

THE GOSPEL OF THE BLESSED BRAMBLE

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0. There are two primary purposes to this paper*. First I want to look very closely at some examples used by Kiparsky (1968:180) in his attempt to justify the thesis that brackets capture significant generalisations in a historical generative phonology. Secondly, in doing so, I will try to suggest that it is certainly misleading and probably downright erroneous to attempt to write simple rules to cover two or three words in isolation.

1. In the section I mentioned, Kiparsky cites six rules (his numbering in brackets):

1. (5') $V \rightarrow [-\text{long}] / ______ CC$
2. (5'') $V \rightarrow [-\text{long}] / ______ C \dots V \dots V$

He simply states these two without seeking to justify them and tells us that they are "Early Middle English (and indeed Modern English)" (1968:180). Of course he may regard justification as unnecessary since, *mutatis mutandis*, the same rules appear in Chomsky and Halle (1968:241) as rules 20 (iii) and 20 (iv).

Kiparsky goes one step further and tells us that "the theory of generative grammar requires that 5' and 5'' be collapsed into a single rule". This gives us:

3. (5) $V \rightarrow [-\text{long}] / ______ C \left\{ \begin{array}{l} C \\ \dots V \dots V \end{array} \right.$

From the Old English sound changes *gōdspell* > *gospell* and *brēmbias* > *bræmbias* he deduces this rule:

4. (6') $V \rightarrow [-\text{long}] / ______ CCC$

and from *blēdsian* > *bledsian* he writes:

5. (6'') $V \rightarrow [-\text{long}] / ______ CC \dots V \dots V$

* I should like to thank Dr Roger Lass and Professor Jacek Fisiak for their very constructive comments on earlier drafts of this paper. What remains is to be blamed solely on the author.

For Old English too a factoring process is invoked giving us:

$$6. (6) \quad V \rightarrow [-\text{long}] / \text{---} \text{CC} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{C} \\ \dots V \dots V \end{array} \right.$$

"Evidently the change ... is an instance of simplification", we are told. And, indeed, so it would appear.

I do not propose here to go into the arguments against using brackets in a phonology (see for instance Anderson 1977). However, I would like to examine Kiparsky's evidence and motivation for rules 4, 5 and 6 because his evidence seems very skimpy for a rule (6) which "covers all cases where there was actual alternation between long and short vowels in Old English" (1968:180).

The three words he uses, *bramble*, *gospel* and *bless*, are striking in several respects. The first is a classic example of consonant epenthesis and the other two of consonant loss. These two latter examples have also been the victims of "folk etymologies". I will return later to the individual problems of each but for now I would like to turn to some general considerations on vowel quantity in Old and Middle English.

2. A glance at some of the handbooks (e.g. Wright and Wright 1923, Jordan 1974, Fisiak 1968) illustrates the complex nature of the changes in vowel quantity through the Old English period and into Middle English. At different points, and there seems to be little agreement on chronology, vowels in various environments and of various qualities, lengthened and shortened. One scholar sees these as one related event in a somewhat Newtonian view of language change (Eliason 1948).

"In the second half of the 8th and the first half of the 9th centuries" (Jordan 1974: § 22) or "some time in the ninth century" (Fisiak 1968:2.8) or "some time before the end of the ninth century" (Wright and Wright 1923: § 68) vowels lengthened before certain consonant combinations containing nasals or liquids plus a homorganic voiced stop e.g. *nd*, *mb*, *ld*, *rd* giving /tʃi:ld/, /la:mb/ etc. This was blocked, however, if a third consonant followed the cluster, thus /lambru/ and /tʃildru/ and this sporadically caused back formations e.g. *lamb*.

Later, "in the transition period from OE to ME, in early ME, and during the ME period" (Wright and Wright 1923: § 69), "later than Early Middle English" (Fisiak 1968:2.8) or "probably already in OE" (Jordan 1974: § 22) this lengthening disappeared again.

As well as this change Wright and Wright (1923: § 86) give five environments where "long vowels and long diphthongs were shortened ... during the OE period, and especially in late OE".

a) / ___ C₂

b) / ___ C₂ in trisyllabic forms

- c) / ___ CCr } where the two consonants are the same
 d) / ___ CC }
 e) / ___ C₁ in trisyllabic forms.

Eliason (1948) and Jordan (1947: § 23) point out that this shortening did not take place where the consonants were "tauto-syllabic"; thus *prēo-stas* and *bindan* failed to shorten. This approach, however, runs into problems with examples such as *breast* < *brēost*, which seems indistinguishable in principle from *prēost*.

Wright and Wright (1923: § 328) suggest that in nouns ending $\begin{pmatrix} m \\ v \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} el \\ er \\ en \end{pmatrix}$ the -e- was not pronounced in inflected forms; however, they do not say whether this affects the counting of syllables for shortening in trisyllabic words.

In OE shortening was hindered by strong secondary accents which divided some words into two accent groups (Jordan 1974: § 23). Or was it? "Long vowels were regularly shortened in derivatives and compounds when the stem-syllable was followed by one or more syllable with a strong secondary accent" (Wright and Wright 1923: § 98).

3. Into this confusion steps Kiparsky with rule 6 — the "required" combination of rules 4 and 5. But can these rules be justified by the examples he gives? Let us look at each in turn.

3.1. *bræmbblas*

3.1.1. Kiparsky quotes this example from Luick (1921: § 204), who mentions under the heading just three words: *bræmbblas*, *godspell* and "vielleicht auch schon" (perhaps also already) *þymbles*. However, Jordan (1974: § 212) suggests that there were two strata of epenthetic /b/ and that the younger is lacking in the North. Though he places *þymbles* in the earlier stratum it is interesting to note in the modern dialects that in the Northern counties, whereas the distribution of *bramble* with and without a /b/ is roughly 50 : 50, for *thimble* a /b/ occurs in less than a fifth of the informants in Orton and Dieth (1962 Vol 1 words iv. 11.1 and v. 10. 9.). It is also noticeable that of the forms quoted in the OED for words such as *ember*, *nimble* etc., where a consonant has been added, there are no examples with the /b/ until the fifteenth century except for *bramble*, which has a /b/ as early as 1000 in Ælfric (Genesis iii) but not before, it seems. In other words, the epenthesis appears to have happened *after* the shortening of the vowel in other similar words. Which came first for *bramble*?

3.1.2. In Kiparsky's type of phonology we certainly have to do with

ordered rules (1968:196ff). This means that the status of the vowel between the /m(b)/ and /l/ is important. It is presumably there at the underlying stage before the inflection is added. Given this it is easy to see how the rules could be extrinsically ordered so that the vowel was shortened by something like rule 5 or rule 2 (depending on the presence or absence of the /b/). Clearly this weakens the motivation for rule 4.

3.1.3. We have already seen that the presence of a third consonant blocked lengthening in those environments which caused lengthening in OE. Coincidentally *bræmbias* looks just like an example of this blocking. In a generative phonology one way of handling situations like this is to use redundancy rules. In this case we have a situation of any vowel before a cluster of three consonants being short. Such a redundancy rule would clearly take care of *bræmbias* as well as *lambru*. If rule 4 is in fact a redundancy rule it is not possible to bracket it with rule 5 as they will not be adjacent rules.

3.2. godspell

3.2.1. It is interesting in turning to Kiparsky's other example for rule 4 to note that this word was borrowed into several other Germanic languages from English, presumably from missionaries. Thus we find Old Saxon *godspell*, Old High German *gotspell* and Old Norse *gud-godspell*. These show that the word had been reinterpreted as "God's story" instead of "good tidings". Was this reinterpretation the result of the vowel being shortened or was it due to the graphemic ambiguity of the word?

Given that it would have been a much written word and given the very early date for the short vowel that is indicated by the borrowings, there is at least a strong case to be made for the latter explanation. This would indicate a shortening before the operation of anything like rule 4.

3.2.2. In Modern English there are very few clusters of three consonants except for two types of environment. One is s $\begin{Bmatrix} p \\ t \\ k \end{Bmatrix}$ Liquid, as in *osprey*, *strike*

and *scream*. The other is where a morpheme boundary intervenes, as in *employ* and *boldness*.

Clusters of /s/+ Voiceless stop seem to have a rather ambiguous status in English. This group seems to act in some ways as though they were single consonants rather than clusters; for instance Middle English Open Syllable Lengthening took place in some instances, e.g. /js:stə(s)/ (Jordan 1974: § 25) — though it could also be a shortening environment, e.g. *fȳst* > *fist*. We should also note here that in Old and Middle English alliterative poetry such clusters acted as single consonants for the purposes of alliteration rules. Thus *Beowulf* has,

Stræt wæs stānfāh, stig wisode (320)

Ond on spēd wrecan spel gerāde (873) (Klaeber 1941)
and *Gawain* has,

For he is stiffe and sturne and to strike louis (Sisam 1970)

A wider study of the domain of rules 1 and 4 might possibly show other examples where /s/+Voiceless stop needs a special status but in any case one should be careful about using /-dsp-/ to justify a 3 consonant cluster environment.

Returning to the question of morpheme boundaries, it is noteworthy that generative phonology in general and Kiparsky (1970) in particular allow boundaries in rules. The word certainly continued to be regarded as a compound even when the /d/ must have been becoming very weak; Ormin (c. 1200) spends 22 lines explaining the compound (White 1878: Dedication (157—178)) and the Gottingen MS (c. 1375) of the *Cursor Mundi* gives a hyphenated form *godd-spell* at one point (Morris 1877: 21227). To be fair to Kiparsky it may even be that the presence of a boundary helps Kiparsky's case since one would no longer have to worry about the ambiguous status of /-sp-/ if one had an underlying form /d#sp-/.

3.2.3. We must remember also the suggestion of Wright and Wright (1923:§ 98) I mentioned earlier; namely the regular shortening in compounds where a strong secondary accent is present. Such a rule easily takes care of *godspell* without any need to resort to formulations like rule 4.

3.2.4. Could the loss of the /d/ have affected the vowel? Not, it seems, at a date that could have influenced any rule 4. Ormin has <dd> indicating a short /o/ throughout.

3.3. A closer study of these two words has pointed up a variety of influences and alternative interpretations which must surely weaken the case for rule 4. If rule 4 is suspect then clearly rule 6 makes no sense and this must obviously make us worry about the "simplification" from rule 6 to rule 3 and therefore about the arguments for braces that Kiparsky is putting forward.

3.4. But what about rule 5 for which we are only given one example *bledsian*? Here Luick (1921:§ 204) gives many more examples, most of which are derivatives or compounds of one sort or another; *hlaemmæsse*, *twentizes* etc. So one question poses itself immediately — what was the status of the suffix *-ian* in Old English grammar? If there was no longer any motivation for treating it as a formative, then, on this score, we can accept *bledsian* as an example but if not, then both this and, for example, *blissian* could fall under the "stress in compounds" rule.

3.4.1. Whilst on the subject of the suffix, can we say for certain that

phonologically it is disyllabic? If the <i> can be treated as /j/ we have another ball game and maybe even some examples to motivate rule 4.

3.4.2. We should also note that both the 3rd person singular present tense indicative and the singular imperative forms would only be disyllabic: *bledsað*, *bledsa*. Presumably these would follow suit "by analogy" but dating is impossible since in poetry the first syllable of this word would always be metrically long regardless of the quantity of the vowel since VCC is equivalent metrically to $\bar{V}C$.

3.4.3. The stop /d/ was strengthened to /t/ very early — almost all examples quoted in Bosworth and Toller (1898) and Toller (1921) have a <t>. When did this consonant disappear? Of the three words we are discussing this is the only one to appear in the Middle English Dialect Survey (no 95)¹ which covers 1350-1450. Nowhere is there a form with a <d>. Ormin always has a <tt>. From a Primitive Germanic formation **blōdisōjan* (to mark with blood), in Middle English it was already being confused with *bliss* (from OE *blīpsian*) hence spellings with <y> or <i> in ME, e.g. *Cursor Mundi* (17890) (all MS) *blis(se)* (Morris 1876). Dating the loss of the consonant before the /s/ is difficult partly because of the problem of interpreting <c>. If Fisiak is correct then at one time the sound was [tʃ] (1968: 21), which forms an odd sequence: [ts > tʃ > s]. However this might be, the vowel seems to have been shortened in *bledsian* as in *godspell* before the disappearance of their respective consonants.

4. Each of *bramble*, *gospel* and *bless* yields on closer examination at least two or three alternative analyses which suggest that other explanations of the vowel-shortening might be more profitable. A standard yardstick for comparing generative phonologies, and indeed generative grammars in general, is the number of rules used to explain phenomena — the fewer the better. Rules 4 and 5 need more convincing exemplification which can not be handled by other parts of the phonology before they can be confidently stated as rules of Old English.

If either or both of rules 4 and 5 cannot be justified, then rule 6 must fall. If rule 6 falls there is no simplification to rule 3.

To use a judicial metaphor, if these three words had been found "guilty" of motivating rules 4 and 5 by Kiparsky, I would accept their appeal against conviction on grounds of "reasonable doubt".

TEXTS

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¹ This survey is currently in progress at Edinburgh University under the direction of Professor Angus McIntosh.

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