The weakening of strong verbs and the collapse of present-tense inflection-class distinctions in early Middle English

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Main hypothesis of larger project

Large-scale regularization of originally strong English verbs was a historical event that took place in late Middle and Early Modern English...

NOT a manifestation of a pervasive tendency for irregular items to regularize.

Overview of this talk

- Part I: Quick crash course in early Middle English verb inflection

- Part II: Proportional/implicative predictions about strong→weak shifts in early Middle English

- Part III: The LAEME corpus and my LAEME verb database

- Part IV: Survival and loss of present-tense inflection class distinctions in early Middle English

- Part V: Strong→weak shifts in early Middle English

- Part VI: Conclusions

Part I:
Quick crash course in early Middle English verb inflection

Type 1 and 2 weak verbs: past tense

All dialects of early Middle English (ca. 1150-1350) maintained a pretty consistent distinction in the **past tense** between two types of weak verbs:

Type 1: Past tense *-t(e)* or *-d(e)* suffix was attached directly to the end of the verb.

Type II: "connecting" schwa preceded the suffix, yielding *-ed(e)*

Types 1 and 2 (and strong verbs) in the **present tense**

Southern and Southwestern dialects of early Middle English maintained a type-1-vs.-2 distinction in at present tense forms as well, where the forms of class-1 weak verbs were the same as those of **strong** verbs.

The Southern present-tense pattern

Strong:
*sing**en*** (inf.)
'sing'

Weak 1:
*hēr**en***
'hear'

Weak 2:
*lov**i*****en***
'love'

sg	
1	sing**e**
2	sing**st**
3	sing**þ**
pl	sing**eþ**
imp	sing

sg	
1	hēr**e**
2	hēr**st**
3	hēr**þ**
pl	hēr**eþ**
imp	hēr

sg	
1	lov**ie**
2	lov**est**
3	lov**eþ**
pl	lov**ieþ**
imp	love

Type 2 as the "regular" inflection class in early ME

- Most French loan words follow type-2 inflection

- Most new denominal and onomotapoeic coinages follow type-2 inflection

(The type-2 pattern is the most direct ancestor of the modern regular pattern.)

Part II: Proportional/implicative predictions about strong→weak shifts in early Middle English

Paul's proportional/ implicative principle

"one word can be subject to analogical influence from another in its inflection only if it [already] corresponds to the other word in the formation of one or more forms" (1886:95)

The strong and type-2 weak patterns did not match **anywhere** in the paradigm in Old English or in southern dialects of early Middle English.

Paul's principle – or any implicative word-and-paradigm model of inflection – predicts that strong verbs could not shift to the type-2 weak pattern ("regularize") under these circumstances.

In traditional proportional terms: There was no "pivot" or anchor" in the paradigm to license this kind of analogical change.

Part III:
The LAEME corpus and my LAEME verb database

The LAEME corpus

- LAEME = A Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English (ver. 2.1: 2008-2013, ver. 3.2: 2013-)

- 600,000+ words written between 1150 and 1325, from all parts of England

- fully lemmatized, morphologically analyzed, and morphosyntactically tagged

- freely available in downloadable form

My LAEME verb database

With simple perl or python scripts, virtually any kind of database can be easily created from the tagged forms in the corpus.

136,931 verb tokens

I added inflection-class information for each lexeme.

LAEME lexel	infl. class	LAEME grammel	LAEME form	LAEME final morpheme	LAEME dates	LAEME text number	Easting	Northing
be	be	vpt13	WAS	WAS	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
be	be	vps13	HIS	HIS	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
bury	w1g	vps13	BURIIC+TH	+TH	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
come	come	vps13	*COM+EZ	+EZ	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
woo	w2	vps13K2	WOC+TH	+TH	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
drink	s3nk	vps13	DRINK+ET	+ET	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
eat	s5	vps13-ct	HET	HET	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
sing	s3ng	vps13	SING+EZ	+EZ	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
be	be	vps13	HIS	HIS	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
rot	w2	vps11K2	ROT+YE	+YE	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
be	be	vps13	IS	IS	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
ago	go	vSpp{rh}	A+GO	+GO	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
have	have	vps13	HAU+ET	+ET	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
be	be	vps23-apn	BET	BET	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
love	w2	viK2	LOU+IE	+IE	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
shall	pret-pres	vpt23{rh}	SSOLD~	SSOLD~	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159
draw	s6	vps23-apn	DRAH+ET	+ET	C13b2-C14a1	163	378	159

Part IV:
Survival and loss of present-tense inflection class distinctions in early Middle English

2/3singular: Heavy-stem type-1 weak

Northing	unsynco-pated	con-tracted	synco-pated	% un-sync
<=200	42	62	85	22%
201-250	151	110	57	47%
251-300	396	159	38	67%
>300	212	36	4	84%

2/3singular: Strong verbs

Northing	unsynco-pated	con-tracted	synco-pated	% un-sync
<=200	98	194	367	15%
201-250	587	377	406	43%
251-300	1430	601	423	58%
>300	671	101	59	81%

2/3singular:Type-2 weak

Northing	unsynco-pated	synco-pated	% un-sync
<=200	252	8	97%
201-250	429	5	99%
251-300	984	15	98%
>300	352	57	86%

imperative: Type-1 weak

Northing	-e	-∅	% -e
<=200	13	42	24%
201-250	20	317	6%
251-300	35	214	14%
>300	28	60	32%

imperative: Strong verbs

Northing	-e	-∅	% -e
<=200	6	92	6%
201-250	18	225	7%
251-300	16	323	5%
>300	38	102	27%

imperative: Type-2 weak

Northing	-e	-∅	% -e
<=200	28	4	88%
201-250	90	10	90%
251-300	146	27	84%
>300	24	33	42%

Part V:
Strong→weak shifts in early Middle English

Strong→type-1 weak

- Found everywhere (as predicted), in some cases continuing shifts that began in Old English:

- in verbs with root-final *d* or *t*:

  - systematically in: *dread*, *read* (?), *let*, *shed*, *wield*

  - occasionally in *lūtan* 'bow', *bēodan* 'offer'

  - sporadically in a few others

- in verbs with other root-finals

  - often in *sleep, flee, drēogan* 'suffer'

  - occasionally in *weep, leap step*, *rīpan* 'reap', *būgan* 'bow', *blōwan* 'bloom' *shine*, *sneorcan* 'grow dark'

Strong→type-2 weak (1)

- Found almost only in the North (Northing > 300) (as predicted):

  - *būgan* 'bow' (6 tokens), *weorþan* 'become' (3), *lēogan* 'tell lies', *drēogan* 'suffer', *sūcan* 'suck' (1 each)

Strong→type-2 weak (11)

- A couple of verbs already varied between strong and class-2 weak in OE: *mourn*, *heave*; type-2 weak forms of these two verbs occur at all latitudes in LAEME

- *līþan*, apparently an archaic verb; occurs mainly in Layamon in strong, type-1 and type-2 weak forms

- *flow* occurs 4 times in type-2 weak forms, as far South as 253.

Part VI: Conclusions

Proportional/implicative models make correct predictions about the geographical distribution of strong→type-2 weak shifts (as opposed to shifts to type-1 weak) in early Middle English.

They also account for the correlation between the collapse of present-tense inflection-class distinctions and the spread of "regularization" in later Middle English.

This is one small piece of the story of the Great English Verb Regularization – a historical episode

- precipitated by a perfect storm of other changes

- and representing the only period in the history of English where there is any sign of a tendency for strong or irregular verbs to regularize.

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