

Old English Breaking as Frontness Dissimilation

In this paper, I present a novel analysis of Old English Breaking (OEB). OEB refers to the diphthongization of the Pre-Literary Old English (Pre-OE) front vowels before allophones of */x/, */r/ and */l/. The diphthongal reflexes of Pre-OE */i, e, æ/ appear as <io>, <eo> and <ea> in Old English (OE) orthography. For example, Pre-OE. **tihhian* ‘consider,’ **werpan* ‘throw,’ **æld* ‘old’ > OE *tiohhian*, *weorpan*, *eald*. While the precise phonetic values of these OE diphthongs is uncertain, there is consensus that the first element of each diphthong is a front vowel and that the second element is a back vowel.

OE also had an active synchronic process of Dorsal Fricative Assimilation (DFA). As a result of DFA, OE /x/ was realized as [ç] when situated after front vowels. It is generally acknowledged that DFA was active by the end of the OE period as evidenced by an early Middle English (ME) sound change which inserted an [i] before the reflex of OE *[ç] and a [u] before the reflex of OE *[x]. Hence, late OE *ta[x]te* ‘taught,’ *plō[x]* ‘plough’ > ME *ta[ux]te*, *plō[ux]*, but late OE *e[ç]te* ‘eight,’ *hē[ç]* ‘high’ > ME *e[iç]te*, *he[iç]*. In some Scottish dialects, these palatal and velar sounds have been preserved into the present day.

I will argue that DFA began in Pre-OE and was active throughout the OE period. Since the diphthongs that emerged from OEB had a back vowel as their second element, DFA produced many instances of [x] that derive from Pre-OE [ç], e.g. Pre-OE **fe[ç]u* ‘cattle’ > OE *feo[x]*. It follows, then, that OEB was never triggered by Pre-OE *[x], only by Pre-OE *[ç].

The claim that Pre-OE *[ç] triggered OEB bears on one of the most central research questions concerning OEB: why do allophones of the dorsal fricative /x/ and the liquids /r/ and /l/ pattern together as a natural class of sounds? The usual answers given to this question are either (1) that each phoneme had a ‘back’ allophone and that the back elements of the diphthongs produced by OEB reflect a method of assimilating the pre-OE front vowels to the ‘back’ allophones of /x/, /r/ and /l/ (Lass and Anderson 1975, etc.), or (2) that /x/, /r/ and /l/ are subject to syllable-induced consonant lenition and that the back elements of the OE diphthongs reflect a transitioning stage towards vocalization (Howell 1991). But these hypotheses do not take DFA into account. If DFA produced the Pre-OE allophone *[ç], then neither backness nor sonority can unify the consonantal allophones that triggered OEB.

It is my contention that the allophones of /x/, /r/ and /l/ that caused OEB were all front sounds and that these segments had frontness in common with the vowels /i, e, æ/. As such, OEB can be expressed as a natural process of frontness dissimilation because sequences of contiguous front segments are marked via the Obligatory Contour Principle. In order to repair these marked sequences, an epenthetic back vowel is inserted after the original monophthong. Thus, OEB is neither an assimilatory process nor one that informs us about sonority. On the contrary, it is dissimilatory and reveals the fronted character of the allophones of /x/, /r/ and /l/.

References:

- Lass, R. & Anderson, J. (1975). *Old English Phonology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Howell, R. B. (1991). *Old English Breaking and its Germanic Analogues*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.