

Palatalization as a non-uniform phonetic process: diachronic analysis

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The previous research concerning the problem of palatalization in Middle English showed palatalization not as a regular process, but rather as a lexically gradual change, affecting different dialects, particularly in Late Middle English. The results of the study corroborated Wyld's hypothesis "that not only are there plenty of *ch* forms in Northern texts, from a very early date in ME, but there are perhaps quite as many *k* forms in the South" (Wyld 1899: 143), questioning the idea of [k]-dialect theory, "sharp borders" of a phonological change and regularity of palatalization. The resultant inconsistency can be explained in terms of "overlapping distributions" and continuum of forms, reflecting the mechanism of lexical diffusion, although it might be too difficult to postulate any specific manner of the change, such as adoption, simplification, convergence, spread, victory of some forms, emergence of hybrid variants or hyperdialectalisms. It is clear, however, that geography as well as the impact of neighbouring areas and transition zones were among the key factors responsible for the variation, borrowing of forms and accommodation processes. The phonological description of palatalization is in fact a complex phenomenon, which may be presented phonetically in a different manner, depending on the stage of development of the process itself. This in turn may lead to interesting observations relating to the nature of the process and phonetic changes in general. The aim of the current study, thus, will be to analyse the phonetic mechanism of palatalization operating in today's languages and to try to relate it to the phonological process taking place in Late Middle English, as evidenced in the previous research carried out on the data from the *Innsbruck Corpus of Middle English Prose*. This should contribute to drawing some more general conclusions concerning the nature of palatalization perceived as a phonetic and phonological change.

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