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ON THE STRONG-WEAK INTERPLAY IN SOME MIDDLE ENGLISH VERBS¹

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It is well known that the system of Old English strong verbs underwent far-reaching modifications in the course of the Middle English period; in fact it is doubtful if one can talk about a strong verb system at all when referring to the linguistic reality of Late Middle English. The two processes responsible for this situation are interparadigmatic analogy and lexical attrition. Thus by the end of the fifteenth century only approximately one half of originally strong verbal roots still existed in the language, and, what is more important, a mere quarter of these continued to rely on ablaut in expressing tense distinctions (Krygier 1994: 247).

The process has received little scholarly attention since Erich Michelau's doctoral dissertation of 1910. Only recently have a number of publications returned to the subject (cf. Welna 1991, Krygier 1994, Görlach 1996, and most recently Kahlas-Tarkka 2000). In these a few factors have been suggested that could have been responsible for the wholesale shift from the strong to the weak paradigm that occurred in the Middle English period. Among the most often mentioned culprits one could list the number of alternants, specific root-final consonants or consonant clusters, pressure of the weak verbal paradigm, and the existence of a parallel weak verb. The last of these putative shift-conducive factors is the subject of this paper.

The confusion of forms of strong and weak verbs derived from the same root was first put forward by Michelau, who stated that "Die tendenz zur vereinfachung der

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verbalflexion ist schon in früher zeit wirksam. bereits im ae. sind eine anzahl starker verba zu gunsten der zugehörigen abgeleiteten schwachen in ihrer anwendung beschränkt. im folgenden verzeichne ich die fälle, in denen ein starkes verbum einem schwachen gleichen stammes gegenübersteht und zwischen beiden bedeutungs- und formenvermischung stattgefunden hat, sei es nun, dass das starke verbum zugleich mit der flexion auch die bedeutung des schwachen übernahm, sei es dass sich das schwache die bedeutung des starken zu eigen machte" (Michelau 1910: 68–69). Michelau was quick to add that in individual cases other factors may have been instrumental in the shift, but then nevertheless provided a list of verb pairs, which he believed exemplify the aforementioned tendency.

Since then Michelau's statement has been repeated in many publications as one of few certain properties of the shift. And yet there seems to have been no attempt to verify this claim. However, it is more than advisable to try and see how this putative process of "bedeutungs- und formenvermischung" operated, for there are strong arguments against putting too much emphasis on this particular factor.

These reservations are quite commonsensical. Bearing in mind the paucity of surviving Old English material it highly unlikely that it will ever be possible to say with any accuracy how many strong verbs there were in Old English, not to mention the number of co-existing related weak verbs². Moreover, the question that immediately springs to one's mind is one of time: why would this factor suddenly become operational in (presumably) Late Old and Early Middle English, if related weak and strong verbs had coexisted for centuries with little interference from each other?

To investigate this problem more closely two Early Middle English texts of good size were selected, which would warrant a sufficient number of examples. These were the English version of the "Ancrene Riwe" from British Museum Cotton MS. Cleopatra C. vi, dated between 1225 and 1230 by Dobson in his edition of the text, and the two manuscripts of Laȝamon's "Brut", British Museum Caligula A. ix and British Museum Otho C. xiii, both written in the second half of the thirteenth century. Each of them was viewed as exemplifying a different Early Middle English dialectal usage; for obvious reasons it is unfortunately not possible to trace the development of any Early Middle English linguistic feature, phonological or morphological, through a succession of directly related forms.

The first verb to be discussed is Modern English *lose*. It is usually traced back to an Old English Class 2 strong verb *lēosan*, attested only in prefixed forms *for-* and *belēosan*, with two distinct meanings, viz. (i) 'lose, abandon, let go', and (ii) 'destroy,

² Michelau himself indirectly weakened his own argument, using asterisked weak forms in a number of his verb pairs (e.g., *screpan* ~ **scrapian*, *deorfan* ~ **dierfan*, *blīcan* ~ **blīcian*). This clearly shows that the influence of related weak verbs in Old English was used by him as a *deus ex machina* in those cases where he could observe no clear reason for the shift.

ruin'³. Its present-day weak morphology is generally attributed to confusion with forms of a weak class II verb *losian*, whose principal meanings in Old English were (i) 'be lost, fail, perish', (ii) 'escape, get away', and (iii) 'destroy'. Thus, e.g., Wefna says that "The continuations of the strong verb *lēosan* 'lose' became confused with ME *lōsen* (WV₂)" (1997: 126). Likewise Brunner in his *Die Englische Sprache* states that forms continuing Old English **lēosan* "sind nach dem 15. Jh nicht mehr üblich und werden durch *lose* vom ae. schwachen Verbum ersetzt" (1960–1962: 217). It is interesting to observe at this stage that there was at least partial semantic overlap between the two verbs in Old English, which could facilitate such mixing.

The evidence obtained from the "Ancrene Riwe" denies the existence of this process in its dialect. ME *lēse* is strong throughout the text, as attested by examples (1) and (2):

- (1) ha **leas** hire maiden had (22.16)
 (2) þe saule is widewe þ̅ haueð **for loren** hire spus (7.7–8)

Example (3) could be interpreted semantically as containing a form properly belonging to *lēse* as well — a past participle of a transitive verb with the meaning 'lose'.

- (3) Awummon þ̅ haueð **ilose**t hire nelde. oðer ansutere his [e]al. secheð hit anan richt (148^v.15–17)

However, there are strong doubts about such an interpretation, primarily phonologically motivated, and it would be preferable to treat this form as an example of meaning extension of the weak verb *lōsie*.

The situation in the "Brut" is similarly unproblematic. *Lēse* maintains its strong forms in all attested alternants, as shown by the examples (4)–(6):

- (4) ah þe king of his monnen monie þusend **læs** (320; O: les)
 (5) ȝif Rome scæl **for-leosen** þa while þe ich leouie (4730; O: for-lease)
 (6) þat he hauede **iloren** his kinelond and his quene þe he leouede (2421; O: ilore)

This is true of both manuscripts, regardless of minor purely phonetic, or even graphemic, modifications. Likewise, the reflexes of the Old English weak verb exhibit similar unity, exemplified in (7) and (8).

- (7) Al his folk he **losede** þer þurh Locri 7 Camber (1101, O: losede)
 (8) anan swa he lai hire mide hire lif heo **losede** sone (12935; O: —)

³ All meanings are quoted directly after *A concise Anglo-Saxon dictionary* (Hall 1960).

Of particular interest are the alliterative phrases of the *leosen 7 losien* type, found twice in the Caligula manuscript and shown under (9) and (10), together with its partial variant found in both manuscripts, given as (11).

- (9) Nu þu scalt læn **leosen 7 losie** þine freonden (8251; O: —)
 (10) þat he scal þat lif **leosen 7 leosien** his freonden (10036; O: —)
 (11) 7 swa heo scullen on londen **losien** heore freonden (10247; O: losie)

Although it is certain that formally the two verbs are still distinguished by the scribes of both Caligula and Otho manuscripts, at the same time these phrases show clearly that semantic contamination must have taken place. Both the strong and the weak verb can be used as transitive with reference to the same type of objects: *monie þusend of monnen* (4), *folk* (7), or *lif* (8, 10). At the same time, only strong forms are used intransitively, albeit rarely.

In comparison with the text of the "Ancrene Riwe" the Caligula manuscript in a number of instances displays what should be interpreted as weak forms of the strong verb *lēse*. Incidentally, it should be emphasised that a distinction must be made between etymologically weak forms of the weak verb *lōsie*, such as (7) or (8), which merely appear in the context previously reserved for the strong verb, and the truly analogical weak forms of the strong verb, such as the one given below as (12). Only the latter can be used as evidence for the formal influence of the related weak verb rather than contextual synonymicity of two different verbs.

- (12) Pa Pohtes weoren uuele he **leoseden** heore aþele (5301; O: —)

There are a number of such forms in the Caligula manuscript, all characterised by strong vocalism and the presence of the dental suffix. However, it is very interesting to observe that the usage of the other manuscript of the "Brut" differs markedly. It seems that the scribe of the Otho MS. still rigidly maintained the formal distinction between *lēse* and *lōsie* in his idiolect. Whenever the Caligula manuscript has one of these new analogical weak forms, Otho shows either strong forms of *lēse*, as in (13), or weak forms of *lōsie*, as in (14)–(16), in each case etymologically correct.

- (13) Nu ich **ileosed** habbe mine sweines lofe (14144; O: i-lore)
 (14) iʒarked al to **leosen** lofue his richen (11649; O: lose leoue his freondes)
 (15) þat heo þer **for-leoseden** lif and heore saulen (12730; O: for-losede)
 (16) swa ane while heo þer l[i]ueden and seoðen heo hit **leoseden** (13166; O: losede)

When one remembers that the two manuscripts are products of two parallel, but separate traditions, it becomes clear that in this particular respect Otho is far more

conservative than Caligula, the latter beginning to introduce isolated analogical weak forms into the text.

The other verb to be discussed is Modern English *hang*. It is generally accepted that its present morphology, generally strong (or, to put it differently, irregular), but weak in a specialised sense of being executed by hanging, derives from a confluence of three separate verbs: Old English strong class 7 verb *hōn*, with two principal meanings: (i) 'hang, suspend, crucify', and (ii) 'put on' (clothes); Old English intransitive weak class II verb *hangian* with three meanings: (i) 'be hanged', (ii) 'depend, rest on', and (iii) 'hang, suspend'; and Old Norse weak verb *hengja*. Welna (1997) gives the following description of its history in the Middle English period: "*hang* (OE *hangian*, also strong *hōn*): PT: *heng hing* (13 – 15 centuries; the South)/*hang hong* (the North) *hung* (from the 16th century onwards): PP *hangen* (12 – 15 centuries) *hongen* (13 – 14 centuries) *hunge* (c. 1300, Robert of Gloucester) *hung* (from the 16th century onwards). All sources agree that *hōn* was eliminated early, and the new strong forms came to be associated with the original weak verb (...) These new strong forms were Northern developments" (1997: 218). According to Brunner "Im Prät. und Part. Perf. kommen südl. und ostmittelländisch sowohl die starken wie die zu *hangian* gehörenden schwachen Formen vor, also Prät. *heng* (und *hing* mit /l/ aus ae. /e/ vor /ŋ/ (...)), Part. *hangen*, *ihonge* einerseits und Prät. und Part. *hanged*, *honed* anderseits" (1960–1962: 245).

What these descriptions lack is precision of detail, and this is proved by the analysis of the usage of *hang* in the "Ancrene Riwe". Unfortunately, there are no preterite forms of the verb in question attested in the text, but both present and past participle forms suffice to create a very interesting picture. The strong verb is clearly used in its original transitive sense as in (17), even though the infinitive *hongen* could be analogical either to *hangian* or to the general pattern of strong verbs of class 3a⁴. Similarly, the weak verb is well attested in its intransitive function, cf. (18). The remaining seven examples all refer to death by hanging or crucifixion and contain past participles of the verb in question. It may seem that confusion reigns supreme in the text, as evidenced by (19) versus (20)–(25).

- (17) me ladde him amaregen on waritreo to **hongen** (49v.19–20)
 (18) An mon þ̅ leiȝe inprisun... ne schulde ut bute forto **hongin** (51.10–12)
 (19) Iesu wið ute gult. for his Muc̅ele godlec wes **anhon** onrode (128v.16–17)
 (20) is þe leouere tobeon Iudase feolaȝe þen Iesu cristes fere. Ba weren **anhonged** (128^v.13–15)
 (21) Amon þe were idemet for an luðer morðre tobeo for barnt alcwic oðer scheomeliche **an honged** (141^v.7–9)
 (22) þa þu were [i]demed for tobeon [**a**]honged (141^v.12–13)

⁴ This would be parallel to, e.g., Old English strong class 3 verb *gangan*, which developed analogically as an alternative to the irregular verb *gān*.

- (23) þe þridde (muze beon ieuened) <to> **ihonged** wið hare gode wil on Iesues rode (160.12–13)
 (24) ich am unwurð hire. as wari þe is **anhonged** (162.15–16)
 (25) al hare blisse is forto beon **ahonged** sariliche 7 scheomeliche wið Iesu on his rode (163.4–5)

However, it need not necessarily be so. The strong past participle *anhon* in (19) refers to Jesus and to Jesus only. All the others depict manners of dying similar or analogical to His, yet subjects in each and every one of them are human and not divine. Although caution is advised when dealing with such a low number of examples, it is quite possible that this is not a coincidence, and that in fact neither semantic nor formal overlap between strong and weak forms exists in the “Ancrene Riwe”.

When one looks at the data obtained from the “Brut” the same conclusion as above suggests itself. Strong forms are the only choice when the verb is transitive; this is evidenced by (26) and (27), while (28) shows additionally that, unlike in the “Ancrene Riwe”, the old infinitive still survives more or less intact.

- (26) and heom þer **hengen** bi-foren heore eldren (2854; O: —)
 (27) þat heore bern me **on-heng** on heze trouwen (2862; O: heong)
 (28) þær Brutus hin hefde idon for to-marewene he hine wolde **an-hon** (366; O: an-hon)

On the other hand, intransitive uses of the verb *hang* without exception take weak forms, both in the present and in the preterite; this is shown in (29)–(31).

- (29) and heo sculen **hongien** on hæze treowen (10531; O: hongy)
 (30) Haldeð heom haldeð alle he sculleð **heongien** (13213; O: hongy)
 (31) heo seiden þat he sculde beon **anhongen** an one heze treowe (514; O: he solde eze hangie (vp)-on grete trouwes)

In (31) one can even find a well-preserved contrast between a strong transitive past participle in a passive construction in the Caligula MS., and a weak intransitive infinitive in the Otho MS.

Moreover, in the “Brut” strong uses of *hang* are attested also for meanings other than ‘hang, crucify’, e.g., ‘hang down, suspend’, as in (32)–(34).

- (32) Þa **heng** he hire hæfued 7 heolde toward bræsten (7829; O: —)
 (33) Þa **heng** his breowen a-dun þe king Vther Pendragun (9169; O: heng)
 (34) He **heng** an his swore ænne sceld deore (10553; O: heng)

Similarly, other intransitive senses of the weak verb *hang*, e.g., ‘be suspended’, are attested with etymologically correct weak forms, given in (35) and (36).

- (35) <munekes> iseȝen þan weien þane swein mid munec-claðen þe <hod>
hongede adun also he hudde his crune (6542–3; O: —)
- (36) þa þe rihȝen tailles **hangede** a þan clarkes (14764; O: —)

The final issue to be mentioned with regard to the forms of the verb *hang* is the past participle of the prefixed verb *behang*, variants of which are listed in (37)–(41).

- (37) al weren þe hællen **bi-hongen** mid pellen (1816; O: bi-honge)
- (38) <ich [inc] wille freoiȝen> mid gode ræue **bi-hon** and makien inc riche (2803; O: cloþi)
- (39) <riden> heȝe here-kempen **bihonged** mid stelen (11879; O: bihonge)
- (40) <þer-after comen> Romanisce leoden mid ræue **bihonged** (13294; O: —)
- (41) þa Arður þider hafde isend sixtene þusund baldere Brutten mid burnen **bihonged** (13305-6; O: bi-honge)

As with mixed variants of the verb *lose* in the Caligula manuscript of the “Brut”, this particular form also displays both weak and strong realisations in identical contexts, testifying to possible incipient confusion. Nevertheless, this is not the main verb, but its prefixed derivate, which need not be still felt a member of this particular word family; cf. the fates of *ætwītan* and *wītan* in Middle English. Furthermore, once again the Otho manuscript displays a markedly different behaviour, using only strong forms in the corresponding lines.

What conclusions can be drawn from the data presented above? It seems quite clear that in the thirteenth century at least in the southern dialects the interaction between strong and weak verbs derived from the same stem was much more complicated than textbooks claim. In the case of *lose* a contamination of meanings of strong and weak verbs can be observed, which may have led to the development of analogical forms attested in the Caligula manuscript of the “Brut”⁵. That this is just a tendency and not a universal principle is borne out by a markedly different behaviour shown by the Otho manuscript of the same text. The situation with *hang* is even more unexpected; here analogical weak forms are simply absent from the data; weak past participles of *behang* attest to morphological opacity of the verb rather than interparadigmatic confusion.

The very idea of weak/strong confusion as responsible for the shift in any significant fashion seems in dire need of reformulation. For it is obvious even on the

⁵ Whenever semantic overlap takes place, formal contamination is naturally far more likely, as then both verbs can appear in identical contexts. The fate of Old English *brinnan*/**birnan*, hopelessly intertwined with weak *bernan*, *bærnan* and Old Norse *brenna*, exemplifies this point.

basis of this admittedly short study that it could have arisen only under very specific conditions. The necessary prerequisite is a general formal uniformity of the verbal inflections in the present tense. This uniformisation would have taken place earlier in the North, though regrettably during the period of few surviving documents, and possibly a few centuries later in the South. Quite clearly, talking about weak/strong confusion as significant before the inception of the process of uniformisation, so, e.g., in Old English, appears to be simply wrong.

To conclude, it must be emphasised once again that the term “analogical weak form” sometimes tends to be misapplied to any synchronically weak form of an originally strong verb, without taking into consideration its diachronic development. If diachronic development were really to be taken into consideration, neither Modern English *lose* nor Modern English *hang* should be referred to as weak; *lose* is diachronically a case of a suppletive paradigm, with the infinitive continuing the Old English strong verb *lēosan*, and past forms continuing the Old English weak verb *losian*; thus it is structurally identical with Modern English *go*, which would never be called a weak verb. *Hang*, on the other hand, should be treated as a regular strong verb continuing Old English *hōn/*hangan*, and *hang* “kill by hanging” should be perceived as a separate verb, directly continuing the Old English weak verb *hangian*. Finally, the role of parallel weak verbs in the strong-to-weak shift should perhaps be relegated to the status of a reinforcing factor in few individual cases, with no systemic significance.

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