

Activity 5.1 - The Peterborough Chronicle for 1140

This is a text whose language is similar to OE, but with clear differences, and we want to clarify what the changes are between the earlier and the later language. We need to do two things: (i) to group the observed differences from OE into similar sets, and (ii) to ask questions and to try to make hypotheses about the kinds of change, and the reasons for change.

Word suffixes and unstressed syllables

Firstly, a look at word endings, the suffixes which marked gender, number and case in OE. We observe that some words are written exactly as they would have been in W Saxon OE:

<i>OE</i>	<i>Chronicle</i>	<i>OE</i>	<i>Chronicle</i>	<i>OE</i>	<i>Chronicle</i>
aht-e	aht-e	ferd-e	ferd-e	sunn-e	sunn-e
bliss-e	bliss-e	lang-e	lang-e	wend-e	wend-e
broht-e	broht-e	spedd-e	spedd-e	wold-e	wold-e

All these words had the OE suffix <-e> and remained identical in spelling, and so presumably in pronunciation, whereas others have changed. The letter <e> was almost certainly pronounced with the mid-central vowel schwa [ə], like the last syllable of MnE *longer*.

The vowels in suffixes of a number of other words, however, are different from their OE forms:

<i>OE</i>	<i>Chronicle</i>				
<a>:		alsw-a	als-e	hlaf-ord	lau-erd
abut-an	abut-on	Engl-a land	Engl-e land	mod-or	mod-er
et-an	æt-en/et-en	feter-a	feter-es	ofwundr-od	ofwundr-ed
beget-an	bigæt-on	heor-a/hir-a	heor-e	leoht-o-de	liht-e-de
habb-an	hau-en	mar-a/mar-e	mar-∅/mar-e	reaf-o-de	reu-e-de
tac-an	tæc-en	swa hwær sw-a	wares-e	þeostr-o-de	þestr-e-de
		<o>		<u>	
man	me	dyd-on	did-en	god-um	god-e
ax-ian	ax-en	æt-on	et-en	opr-um	othr-e
rics-ian	rix-an	flug-on	flug-æn	sun-u	sun-e
candel-as	candl-es	fuht-on	fuht-en		
OA geld-as	geld-es	lædd-on	læd-∅	Other changes:	
		nam-on	nam-en	styred-e	styred
		swic-on	suyk-en	land/land (pl)	lande/landes
		broþ-or	broth-er		
		sust-or	sust-er		

(OA = Old Anglian, the dialect of the Midlands & North.)

Reduction of vowels in unstressed syllables

Most vowels in unstressed syllables were now spelt with letter <e>. The new spelling is evidence of the **reduction** of vowels, in these unstressed suffixes, to the vowel [ə], which is also the commonest vowel in present-day spoken English.

Some OE verb infinitives ending in <-an>, and the past tense plural <-on>, were written as <-en>. The scribe of the *Chronicle* was not consistent, however, and also used <-æn> and <-on>. The inconsistency suggests that some of the spelling reflects changed pronunciation at a time when the former OE standard system had broken down, but that older habits of spelling were not completely

lost. Similar evidence from variable spellings in OE manuscripts shows that changes in the pronunciation of unstressed vowels had begun long before during the OE period.

As the contrasting vowels of OE suffixes spelt <an> <on> <en> were reduced to [ə], so the pronunciation of the suffixes became identical, [ən], spelt <en>. Similarly, the suffix [um] in time became [ən]. Then the final consonant [n] was lost, because in an unstressed syllable it was very lightly pronounced. So a range of contrasting inflections eventually became [ə], spelt <e>. In later ME, this remnant of the OE inflections itself ceased to be pronounced. This process took place over a long period of time. You can observe its stages in the ME texts of *From Old English to Standard English*.

Notice also that *feteras*, the plural of OE *feter*, is written *feteres*, and that the plural of *land* (in OE the uninflected *land*) is written *landes*. This is evidence of the beginning of the development of the MnE regular plurals <-s> and <-es> from OE <-as>, and the loss of most other forms of OE plurals like <-an> and <-u>.

Vowels in stressed syllables

Some of the words in the *Peterborough Chronicle* extract are set out below in groups according to the vowel of the former OE spellings. You can see that there is much inconsistency, so we can only suggest possible changes in pronunciation. Vowel length is marked on the OE words.

For each group of words, consider the possible changes in pronunciation which the Chronicle spellings suggest were taking place by the mid-12th century. Remember that some changes may be in spelling convention only, and not in pronunciation. There is not enough evidence here for you to be certain.

OE <i/y>:

betwix Brycgstow dyde/dydon for þȳ þæt cýning	betuyx Bristowe dide/diden forþi þæt king	lytel/ON litill mihte styrede ON systir/ suster	litel myht styred suster	swicon swipe wyrsa/wyrse	suyken suythe wærese
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OE <ea>:

ongean eall	agenes/agænes al/all	deaf geaf	ded iaf	reafode wearþ	reuede wærd
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OE <æ>:

ætton for þȳ þæt hæfde	eten forþi þæt hedde	þær þæt þæræfter	þar ðat þerefter	wær swā hwær swā wæs	war waresc was
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OE <eo>:

eorl leohtode	æorl/eorl lihtede	sceolde/ scolde heo	sculde scæ	þēostrode weox	þestrede wæx
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OE <e>:

etan besette	ætten/eten besætte	OA begetan	bigæton	OA gēr (WS gear)	gær
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OE <a>:

tacan	tæcen
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Consonant changes

OE <Ʒ>, <g>:

In the following words, OE <g> was pronounced [j] so the new spelling with <i> does not suggest a sound change. Letter <y> was often used for <i> from this time, *beyen*, *day*, *yaf* and *layde*.

OE beƷen	beien	OE geaf	iaf
OE dæg/dæges	dæi/dæies	OE lægde	læide

OE <þ>:

The familiar <th> spelling for [θ] and [ð] was adopted from French writing, so there was no sound change.

OE brōþor	brother	OE oþrum	othre
OE cūþe	cuthe	OE swiþe	suythe

Other spelling changes

The spellings in the next group of words suggest that they are examples of **elision** (the loss of a sound in a word), or **assimilation** (the merging of one sound with its neighbour).

OE al swa	alse	OE hlaford	lauerd	OE habban	hauen
OE hæfde	hedde	OE swa hwær	warese	OE lencten	lengten
OE hit	it	swa			
OE cyning	king	OE wifmann	wimman		

In OE, the voiceless consonant spelt <f> was voiced and pronounced [v] when it came between two voiced sounds, eg in *blaford*, [hɫavərd]. The letter <v> was not needed, as the two sounds were never used to produce a difference in meaning like, for example, in MnE *file/vile*, *fat/vat*. But in French the two sounds [f] and [v] were separate and contrastive, so both letters were used. Evidence of the influence of French spelling can be seen in the following words from the *Chronicle* text, but notice that the letter used for the sound [v] at this time is <u>, not <v>, which was introduced later:

OE hlaford	lauerd	OE reafode	reuede	OE yfel	yuel
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Pronoun changes

Late OE *þe/þeo*, which replaced OE *se/seo/þæt* etc (MnE *the*) ⇒ **þe/te**

OE *heo* (MnE *she*) ⇒ **scæ**

OE *hi/hie* (*f acc sg* = MnE *her*) ⇒ **hire**

þelte

There are two very significant changes in the use of pronouns in the text. There was a variety of inflected forms in OE for the word that has become the MnE definite article *the*. By the mid-12th century, and certainly in the East Midlands dialect of Peterborough, there is only one pronoun form for OE *se/seo/þæt* etc, written as *þe* or *te*. *Te* rather than *þe* is written after the abbreviation <7> (*and*) because the fricative consonant [ð] of *the* was assimilated to the preceding stop consonant [d] and so was pronounced [t].

scæ/hire

All OE 3rd person pronouns began with letter <h> - *he, heo, hit* etc. Some of them are ambiguous; for example, *hi* or *hie* could be either the feminine accusative singular or the common nominative and accusative plural pronoun. The feminine pronoun *heo* is also less clearly distinguished from the other pronouns than MnE *she*. In the *Chronicle* text we see an early example of the development of the feminine singular pronoun (MnE *she*) and the object pronoun *hire* (MnE *her*)

him

Notice also that the masculine pronoun used as the object in a sentence is *him*, and so we tend not to notice that it is new. The OE object pronoun was *hine*, and this has now been merged with the OE dative pronoun *him*.

There are two examples of a construction common in ME, *þe kinges sune Henries* and *þe kinges suster of France*, but no longer acceptable in MnE, which requires *king Henry's son* and *the king of France's sister*.

Prepositional phrases (PrepPs)

The following PrepPs are from the *Chronicle* text, and we can see that most (though not quite all) of the nouns and adjectives in them are not inflected, as they would have been in OE.

abuton nontid	in þe lengten	mid micel ferd	on þis gær	to Engleland
agænes þe king	in þe castel	mid him	on candelmasse dæi	to Bristowe
agænes heore lauerd	in prisun			to France
be gode rihte	in feteres			to wife
betuyx þe king	in lande			
efter Rodbert eorl				