

# Middle English Open Syllable Lengthening produced canonical word form shapes

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Our paper asks a new question about a sound change known as Middle English Open Syllable Lengthening (OSL; Ritt 1994, Myungsook 1993, Lahiri & Drescher 1999). This durational change affected non-high short vowels in open disyllables such as *name* /namə/ > /na:m(ə)/, *hope* /hopə/ > /hɔ:p(ə)/, or *beaver* /bevər/ > /bɛ:v(ə)r/. Crucially, it is consistently reflected only in words like *name* or *hope*, whose second syllables ended in schwa and were lost. However, words like *beaver*, which have retained their final syllable, reflect OSL only sporadically, and those that do are of a specific subtype: their second syllable begins with an obstruent, ends in a sonorant, and admits schwa syncope (as in ModE [bi:vɹ] for *beaver*). This has given rise to the theory (Minkova 1982, Bermudez-Otero 1998) that OSL compensated for weight loss in post-tonic syllables.

While the compensatory account of OSL is descriptively adequate, it still raises the question what the motivation of the compensation was. Our paper addresses that question and tests the hypothesis that the lengthenings in /CVCə/ items that lost their schwas made them conform, in terms of weight, to the majority of monosyllabic word forms that existed at the time of the change (Mailhammer, Kruger & Makiyama 2015). Extending a previous study based on the PPCME, we report a quantitative analysis of words forms attested in the LAEME corpus, which covers the period in which schwa loss and OSL unfolded. We extracted major class word forms that were not inputs or outputs of OSL, and determined the frequency and the morphological structure of types such as CVC, CVCC, CVVC, CVCV, CVVCV, CVCCV, etc. Specifically, we looked (a) at the relative (type and token) frequencies of morphologically simple CVC and CVVC monosyllables, and (b) at the relative frequencies of morphologically simple CVCV(C) and CVVCV(C) vs. morphologically complex CVC+V(C) and CVVC+V(C) disyllables. We show that at the time when schwa loss and OSL began to spread, CVVC and CVCC forms were indeed significantly more frequent than CVC types among monosyllabic major class words, but only if the vowels were mid or low. Among words with high vowels, CVC items were not less frequent than CVVC items. For disyllables, preliminary results suggest that the majority of items with long vowels in their first syllables were morphologically complex, i.e. CVVC+V(C).

Thus, the way in which OSL was implemented had two effects. In monosyllables resulting from schwa loss, the consistent lengthening of non-high vowels adapted their word shapes to conform to the majority pattern. In stable disyllables, on the other hand, lengthening would have produced word forms shapes that were typical of complex rather than simple word forms, and may have failed to affect them for that reason.

Apart from potentially deepening our understanding of OSL, our presentation proposes that the implementation of specific sound changes may be affected by preferences for word form

shapes to conform to canonical patterns, and to assume patterns that signal their morphological structure.

## References

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