

Irregular adjectival gradation in Old English: The case of the mutated superlatives

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1. Introduction

The interface between phonology and morphology has always been a particularly fruitful field for historical linguistic research. The mutual interaction between phonological change and the restructuring of morphological systems in reaction to these changes, often referred to as Sturtevant's Paradox, provides a useful insight into the internal working of forces serving two opposite tendencies, those of regularity and variety in language.

Out of the early phonological changes affecting the English language, none has been more productive with regard to morphophonemic alternations, both inflectional and derivational, than *i*-umlaut. This distant vocalic assimilation of frontness, affecting back vowels when followed by *i, *ī or *j in the next syllable, took place in the pre-literary Old English period, affecting all eligible inputs without exceptions. Whereas details of its operation are beyond the scope of this paper, and indeed, not relevant for the present discussion, selective presence of the conditioning elements in various paradigmatic forms led to the emergence of a complex web of irregular paradigms and derivational classes.

As far as Old English inflections are concerned, there are as many as three classes of words which display paradigmatic *i*-umlaut, i.e., use *i*-umlaut as an inflectional marker (as opposed to lexical *i*-umlaut, which is present throughout the paradigm, as in the old *i*-stem nouns). In feminine and masculine athematic nouns, masculine *nd*-stem nouns, and *r*-stem nouns inflectional *i*-umlaut is visible in the genitive and/or dative singular and/or the nominative/accusative plural, as in *bōc* 'book' (g.d.s., n.a.p. *bēc*), *frēond* 'friend' (n.a.p. *frīend* ~ *frȳnd*), *dōhtor* 'daughter' (d.s. *dēhter*). In the so-called strong verb system *i*-umlaut is manifested in 2,3sg.pr.ind. of eligible strong verbs (Hogg 1992: §5.85(6) also lists the pa.subj. and pa.part., the latter probably erroneously, cf. Seebold 1967), as in *faran* 'go, travel' (*færst*, *færþ*). Finally, *i*-umlaut is present in adjectival gradation, in a limited set of adjectives which use the alternation as a reinforcement strategy to construe the comparative and superlative grades, as in *lang* 'long' (*lengra* ~ *lengest*).

It is the last of the three categories, i.e., adjectival gradation, that will come under closer scrutiny in this paper. Adjectives are quite often neglected in studies devoted to Old English morphology, and patterns of gradation are usually presented as not allowing much variation (cf. Campbell 1959: §658). Therefore, the main aim of this paper will be to verify the model of adjectival paradigmatic *i*-umlaut presented in traditional grammars of Old English, on the basis of the subclass of mutated adjectives and with the focus on the superlative grade.

2. Adjectival gradation in Old English

The system of adjectival gradation in its basic principles has not changed radically since the Old English period. The three major types utilised by the language are inflectional, morphophonological, and suppletive. Of these the most popular and regular is the first type, which employs the inflectional endings *-ra* and *-ost* for the comparative and the superlative respectively. A typical example of this subclass is the adjective *blind* 'blind':

(1) *blind* ~ *blindra* ~ *blindost*

The second type comprises a number of high frequency words such as *eald* 'old' or *brād* 'broad'. It is assumed that in Proto-Germanic these adjectives used alternative suffixes, **-izan-* for the comparative and **-ista-* for the superlative, as opposed to the regular **-ōzan-* and **-ōsta-*, and that the **i* of these endings was responsible for the presence of umlauted vowels (cf. Campbell 1959: §660), as in:

(2) *eald* ~ *ieldra* ~ *ieldest*

Finally, another group of very frequent adjectives such as *gōd* 'good', *yfel* 'evil' or *micel* 'great' inherited from the protolanguage a suppletive gradation paradigm, which used a different root for the comparative and the superlative alike, as in:

(3) *gōd* ~ *betera*, *bet(t)ra* ~ *bet(e)st*, *best*

3. The place of *i*-umlaut in adjectival gradation

Quite interestingly, while there is a general agreement as to the predominance of the first, inflectional type, the others are usually taken for granted, i.e., listed but not discussed in much detail. Therefore, before turning to the actual data illustrating the use of *i*-umlaut in adjectival gradation, a short overview of earlier studies should be undertaken¹. The most insightful presentation can be found in Campbell's 1959 *Old English Grammar*. There he lists five regular adjectives belonging to this class, *eald* 'old', *geong* 'young', *hēah* 'high', *lang* 'long', and *sceort* 'short', as well as a few others, where the presence of umlauted vowels is limited in scope: *brād* 'broad' (only in poetry and in the West-Saxon dialect), *grēat* 'great', *strang* 'strong' (where the umlauted forms may be confused with those of *streng* 'severe'), and *hlēow* 'warm' (Campbell 1959: §658).

Other authors tend to repeat Campbell's information, only rarely supplying additional details. Thus, Welna (1996: §1.72) mentions occasional non-mutated forms such as *longra*, *scortest*, or *strongra*, ascribing them to the analogy on the basis of the positive grade; he also notes the presence of the regular paradigm *gung* ~ *gungra* ~ *gungest* in the *Vespasian Psalter* for the regularly mutated *geong* 'young', whereas Brunner (1965) or Lass (1994) are satisfied with providing the standard list; the latter concludes his discussion with a curious statement that "[i]n OE the choice of one or the other [type of gradation — M.K.] seems to be largely lexically determined" (Lass 1994: 150). The overall picture emerging from their accounts is given below:

TABLE 1: Old English adjectives with morphophonological gradation

Positive	Comparative	Superlative
<i>brād</i> 'broad'	mixed	mixed
<i>eald</i> 'old'	mutated	mutated
<i>geong</i> 'young'	usually mutated	usually mutated
<i>grēat</i> 'great'	mutated	mutated
<i>hēah</i> 'high'	mutated	mutated
<i>lang</i> 'long'	usually mutated	usually mutated
<i>sceort</i> 'short'	mutated	usually mutated
<i>strang</i> 'strong'	usually mutated	usually mutated

4. The data

The following section contains an analysis of the eight Old English adjectives employing morphophonological gradation on the basis of the entire surviving corpus of Old English texts. In order to collect the data the Old English Corpus Variant Word/Phrase Search tool was used, while subsequent verification and identification of the forms preliminarily identified as superlatives was carried out with the help of the Toronto Old English Corpus.

A. *brād* 'broad' - expected form(s): *brādost*, less frequently *bræðost*

In the *Toronto Corpus* there are only two occurrences of the superlative form of this adjective. Both of these display an unmutated vowel: *brādest* (Ch 1443 (HarmD 16)) and *bradost* (Or 1).

B. *eald* 'old' - expected form(s): *ieldest/yldest*, *ældest/eldest*

There are all in all 184 occurrences of this adjective in the superlative in the *Toronto Corpus*. All but three of these display the mutated vowel; the West Saxon *i(e)ldest/yldest* type accounts for 166 occurrences whereas 15 represent the Anglian *ældest/eldest* pattern. There are however three instances of the unumlauted superlative, which are beyond any doubt early signs of the regularisation process that removed this particular morphophonemic alternation from the inflection of this adjective:

(4) Ðu, se aldsta feder, and þu wisesta, ic þe befæste mynne lycuman, þat þu hine gehealde halne (Solil 1)

(5) Of Noes ealdeste sunu, ðe wæs Sem ihaten, com þæt Ebreisce folc (ÆLet 4 (SigewardB))

(6) Of Cham, Noes sunu, com þæt Cananeisce folc, & of Iaphet, ðam gingstan, þe wæs ibletsod þurh Noe, com þæt norðene mennisc be ðare Norðsæ, for ðan þe ðry delas beoð idælede ðurh heom, Asia on eastrice ðam ealdestan sunu, Affrica on suðdælæ ðes Chames cynne & Europa on norðdæle Iapheðes ofsprunge (ÆLet 4 (SigewardB))

C. *gieong/gung* 'young' - expected form(s): *gingest*, occasionally *gungest*

The vast majority of superlative forms of this adjective displays the expected *gingest* form, with occasional *-y-* variants, amounting to 32 out of 38 occurrences. Furthermore, there are 2 instances of the *gungest* type, mentioned by Welna (1996: §1.72)

(7) Dær wuneoð beniamin se gungesta on firhto ealdermæn iuda heretogæ vel latþeowes hiræ ealdras of zabulon & ealdermen neptalim (PsGIE (Harsley))

(8) Ðer se gungesta in fyrhtu aldermen heretogan heara aldermen & aldermen (PSGIA (Kuhn))

Finally, as many as 4 cases of the regular *-eo-* spelling for the superlative have also been found:

(9) Beo eower an broðor her on cwearterne & fare ge mid þam hwæte þe ge bohton to eowrum husum, & lædaþ eowerne geongestan broþor to me (Gen)

(10) *quasi tenerrima* swa swa se geongeste (AldV 1 (Goossens))

(11) *quasi tenerrima* swa swa se geongeste (AldV 13.1 (Nap))

(12) Ðonne onwoc fram þam ðriddan suna seme, & se wes heora geongost wæs þeh hwæðere on wisdome yldost, seofon & twentig þeoda (Notes 10.2 (Nap))

D. *grēat* 'great' - expected form(s): *grīetest*

No instances of the adjective in the superlative grade were found in the *Toronto Corpus*. Therefore, **grīetest* has to be dismissed as a reconstructed form.

E. *hēah/hēh* 'high' - expected form(s): *hīehst/hy̆hst*, Anglian *hīgest/hēahest*

This particular adjective displays slightly different paths of development in the two main Old English dialectal areas. Anglian forms with *-ē-* might have undergone smoothing rather than *i*-umlaut (cf. Campbell 1959: §6.58n.6), and in order to maintain a uniform approach to the data they will be treated as such.

All in all, there are 522 instances of the superlative grade of the adjective *hēah* in the *Toronto Corpus*. Of these 177 are unambiguously mutated, as in examples (13) and (14):

(13) & þis þa mid aðe gefestnodan xii þa hihste of ægðre healfe (ChronE (Plummer))

(14) *Editissimae* þæt hiehste (ClG1 3 (Quinn))

This means, however, that the majority of forms — 345 — are either ambiguous or clearly analogical, remodelled on the pattern of the positive grade. As this particular adjective

displays considerable variation both in its vocalism and consonantal make-up, it seems likely that the unlauded superlatives were not the first choice for native speakers of Old English:

(15) Ða andswarode hyre se engel; Se halga gast on þe becymb & þæs heahstan miht þe ofersceadað, & forðam þæt halige ðe of þe acenned byð byþ Godes sunu genemned (Lk (WSCp))

F. *lang* 'long' - expected form(s): *lengest*

Whereas there are as many as 31 instances of the comparative in *langre* in the corpus, all superlatives are attested with the mutated root vowel.

G. *strang* 'strong' - expected form(s): *strengest*, occasionally *strongest*

As already mentioned, Campbell (1959: §658) sees the mutated variants as belonging to the paradigm of *strengre* 'severe'. However, it seems that in the majority of cases the interpretation of individual instances at least allows, if not requires, the reading 'strongest', as in:

(16) se hæfde Samsones strengðe, se wæs ealra eorðwarena strengest (HomU 27 (Nap 30))

With that reservation in mind, there are 48 instances of the superlative grade of this adjective in the corpus. 41 of these contain the mutated *e* vowel, whereas a clear minority show the effects of analogical remodelling as in:

(17) Ðyssum tidum forewæs Norðanhymbra rice se strongesta cyning & se gylpgeornesta, Æðelfrið haten (Bede 1)

H. *sceort* 'short' - expected form(s) *scyrtest* or *scortest*

There are only 4 instances of the superlative form of this adjective in the entire Old English corpus. Three of them contain the mutated vowel, whereas in one case the vowel of the positive grade is analogically extended to the superlative:

(18) Þeos race is swiðe langsum fulllice to gereccenne, ac we hit sæcgað eow on þa scortostan wisan (ÆLS (Julian & Basilissa))

5. Conclusions

The implications of the data presented above for the process of analogical reintroduction of regularity into a paradigm affected by internal morphophonological alternation are quite interesting. Whereas generally the type frequency seems to play the crucial role in resisting the regularisation process, it is by no means the decisive factor, as can be seen from the behaviour of *hēah*. There the frequency factor, working towards the preservation of the alternation, is more than offset by further phonetic developments on the one hand (smoothing of the diphthong, vocalisation of the coda fricative), and the influence of dialectal variation on the other hand. This leads to the intraparadigmatic variation becoming too high and pushing the paradigm towards regularisation.

In conclusion, the data show clearly that the picture painted by traditional scholarship offers a somewhat simplified account of the adjectival gradation in Old English. The majority of adjectives with unlauded superlatives employ them very regularly, *brād* and *lang* without exceptions, *eald*, *geong*, *strang* and *sceort* very markedly so. The only counterexample is offered by *hēah*, which, however, can be attributed to a mixture of factors such as considerable variability of the stem vowel or dialectal differences. Finally, the superlative of the adjective *grēat* appears to be an artifact created by linguists, as no trace of this form has been found in the entire Old English corpus.

Internet resources:

Old English Corpus Variant Word/Phrase Search

<http://www.doe.utoronto.ca/tools/varphrase.html>

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¹ Fritz Seelig's *Die Komparation der Adjektiva und Adverbien im Altenglischen* (Seelig 1930) is based on outdated editions of Old English texts, and as such, not entirely reliable.