

'Free lenition' in Middle Welsh: problems of function and origin

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1. Introduction

All conditions on Middle Welsh nasalization and spirantization and most conditions on Middle Welsh lenition are of the form: 'if a word follows morpheme X, its initial consonant is mutated'. This is **contact mutation**, whose origin can be traced back to phonetic properties of the proto-language. As a rule, contact mutation started life as a functionless morphophonemic property (in e.g. *ry fawr* 'too big' < **ro ma:ros* lenition of *mawr* is a functionless morphophonemic property of *ry*), but it could acquire function as a result the loss of information in the word causing the mutation (as in e.g. *y garr* 'his car' as opposed to *y charr* 'her car' as opposed to *y carr* 'their car', where mutation determines the person, gender and number of the possessor; or in *y frenhines fawr* 'the big queen', where lenition indicates gender).

Middle Welsh in particular also applies lenition where neither synchronic contact with a preceding morpheme nor former phonetic context can account for its occurrence. This is **free lenition**. Free lenition always has function (e.g. as a marker of apposition in *Keredic Vrenhin* 'Ceredig (the) King'). To a limited degree, free lenition occurs in Breton too (adverbs are often lenited, e.g. *bemdez* 'every day'; so are the petrified objects in *ober vad* 'do well', *ober van* 'pretend'), which suggests that the roots of the MW state of affairs goes back at least to Late British times.

The aim today is:

- (1) to explore MW conditions for free lenition
- (2) to argue that most of these conditions fall under the functional description 'lenition of appositions'
- (3) to highlight the problem that the origin of free lenition is obscure

Methodological problem: source language is Middle Welsh, where lenition is not consistently written; conformation to judgements in TC (T.J. Morgan, *Y Treigladau a'u Cystrawen*, Cardiff 1952) and GMW (D.S. Evans, *A Grammar of Middle Welsh*, Dublin 1976).

NB: Lenition of proclitics is not addressed (e.g. *vy*, *dy*, *gan*)

2. Conditions of free lenition in Middle Welsh

- (1) A noun in apposition to another noun is lenited (TC 122-3, GMW 15)

Rita Gawr (BD 170.22) 'Rita the Giant', *Maxen Wledic* (BD 72.11) 'Maxen the Ruler', *Pryderi uab Pwyll* (PKM 27 Pwyll) 'Pryderi son of Pwyll'

dy nith uerch dy chwaer (PKM 77 Math) 'your niece daughter of your sister', *y nyeint ueibon y chwaer* (PKM 67 Math) 'his nephews sons of his sister'

ual yd las ureichuras y urawd (LIH 177.2: Cynddelw, Marwnad teilu (gosgordd) Owain Gwynedd; other mss. have *breich-*) 'as/when his brother Breichfras was killed' (if in prose this would have been **ual yd las y urawr Ureichuras*)

(2) A personal name in apposition to a personal pronoun is lenited (TC 147, GMW 15)

dechreu a wnaeth ef Uanawydau llunyaw corueu (PKM 52) 'He, M., began to fashion pommels'; *ynteu Wydyon goreu kyuarwyd yn y byt oed* (PKM 96.13) 'He, Gw., was the best teller of tales in the world'; cf. *tithau fab!* 'you, son!'

Also Cornish: *ty vaow* 'you servant!'

(3) The personal pronouns of the first and second person singular are lenited after a pronoun or verbal ending denoting the same person (usually not discussed as a lenition rule but classed as a separate pronominal paradigm):

A minheu ui a'r morynyon (PKM 82.25 Math) 'and me - me and the maidens'; *genhyf (f)i* 'with me - me'; *dy benn di* 'your head - you'; *yd elwyf fi* 'I shall go - me'

NB: pronouns of 12sg. and old conjunct verbal endings of 12sg generally ended in a vowel, which would have triggered contact lenition. Perhaps this was the starting point of (1) and (2).

(4) Normally, if a plural subject noun follows the verb, the verb is in the 3sg (GMW 179). In early poetry, a plural verb may precede a plural subject, in which case the subject undergoes lenition (TC 193 note, 224; GMW 18)

yn Aber Cuawc yt ganant gogeu (CLIH 23.5a) 'In Aber Cuawg cuckoos sing'

ymgetwynt Gymry (AP 5.141) 'the Welsh will see to it'

Interlude: a wide notion of apposition

A sememe is the linguistic meaning of a linguistic form (morpheme, lexeme), e.g. MW *cogeu* contains the morphemes *cog* and *-eu*, which correspond to the sememes 'cuckoo' and 'plural'. A sememe can be attached to suprasegmental features (stress, intonation) and to word order, too (*marw cog* \neq *cog marw* '(the) cuckoo is dead' \neq 'a dead cuckoo'). The meaning of a sentence is the sum of its sememes.

A referent is the object in the world (person, object, abstract notion, situation, real or imagined, etc.) which is perceived by a speaker and which triggers the linguistic mechanism. The referent is not itself part of linguistic performance.

So the linguistic form *cog* has a sememe = linguistic meaning 'cuckoo' and a (non-linguistic) referent <cuckoo>, viz. a particular example of the species 'cuckoo' that the utterance refers to.

The wide notion of apposition that is applied here is: if two sememes have the same referent, the second is an apposition of the first. The rule for Middle Welsh free lenition that I propose is:

If two sememes that belong to the same clause have the same referent, one, usually the second, is lenited.

If described in this way, the MW lenition rule lays a particular relation between linguistic material (sememes) and extralinguistic material (referents). Alternatively, however, the rule can be formulated in purely linguistic terms:

If two sememes that belong to the same clause fill in one and the same abstract linguistic slot (e.g. 'subject', 'object', 'tense', 'mood'), one, usually the second, is lenited.

In other words, if a referent has already been mentioned in the same clause (or if an abstract linguistic slot has already been filled), mentioning it again triggers lenition. This is the clause-internal counterpart of a definite article, which performs a similar function but across clauses ('A man and a woman quarreled. The man left shouting').

2. Conditions of free lenition in Middle Welsh (continued)

(5) An adjective after a personal name may (but need not) be lenited (TC 116-9, GMW 19)

Howel Uychan (BD 199, 9-10) 'Hywel the Small'; *Cadwaladr Uendigeit* (BD 204.13) 'Cadwaladr the Blessed'; *Iolo Goch*, *Hywel Dda*, *Llywelyn Fawr* etc.

Morgan (TC 117): lenited adjective is used to distinguish two persons of the same name, unlenited adjective is simply attributive.

But what about *Rhodri Mawr*, *Ifor Bach* then?

Cf. type (1) *Maxen Wledic*. So substantivized adjective is used in apposition, hence lenited. Substantivized adjectives are always used to distinguish two persons of the same name, while attributive adjectives CAN but NEED NOT be so used.

This type is also found in Breton (*Pipi Goz* 'Peter the Old', *kozh*)

(6) A superlative used as a noun in apposition is lenited (TC 246-7, GMW 229)

a gofyn itaw ae ef gyntaf bieiuu y llys (WM 394 Gereint vab Erbin) 'and he asked him whether he was the first to own the court'

pan doeth y dyd gyntaf kyuodi a oruc Peredur (WM 128 Peredur) 'When the day came, Peredur was the first to rise'

litt. 'he (as the) first'

(7) A sememe (e.g. comparative adjective, adverbial complement of negation) that specifies and limits the applicability of the negation or the question particle is lenited (GMW 20). So the comparatives stand in apposition to the negation and question particles.

GMW 43 In front of the predicative comparative "the unaccented copula (*a uei* &c.) was lost, but the lenition caused by it was preserved in interrogative and negative sentences: *a dyvu o Vrython wr well no Chynon* 'did there come from the British a better man than Cynon?' CA 8.200, *ny weleis ansyberwyt uwy ar wr* 'I have not seen greater discourtesy in any man' PKM 2.14, *Ny wydwn i varch gynt* 'I did not know of a fleeter horse' 10.8, *na welsynt eiryoet llongeu gyweirach eu hansawd* 'that they had never seen ships in fairer trim' 30.1, *ny welsei dyn wenith degach* 'man had not seen finer wheat' 59.23-24."

Explanation unsatisfactory: why was lenition preserved (extended, even) only in interrogative and negative sentences? Rather, the interrogative and negative context should be part of the explanation of the lenition.

Ny wydwn i varch gynt : *gynt* limits the scope of the negation. It is not the case that I have seen no horse before but that I have seen no fleeter horse

a dyvu o Vrython wr well no Chynon: *well* limits the scope of the question. The question is not whether a man ever came from among the Britons, but whether a man better than Cynon ever came from among the Britons.

Similarly: *ni'th wadaf ddim* (Math. xxvi.35) 'I will not disown you at all': scope of the negation is specified by *ddim*

(8) Temporal adverbs without preposition are lenited unless they stand at the head of a clause (TC 251, 254; GMW 15): temporal adverbs stand in apposition to the tense expressed in the verb.

ual yd eistedyssant ulwydyn or nos honno (WM 26 Pwyll) 'when they had stayed for a year since that night'

wylaf wers, tawaf wedy (CLIH 35.18c) 'I shall weep a while, then I shall be silent'

ni'th elwir bellach byth yn uorwyn (PKM 79.7-8 Mab) 'you shall not ever from now on be called a maiden'

ynteu a rodes yr un ateb ac a rodassei gynt (BDe 14.21) 'he gave the same answer as he had given before'

(9) Nouns denoting quantity or degree are lenited if they follow the word of which they denote the quantity or degree (TC 252-3, GMW 101-2, 105):

gwneuthur rei ereill yn llei lawer no'y throet (PKM 80.8 Math) 'to make others quite a bit smaller than het feet'

mwy oed ef lawer no hynny (WM 229.6 Chwedl Iarllles y Ffynnawn) 'bigger was he by far than that'

Similarly: *gormod* -> *ormod* 'excess, too much' (GMW 105), *digon* -> *ddigon*. Cf. in the later language *dipyn mwy* 'a bit more', *anherchion gant* 'hundred greetings', *arian ddigon* 'enough money'

(10) 'An object of destination after verbs of motion is generally lenited' (GMW; TC 227; I. Williams, *Canu Aneirin* note 57, pp. 84-5): the direction implied in the (intransitive) verb of motion is taken up again and specified by the object of destination.

Gwyr a aeth Gatraeth gan wawr (CA 3.68) 'Men went to Catraeth at dawn'

Kei win a aeth Von y dilein lleuon (BBC 96.12-13: Pa wr yw'r porthor?) 'Fair Kei went to Mon to kill lions'

(11) A vocative appearing without the vocative particle *a* and not standing at the head of the clause is generally lenited in MW (TC 420, GMW 15)

Pa beth yw hynn, Vargret (B ix.329.11) 'what is that, Margred?' vs. *Margret, gwybyd ti* (B.ix.328.13) 'Margred, do you know?'

In accordance with the general rule of free lenition, a vocative would be lenited regularly if the person to whom the vocative refers has already been expressed elsewhere in the clause. So in e.g. 'Come here, Margred; help me, Margred; did you see that, Margred?', etc., but not in 'what is that, Margred?'. The former type would have been more frequent than the latter (?)

Alternative: the vocative particle *a* was lost (but this does not explain the lack of lenition in clause-initial position).

(12) If the subject of a clause is a noun that follows the verb and one or more other parts of speech separate the verb from the subject, the subject is usually lenited (TC 429, GMW 118) but not always (TC 226-7).

y mae yno wr du (RM 240.19) 'there is a black man there'

y doeth ym drwy vy hun yudred godineb (B viii 139.34) 'there came to me through my sleep the filth of adultery'

MoW: *y mae mab gennyf* vs. *y mae gennyf fab*

It is not at all clear whether the proposed lenition rule is applicable here.

A nominal subject that immediately follows the 3sg. verb does not undergo lenition (unless the verbal form causes it). That means that according to the proposed rule, the 3sg. verb, in contradistinction to all other forms of the finite verb, does not contain a marker of the 3sg. but is a non-person. Otherwise 'a boy came' should have been **y doeth* (3sg.) *fab* (apposition to 3sg.). If the subject gets displaced to the right, however, it *is* lenited: *y doeth ddoe fab*

'yesterday a boy came'. If we apply the proposed rule of free lenition to this, the analysis should be that right dislocation of the subject leaves a trace directly after the verb, to which the dislocated subject stands in apposition:

(a) *y doeth mab ddoe* -> (a') *y doeth _ ddoe fab*

This would be comparable to the 'dummy subject' of e.g. German *Es kam gestern ein Junge*, the difference being, of course, that the dummy subject in German is overt while in Welsh it is covert, its only surface expression being lenition of its apposition.

3. Types of free (?) lenition not covered

(13) Pervasive in MoW, less regular in MW (TC 192ff., GMW 18, Morris-Jones 317). Probably originated as a contact mutation that was exploited in order to differentiate subject from object. TC 193:

O'r chwe ffurf sydd ym mhob amser a modd ar y ferf nid yw'n bosibl cael goddrych enwol ond ar ôl un ohonynt; fe all y chwech gymryd gwrthrych enwol ... rhwng yr holl bersonau y mae chwe chynnig i'r gwrthrych dreiglo yn erbyn un i'r goddrych.

To which one may add that of the 3sg. forms only the imperfect, past subjunctive and pluperfect forms as well as rare remnants of the 3sg. of the suffixless preterite caused lenition. Among the other persons, old absolute forms would never have caused lenition. Among the old conjunct forms, lenition was caused by the 1sg. and perhaps the 2sg (depending on reconstruction) of all tenses and moods (apart from the imperfect, past subjunctive and pluperfect), but not by the other persons.

(14) Lenition of verbal nouns in constructions like *i'r gwrthrych dreiglo* 'to lenite the object'

(15) Predicate noun lenites following copula (*dilesteir uyd dy hynt* PKM 3.26 'without let shall be your road'), copula lenites following predicate noun (*mi a vydaf gath* ChO 23.21 'I am a cat'; probably contact lenition in this particular case). These mutations are also found in Cornish and Breton.

(4) Conclusion

Most instances of free lenition in Middle Welsh fall into the category of lenition of an apposition (in the wide sense of the term). Breton and Cornish show remnants of this category of lenition. It defies an explanation on the basis of historical phonology.