, along with the possible incomplete grammaticalisation of certain items, an important factor in their being chosen for ictic positions. Suffixes such as *-dom* and *-hod/-hed(e)* frequently occurred 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 fossilised in poetry. However, as mentioned before, morphological aspects need not disprove the impact of weight-driven considerations. An argument for the latter may be found in the following analysis of another early Middle English poem.

4. *The Owl and the Nightingale*

The Owl and the Nightingale survives in two manuscripts: Cotton Caligula A IX and Jesus College 29, both dated to the 13th century. The present analysis is based on the Atkins and Guildford (1922) edition of the Cotton version, as it is probably the earlier variant (Bravo et al 1991, 1). The poem is written in octosyllabic rhymed couplets. As Minkova (103) states, rhymes, when present, are the most inviolable position in a line of verse. This final ictic position was therefore selected for the subject of the present analysis. Prosodically unexpected rhymes occurred in c.6.9% of lines, a number somewhat lower than in the case of the 4th foot in Orm’s verse (7.85%). This might be due to the unparalleled metrical strength of the rhyming position and thus its higher requirements. The non-root-initial and non-left-bound morphemes are listed in Table 4 below:

Table 4. *The Owl and the Nightingale*: irregularly accented morphemes in the final ictic position

morpheme	instances				
-rēd	1	-wārd	4	-rihte	1
-swō	1	-ham/-hom (OE hām)	2	-līch(e)	14
-swāre	9	-lond	3	-hēd(e)	9
-man (OE mann)	1	-sīþe	1	-ness(e)	20
-nēr(e)	1	-daʒ	1	-lēs	2
-weie	2	-kenn/-kunn	3	-rēd	1
-spel	2	-fold	1	-dōm(e)	5
-forde	1	-gāle	9	-ing(e)	38
-sugg (OE sūgan)	1	-wāle	1		

The majority of the morphemes in Table 4 are heavy or could be considered etymologically heavy. The four occurrences of the morphemes *-daʒ* and *-wei* are problematic. These, however, constitute only c.3% of the data set. Furthermore, both typically function as separate and accented lexical items, and thus the previously stated arguments for the possibly exceptional treatment of -VC# codas in content words may be applicable.

As in the case of *Ormulum*, a large portion of the morphemes in Table 4 are compound elements, c.31.3%. The majority of the morphemes belong to the derivational category, amounting to over 60%, as can be seen in Figure 3 below:

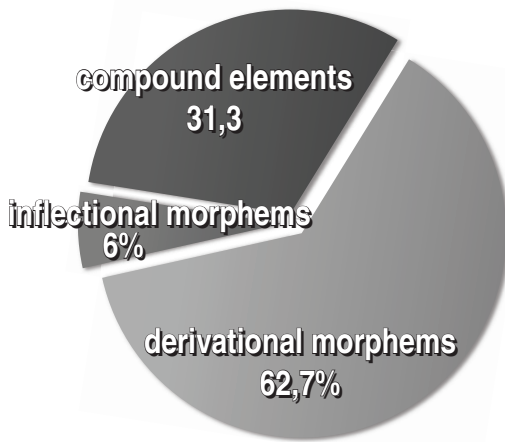


Fig. 3. *The Owl and the Nightingale*: morpheme types for non-primary accent

The ratio in Figure 3 resembles the one previously stated (cf. preceding Figure 2) for *Ormulum*. There are, however, eight uses of the *-ing* suffix which point to a participial rather than gerundive meaning. This amounts to c. 6% of the items in Table 4 and might be an indication as to the partially quantitative rather than purely morphological motivation for the selection of ictic syllables.

5. *Poema Morale*

Finally, worth mentioning is another early Middle English poem, the *Poema Morale*. This short text of c.400 lines survives in seven manuscripts which have a rather wide geographical and chronological spread (Laing 1992, 570). Due to the preliminary scope of the study only one of the versions has been analysed, the Hall (1920) edition of the Trinity College MS, the choice being based on its relatively early date of origin and relative completeness. *Poema Morale* has been shown to display a certain degree of metrical weight-sensitivity by Fulk (2002), who points to the possibility of resolution at the end of the first half-line. This phenomenon, whereby a sequence of two syllables, the first of which is light, is equivalent to a heavy syllable would explain the apparent metrical irregularity of a number of lines in the poem. Thus, other weight-driven metrical choices would not be isolated. Presented in Table 5 are non-root initial and non-left-bound

morphemes appearing in rhyming ictic positions, as previously stated, rhyme being the metrically strongest element.

Table 5. *Poema Morale*: irregularly accented morphemes in rhyming ictic positions

morpheme	instances
-fast(e)	2
-ing	4
-kenn(e)	2
-lich(e)	1
-ling	1
-messe (OE <i>mæssa</i>)	1
-ness(e)	3
-rich(e)	2

The items in Table 5 are either heavy or may be considered etymologically heavy. In the case of *Poema Morale*, the prosodically unexpected lifts occur in only 4% of rhyming positions (cf. c.7% in the case of *The Owl and the Nightingale*). Yet the relative shortness of the poem renders the sample less representative. Again noticeable is the predominance of compound elements and derivative morphemes (with all uses of the *-ing* suffix being gerundive) pointing to the morphological factor in the choice of ictus. However, the apparent employment of resolution in the same poem adds plausibility to the quantitative factor. In support of the latter, it is, finally, worth noting that in *The Canterbury Tales*, a considerably later composition, the *-ing* suffix appears to be an acceptable ictus regardless of its grammatical content.

Table 6. *-ing/-yng/-ung* in disyllabic words (lines 1–6000, *The Canterbury Tales*, Ed. Furnivall 1879)

accented suffix	127	Gerund	83 (65.4%)
		Present Participle	44 (34.6%)
unaccented suffix	627	Gerund	397 (63.3%)
		Present Participle	230 (36.7%)

Table 6 shows the results of an analysis of c.6000 lines of Chaucer's verse (Kolos 39), The listed morphemes include all ictic positions other than the initial

foot. The ratio of gerunds to present participles seems virtually unchanged regardless of whether the *-ing* suffix is accented or not. The number of the occurrences of the present participle suffix *-ing* as an accented syllable is considerable and may be another argument for the importance of quantitative considerations.

6. Conclusions

A preliminary analysis of selected early Middle English texts points to the possibility of a degree of continuity in the metrical status of heavy syllables from Old to Middle English. It seems that alongside morphological considerations, syllabic quantity may have been a factor in the placement of suffixes and non-primary compound elements in ictic positions. With the loss of variable degrees of accent present in alliterative poetry, non-primary bimoraic syllables may have been considered deficient yet possible candidates for lifts. Their deficiency would have been rooted in morphological factors and is corroborated by the extremely low frequency of non-primary accent in the strongest metrical position of Orm's verse, the 14th syllable.

Another angle of comparison might be obtained through the analysis of later Middle English verse. The initial results show that Chaucer's verse allows heavy syllables in ictic positions even when a given morpheme is inflectional rather than derivational. This could point to external prosodic influences but might also show continuity from Old English to Middle English in the metrical status of heavy syllables

Finally, it should be noted that the present analysis does not postulate any linguistic properties of early Middle English outside of verse. The diachronic analysis points rather to metrical weight-sensitivity as a remnant of an earlier poetic tradition, a 'fossil' which would have survived only in poetic tradition.

A broader scope of investigation might be necessary in order to reach further conclusions

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