

PERMANENT AND SPORADIC LOSS OF THE SEMIVOWEL [w] AFTER
CONSONANTS IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO *SO*, *ALSO* AND *SUCH*

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ABSTRACT

The deletion of the semivowel [w] adjacent to other consonants, especially [s], was a process initiated in Early Middle English, a period which saw the reduction of the semivowel in adverbs like *also* (OE *ealswa*), *so* (OE *swa*) and the pronoun *such* (OE *swylc*), all exhibiting very high frequency of occurrence. In the present study attention is focussed on the three items, whose contemporary spellings demonstrate the deletion of [w], which occurred much earlier than the traditional grammars say. These three must have been affected by the loss in the order (1) *swa*, (2) *ealswa*, (3) *swylc*, in a process which followed the natural path of lexical diffusion. Because all the three words have always shown a high degree of grammaticalisation, the latter may be held responsible for the relevant loss of their substance.

1. Loss of post-consonantal [w] in English

The deletion of the semivowel [w] adjacent to other consonants is a process which enjoys a long tradition going as far back as Early Middle English. Apart from several isolated developments of the loss of initial prevocalic [w] (cf. *ooze* < ME *wose*), the deletion involves three major contexts in which the change is effected:

- 1) a) syllable initial before [r], as in *wrat*, *wring*, *wron*, *write*, *wry*, etc.;
- b) medial after various consonants, in an unstressed syllable, especially in place-names (*Alnwick*, *Berwick*, *Chiswick*, *Dulwich*, *Greenwich*,

Harwich, Ipswich, Norwich, Southwark, etc.), but also in common words like *gunwale, two, who* (< OE *hwā*), *whom, whose*;

- c) initial and medial after [s], cf. *answer, boatswain, coxswain, housewife (hussy, etc.)*, EMOE *kelson* (ME **kelswīn*), *sultry* (< **swulter*), *sword*, etc.; *also* (< OE *ealswā*), *so* (< OE *swā*), *such* (< OE *swylc*).

Of the three types of change, perhaps the most spectacular was the loss of the semivowel [w] initially before [r], as in *write* etc., which began in the 15th century and was completed two centuries later (cf. Dobson 1968: 975). Less systematic was an analogous loss in words listed as (1b). Characteristically, words under (1a) and (1b), which exemplify the loss of [w], all retain the corresponding grapheme, although [w] is absent in pronunciation. The third group which embraces words like *answer, sword*, etc. with the semivowel deleted after the fricative [s] contains the most important items with [w] lost in both pronunciation and spelling. Here belong, for instance, adverbs like *also, so*, and the pronoun *such*, all exhibiting a very high frequency of occurrence.

The present study of the above peripheral phonological change is confined to the group of words listed as (1c). Because several changes, like those affecting words such as *answer, boatswain, coxswain* etc., go beyond the time limits of Middle English, and the earliest evidence of *w*-deletion is only registered in the modern period, the present paper concentrates on processes operating in Middle English. Our attention will be primarily focussed on the three items, i.e. *also, so, such*, whose contemporary spellings reflect the loss of [w].

2. Hitherto studies and causes of the change

Being a mere peripheral phonological change the loss of [w] has not attracted much attention of historical linguists. The only major study devoted to the problem is almost a century old monograph by Mařík (1910; cf. also his brief paper, Mařík 1912). The monograph concentrates on the developments occurring at the turn of Early Modern English which affected mainly nouns and place-names, with only little space devoted to changes influencing the phonological shape of the adverbs *also, so* and the pronoun *such*, in our opinion the most important words exhibiting *w*-deletion. As the starting point, Mařík (1910: 4) chose the contemporary (i.e. early 20th century) dialects supplementing their evidence by the statements of the early grammarians, with the Middle and Old English data treated as subsidiary evidence. Mařík states that, phonetically, the deletion took place before Middle English back vowels (“vor me. velarem Vokal”), especially high back [u]. A tendency to eliminate [w] in such contexts produced numerous

instances of sporadic *w*-deletion, which were later amended the by restoration of the semivowel as a spelling pronunciation, cf. *swooned* > [su:nd] > [swu:nd]. According to Mařík's chronology (1910: 38), in majority of words subject to *w*-deletion initial prevocalic [w] was dropped in the latter half of the 14th century, but when appearing in a post-consonantal position it might have been deleted earlier, i.e. in the first half of the 14th century. But, adds Mařík, the early loss of [w] in words like *so* and *such* must have been determined by the weak stress.

As a rule, accounts of early phonological change cannot pass over Luick's *Historische Grammatik der englischen Sprache*, which contains a brief account of the relevant deletion (1940: 920-921). Like Mařík, Luick also adduces the evidence of the early grammarians (Salesbury, Cooper, Elphinston and others) and lists the contexts in which the change is effected. Thus, according to Luick, [w] was lost in the following positions:

- 2) a) before a consonant + [w] + [u], as in **swuster* (> *suster*) and then, in Late Middle English, before ME [ou], e.g. *swounen* > *sounen* 'swoon', with [w] restored due to spelling pronunciation;
- b) before NE [u:] (< ME [o:]) in *who*, *two*, also ENE *soote/swoote*, cf. ENE *s(w)oot* 'sweet', with the variant form *sweet* surviving;
- c) before NE [uə] (< ME [ɔ:r]) in ENE *s(w)ore s(w)orn*, with [w] restored through the influence of *swear*;
- d) before [uə] (< ME [o:r], as in [suəd soərd] *sword*, with a permanent loss of [w].

Another comprehensive study of historical phonology, Horn – Lehnert (1954: 750), contains a very similar specification of the environments of the change ("Der Schwund des *w* tritt immer ein, wenn im Laufe der englischen Sprachgeschichte die Lautgruppe Konsonant + *w* + *u* zustande kommt."), putting emphasis on a following back rounded vowel as the change trigger. Horn – Lehnert's (1954: 751) examples are listed as item (3) below:

- 3) a) Before [u(:)]: **twū* > OE *tū*, **hwū* > OE *hū* (phonetic spellings <to(o)>, <ho(o)> appear 15/16c.); OE *swustor* > *sustor* (replaced by *sister*), ME *swuch* (> *such*); ME *swōrd* (> *swūrd*) > ENE *sūrd* > [so:d] (cf. 17c. spellings <sourd, sord>); ENE *swūn* 'swoon' > *sūn*, ENE

swoop (> *sūp*, with [w] restored by spelling pronunciation); *sworn* (> *sūrn*), *swum* (> *sum*, dial.)

- b) Before [o(:)]: *swoote* > *soote* (adj.), *swollen* (17c. *soln*), *sword* (> *soord/soard* 1578). (Also cf. ENE *thwong* > *thong*, with a permanent loss of [w]).
- c) In unaccented syllables: *answer* > *anser* (*w*-loss practically undocumented, apart from the evidence offered by 17th century grammarians).

The above statements in the prestigious monographs of 20th century authorities assign almost all instances of *w*-deletion to Late Middle and Early Modern English. But the loss of [w] in the three words mentioned earlier, i.e. *so*, *also* and *such*, must have had a different history and conditioning. In what follows attention will be focussed on these three words.

3. Deletion of [w] in *swā* ‘so’, *ealswā* ‘also’ and *swylc* ‘such’

In his explanation of the reasons for the loss of [w] in *swā* (> *so*), *ealswā* (> *also*) and *swylc* (> *such*) Luick (1940: 971), who believes that the change belonged to Early Middle English, argues that the loss of [w] in OE *swylc* > ME *such* is connected with the retraction of [ū] to [u] in the sequence [ūt]. The earliest instances of *such*, according to him, are those in Layamon’s *Brut*, *The owl and the nightingale* and Robert of Gloucester which, as will be shown later on, is not quite true. As regards the adverb *so*, that form, claims Luick, goes back to the related adverb *also*. His argument for the latter development is so elaborate that a quotation of the relevant statement from the *Historische Grammatik* seems indispensable; cf.

- 5) Aus dem Frümittelenglischen [stammt; JW] ... *alse* aus ae. *ealswā*, daneben ergab sich durch Mischung dieser Form mit dem vollbetonten *alswō* auch *alsō* und davon losgelöst *sō*, die zu ne. *also*, *so* führten.

The earliest instances of the form *so* are traced back by Luick to the *Katharine Group* cycle (West Midland).

In order to obtain a full picture of the change one should not overlook Mańczak’s (1987: 50-51, 80) interpretation of *w*-loss in *swylc* and *swā* in terms of statistics. His frequency list of words with the original initial sequence [sw-]

based on the *Lorge* magazine count includes 62 items, a selection of which are shown under (6). Items which exhibit *w*-loss in different periods are printed in bold type:

- 6) 1. **so** 11712, 2. **such** 2541, 3. ?**sweet**, 679, 4. ?**sister** 590, 5. swing 314, 6. swept 300, 7. swell 282, 8. swim 281, 9. swift 207, 10. swiftly 204, 11. swung 193, 12. swallow 170, 13. sweetheart 157, 14. sway 148, 15. sweat 124, 16. swear 120, 17. switch 112, 18. swamp 92, 19. **sword** 91, 20. sweater 85, ... 25. **swore** 67, 27. **swollen** 53, ... 40. **swoop** 30, ... 60. **swoon** 5 ... (Mańczak 1987: 80).

The phonological explanation which states that the change took place before back rounded vowels ([u, o]) is rejected by Mańczak, who claims that *w*-deletion, whichever word is affected, is exclusively determined by the frequency of the use of words with the initial sequence [sw-]. Although we can agree that *sword* (here ranked 19th) would have been ranked much higher in the medieval period, one can easily notice that all words exhibiting the change do contain rounded back vowels. Items 3 (*sweet*) and 4 (*sister*), with front vowels after the cluster [sw-], are no direct continuations of forms with *w*-loss because what was really affected by *w*-deletion were ME *swote* (a by-form of *swete*) and ME *swuster*, not *sister*, the last item being a Scandinavian loanword retaining its original *w*-less form.

Last but not least one cannot fail to observe that the two high frequency leaders in the list, *so* and *such*, seem to be instantiations of the process of grammaticalisation. If so, an account of the evolution of their forms should be kept separate from other apparently similar developments. The adverb *also*, absent from Mańczak's frequency list, seems to be another instance of a grammaticalised word.

4. Deletion of [w]: The evidence of the *Middle English dictionary online*

Section 4 contains the statistics of the occurrence of *w*-full forms confronted with *w*-less forms in dialectal distribution. The data have been extracted from the *Middle English dictionary* on-line (from now onwards *MED*). The examples, grouped according to dialect, show the proportion of the *w*-full and *w*-less forms symbolised SWA/SO (*swa*, *swo/sa*, *se*), ALSWA/ALSO (*alswa*, *alswow/alsa*, *alse*) and SWYCH/SUCH (*swy(l)ch*, *swuch*, *swich/such sich*) and their variants.

7)

Northern		SWA/SO	ALSWA/ALSO	SWYCH/SUCH			
a1400 (a1325)	<i>Cursor Mundi</i> (Vsp A3)	12	9	1	4	17	0
a1400 (a1325)	<i>Cursor Mundi</i> (Frf 14)	1	1	1	0	1	1
a1425	<i>Benedictine Rule</i> (1) (Lnsd 378)	3	2	2	1	4	0
a1425 (a1400)	<i>Pr.Consc.</i> (Glb E.9 & Harl. 4196)	8	0	–	–	–	–

The only text which belongs to the 14th century, the *Cursor Mundi*, is known in several versions of which Cotton Vespasian A3 contains most forms of the three words under scrutiny. Curiously, that text from West Riding Yorkshire is very conservative, favouring forms with the cluster [sw], while the Trinity MSS (West Midland, see item 9) exhibits forms with *w*-deletion. The scant mixed evidence from Fairfax 14 MS containing the version of the same poem produced in northern Lancashire shows instances of both types. Even the later texts show the prevalence of the conservative forms without *w*-deletion.

8)

East Midland		SWA/SO	ALSWA/ALSO	SWYCH/SUCH			
(-1154)	<i>Peterborough Chronicle</i>	66	0	3	0	5	0
c1200	<i>Ormulum</i> (Jun. 1)	18	2	2	0	15	0
a1225 (a1200)	<i>Trin.Hom.</i> (Trin-C B.14.52)	19	2	0	3	4	0
a1225 (c1200)	<i>Vices & Virtues</i> (1) (Stw 34)	24	6	2	0	7	0
(c1300)	<i>Havelok</i> (Ld Misc 108)	0	4	0	1	4	0
a1300 (a1250)	<i>Bestiary</i> (Arun. 292)	0	6	–	–	1	0

c1325 (c1250)	<i>Gen. & Ex.</i> (Corp- C444)	1	35	0	5	7	0
a1400	Chaucer (various MSS)	2	90	1	12	45	7

The East Midland texts cover a range from mid-12th to the end of the 14th century. The *Peterborough Chronicle* contains no forms with deletion but *w*-less spellings can be found in the *Ormulum*. An opposite tendency to use modified forms is evident after 1300 as regards *SO* and *ALSO*, while *SWYCH* (*swich*) prevails even in Chaucer, who had got rid of the conservative forms of *SWA*, simultaneously retaining [w] in *swych*. The form *alswa* comes from the *Reeve's Tale* (Manly – Rickert) A.4085: *Lay down thy swerd' and I wol myn alswa*, where the poet imitates the Northern dialect.

It can be thus concluded that around 1400 East Midland implemented *w*-deletion in *SO/ALSO* but not in *SWYCH*.

9)

West Midland		SWA/SO		ALSWA/ALSO		SWYCH/SUCH	
a1225 (OE?)	<i>Lambeth Homilies</i> (Lamb 487)	14	5	4	0	3	0
c1225 (c1200)	<i>St. Katharine (I)</i> (Roy 17.A.27)	5	0	2	0	1	0
c1225 (c1200)	<i>St. Katharine</i> (Bod. 34)	3	5	–	–	2	0
c1225	<i>Holy Maidenhood</i> (Bod 34)	1	4	–	–	1	0
c1230 (a1200)	<i>Ancrene Riwe</i> (Corp.-C 402)	1	12	1	0	17	1
a1400 (a1325)	<i>Cursor Mundi</i> (Trin.383 R.3.8)	0	6	0	1	0	2
c1400 (a1376)	<i>PPI A (I)</i> (Trin-C R.3.14) a. o.	0	20	0	5	0	9
c1400 (c1390)	<i>Sir Gawain</i> (Nero A.10)	0	10	–	–	0	2

c1440 (a1350)	<i>Isumbras</i> (Thrn.)	1	1	–	–	1	0
c1440 (a1400)	<i>Perceval</i> (Thrn.)	2	3	–	–	1	0

It is not the first time that West Midland proves to be an area where most phonological changes are initiated. From as early as the first quarter of the 13th century we find forms with *w*-deletion in the *Lambeth Homilies* and by the beginning of the same century SO dominates over SWA. The first forms of SUCH appear in the *Ancrene Riwle* around 1230, much earlier than suggested by Luick (see above; the early forms of SUCH are adduced in the following section). Characteristically, an examination of the whole text of the *Riwle* has revealed an almost perfect balance of forms of SO with and without [w] (211 : 223), but simultaneously the domination of *w*-full forms of ALSO (103 : 1; see the Appendix). Last but not least, the phonological innovations may have had their origin in the language of the so-called *Katharine Group*, which contained texts such as *Saint Katharine* and *Holy Maidhood*. Also, Langland's *Pierce the Plowman* only contains contemporary *w*-full forms.

The richest literature, which shows amazing continuity, comes from the South of England; cf. :

10)

Southwestern		SWA/SO	ALSWA/ALSO	SWYCH/SUCH			
c1175 (OE?)	<i>Bodley Homilies</i> (Bod 343)	18	0	1	0	6	0
a1225 (OE?)	<i>Vsp.A.Hom.Init.Cre</i> <i>at.</i> (Vsp. A 22)	7	0	2	2	1	0
a1250 (?1150)	<i>Prov. Alf.</i> (Mdst.A.13)	0	2	–	–	2	0
a1275 (c1150)	<i>Prov. Alf.</i> (Trin.- CB.14.39)	1	2	–	–	1	0
c1250	<i>Body & Soul</i> (4) (Trin.-CB.14.39)	3	4	–	–	–	–
c1250	<i>St. Margarete</i> (2) (Trin.-CB.14.39)	0	7	–	–	–	–

c1275 (?1200)	<i>Layamon's Brut</i> (Clg A.9)	51	2	7	0	23	3
c1275 (a1216)	<i>Owl & Nightingale</i> (Clg A.9)	1	2	2	0	5	0
c1325 (c1300)	<i>Glo. Chron A</i> (Clg. A.11)	0	10	0	3	1	7
c1330 (c1250)	<i>Floris</i> (Auch.)	0	6	–	–	1	1
c1330 (c1300)	<i>Tristrem</i> (Auch.)	0	7	0	3	1	0
c1330 (c1300)	<i>Guy of Warwick</i> (1) (Auch.)	0	6	–	–	–	–
a1375	<i>William of Palerne</i> (KC 13)	0	35	0	4	13	0
a1382	<i>Wyclif Bible</i> (1)	0	19	–	–	0	1

The earliest *w*-less forms of ALSO come from *Old English Homilies* (in the Middle English version), while those of SO can be encountered in the *Proverbs of Ælfred* (mid-13th century). One of the earliest texts containing the modern form of SUCH, *Layamon's Brut*, employs only the conservative forms with [w] of SO and ALSO. Although forms with deletion in the pronoun *such* dominate in Robert of Gloucester's *Chronicle*, they do not seem to have gained wide popularity in the region before 1400. Another striking contrast is observed in *William of Palerne*, namely that between the preserved conservative forms of SUCH and the modified forms of SO.

11)

Kentish		SWA/SO	ALSWA/ALSO	SWYCH/SUCH			
a 1150	Vsp.D.Hom (Vsp.D14)	134	0	–	–	28	0
(1340)	Ayenbyte of Inwyt (Arun 57)	16	0	3	0	11	0

The scant material from Kent confirms that forms without *w*-deletion survive in that conservative area almost to the end of the Middle English period. The most characteristic text, the *Ayenbyte of Inwyt*, contains only two forms without <u> (= *w*) (*zo* 2 *alzo* 1) as compared to 457 instances of *zuo* and 16 of *alzuo*. The text contains no *w*-less forms of SUCH (see the Appendix).

5. Conclusions

The data adduced above allow one to formulate several general statements concerning the oldest instances of *w*-deletion in medieval English. The three words affected first were the adverbs *swa*, *alswa* and the pronoun *swylc*.

1. The loss of [w] first occurred in the adverb *swa*, then in *alswa* and finally in *swylc* and its variants. Thus the change followed the characteristic route of lexical diffusion.
2. The evidence presented above shows that the earliest examples of *w*-loss are found considerably earlier than is postulated in the traditional grammars.
3. As regards the simplification of syllable structure the process is not easy to explain because the sequence [swV] did not violate the sonority sequence principle. Hence the reasons for the change must be sought beyond the area of phonology.
4. Unlike other items (*sister*, *sword*, etc.) the three words discussed in the study were evidently subject to the process of grammaticalisation. As is known, grammaticalised words lose their phonetic substance, hence the simplification of their forms.

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APPENDIX

Deletion of [w] as reflected in a selection of full texts

North*Cursor Mundi* (a1400 (?a1325) London, British Library, Cotton
Vespasian A.3) (WRY)

<i>sua</i>	640	<i>so</i>	43
<i>swa</i>	1		
<i>alsua</i>	76	<i>also</i>	1
<i>al sua</i>	2		
<i>alswa</i>	1		

nEast Midland*Ormulum* (?c1200 Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 1) (swLincolnshire)

<i>swa</i>	[exclusively]		
<i>all swa</i>	130	<i>all se</i>	19
<i>allswa</i>	10	<i>allse</i>	11
		<i>alls</i>	210
<i>swillc</i>	77		
<i>swillk</i>	39		

eEast Midland

Genesis & Exodus (a1325 (c1250) Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 444) (wNorfolk)

<i>swa</i>	0	<i>so</i>	149
<i>swo</i>	0	<i>se</i>	5
<i>alswa</i>	0	<i>also</i>	6
		<i>al-so</i>	13
<i>swilc</i>	40		
<i>swiulc</i>	1		

sEast Midland

Vices and virtues (a1225 (c1200) London, British Library, Stowe 34) (Essex)

<i>swa</i>	177	<i>so</i>	4
		<i>sa</i>	2
<i>alswa</i>	31	<i>also</i>	4
<i>al swa</i>	33	<i>al so</i>	4
<i>swilc(h)</i>	20		

e.g. *ðat tu wilt so don, do hit ðanne* (102, l. 27)

ic wolde ðe wrecchede saule sa rewliche acwellan (p. 10, l. 19).

West Midland

Ancrene Riwe (c1220 London, British Library, Cotton Titus D.18) (cCheshire)

<i>swa</i>	211	<i>sa</i>	1
		<i>se</i>	222
<i>alswa</i>	84	<i>alse</i>	1
<i>al. swa</i>	11		
<i>al.-swa</i>	8		
<i>swuch</i>	81	<i>such</i>	2
<i>swich</i>	4		

e.g. *is sa sare of dred* (p. 55, l. 21)

swiche (p. 55, l. 37)

;; *suche luues iesu crist to lefmon & to spuse* (p. 23, l. 30)

& *alle oðre suche* (p. 82, l. 16)

& *alse þurh þ he wunes under o sum wise zelpes hit & scheawið* (p. 41, l. 34)

sWest Midland

Hali Meidenhad (c1225 (?c1200) Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodl. 34) (Herefordshire)

<i>swuch</i>	39	<i>such</i>	0
<i>swa</i>	37	<i>se</i>	157
<i>alswa</i>	10	<i>alse</i>	1
		<i>suster</i>	4

South Western

The owl and the nightingale (c1275 (?a1216) London, British Library, Cotton Caligula A.9)

<i>swa</i>	4		
<i>swo</i>	11	<i>so</i>	82
<i>alswa</i>	2		
<i>alswo</i>	1	<i>also</i>	13
<i>swuch</i>	14		
<i>swich</i>	1		

- e.g. 1307 *swuch þu art ette,*
 1347 *Swiche huue ich itache & lere,*
 76-7 *Ðin ezene boþ colblake & brode, Riȝt swo ho weren ipeint mid wode; Ðu starest so þu wille abiten*

nSouth Western

Layamon's *Brut* (c1275 (?a1200) London, British Library, Cotton Caligula A.9) (nwWorcestershire)

<i>swa</i>	767	<i>so</i>	6	<i>sa</i>	1	<i>se</i>	1
<i>al swa</i>	76	<i>al so</i>	1				
<i>al-swa</i>	30	<i>al-so</i>	3				
<i>alswa</i>	3	<i>also</i>	2				
<i>swo</i>	1						
<i>al swo</i>	1						
<i>swuch</i>	3						
<i>swulc(h)</i>	151						
<i>swlch</i>	6						

- e.g. 1522 *Þeo art me leof **al-so** mi fæder; & ich þe **al-so** þi dohter.*
 4997 *Al þe king weorhte; **also** heo bi-sohten.*
 3176 *A-nan **se** he wes wrað wi[ð] eni mon; i þan stude he hine wolde slæn*
 9731 *& **sa** me scal lacnien; his leomes þat beoð sare.*
 67 *mid wintre he wes bi-weaued. **swo** hit wolde Godd.*
 369 *& fare we on sele; riht **al swo** stille*

wSouth Western

Layamon's *Brut* (c1275 (?1250) London, British Library, Cotton Otho C.13) (wSomerset)

<i>swa</i>	0	<i>sa</i>	0
<i>swo</i>	1	<i>so</i>	390
<i>al swa</i>	0		
<i>al-swo</i>	0	<i>also</i>	6
		<i>al so</i>	21
		<i>al-so</i>	20
		<i>solch</i>	6
		<i>soc(c)h</i>	74

- e.g. 8463 *and **swo** hii gonne þe heapene; legge to grunde.*

Kent

Ayenbite of Inwyrt (1340 London, British Library, Arundel 57) (Kent)

<i>zuo</i>	457	<i>zo</i>	2
<i>alzuo</i>	16	<i>alzo</i>	1

zuich/zuych (exclusively)

- e.g. *An þeruore / me ssel hine loky / and ureþie / **zo** holyliche* (6, l. 23)
*þet hine **zo** uayr / an **zuo** guod: hedde y-mad.* (16, l. 7)
*Zuych zenne makeþ ech þet zenezep dyadliche. uor þanne **alzo** moche ase of*
him is he (19, l. 6)