Phonological and morphological change in the development of Old English contracted verbs

Old English contracted verbs are normatively verbs in some forms of which Germanic */x/ is lenited and subsequently lost between vowels, with consequent vowel contraction due to loss of the hiatus left by the deleted consonant, for example PGmc. *fleuxanan > *flēohan > *flēo-an > OE flēon ‘flee’ (inf.). The results of the purely phonological developments lead to some notable paradigm allomorphy in such verbs, and since Old English is a language that is intolerant of a great deal of such variation within paradigms, verbs of this kind are subject to morphological change on the basis of analogy. The results of the interaction of the phonological and morphological changes are not uniform across dialects, and determining the extent to which each kind of change has applied leads to problems of analysis. This paper examines two such problems:

(1) Early West Saxon strong verb forms like 3 sg. pres. flīehð /fliexθ/ ‘flees’ appear to indicate that syncope of the vowel in the inflection antecedes lenition, so that the development is of */fliexiθ/ to /fliexθ/, after which lenition applies vacuously, since /x/ is not intervocalic. However, in weak verbs the reverse order of lenition (and loss of [h]) followed by syncope seems to apply, as in */ðy:xiθ/ > */ðy:hiθ/ > */ðy:iθ/ > /ðy:iθ/ (þyð) ‘presses’. Luick (1914–40) and Campbell (1977) propose that syncope took place earlier in strong verbs than in weak, though this would appear to condition a purely phonological change on a morphological basis. Hogg (1992) proposes instead that the strong verb forms are analogically induced on the basis of the pret. sg. flēah. However, this results in increased, rather than decreased, allomorphy in the present paradigm, and not all the relevant verbs contain /x/ in the pret. sg. to serve as the model for the analogical change, e.g. fōn ‘take’, pret. fěng. Rather, it can be shown that there is a plausible phonological basis for Luick and Campbell’s position, since the strong pres. 3 sg. inflection is historically *-iþ, whereas the weak inflection after heavy stems (and all the relevant weak verbs have heavy stems) is *-iþ < *-ij-iþ, under Sievers’ law. It remains then to explain preterite weak forms like þyðe ‘pressed’ (for expected *þyhte) and Anglian strong forms like flīið (= West Saxon fliehd). Morphological change must be invoked to account for forms like these, but such change appears probable and natural in the context of other morphological developments known to have occurred.

(2) The disparity between West Saxon slēan ‘strike’ and Northumbrian slā leads Hogg (1992) to posit a different order of application for the phonological rules of breaking and restoration of [a] in Northumbrian. In view of Northumbrian forms like dat. pl. tēarum ‘tears’ and nom. pl. ēa ‘waters’ it can be shown, however, that the supposed rule reversal would have to be restricted to the category of verbs. This and other considerations lead to the conclusion that Northumbrian slā is an analogical formation, as supposed by Luick (1914–40) and Campbell (1977).