

VERB FORMS IN MEDIEVAL ANGLO-IRISH TEXTS

PIOTR JAKUBOWSKI

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

ABSTRACT

The object of the present study is the shift of strong to weak verbs in medieval Irish English of the fourteenth century as represented by the text of the *Kildare Poems*. A comparison with the developments in other dialects of English of the same period reveals a degree of conservatism in Irish English. In fact, some of the verbs which either became weak or developed parallel weak forms remain strong in the Irish English dialect. The forms which retained the strong pattern are discussed in detail and are provided as evidence of the archaic character of Irish English.

1. Introduction

The study of medieval Irish English morphology has not attracted as much scholarly attention as that of medieval English in England. In fact, comments on medieval Irish English in general are rare in standard historical grammars of English. For instance, Kallen (1994) comments that:

There is yet no reference grammar of Irish English varieties, no phonological atlas or even a published set of detailed phonetic descriptions, and no dialect lexicon: in short, the working tools of linguistic description are still being developed
(Kallen 1994: 195).

However, recently tools for the study of medieval Irish English have been provided by Raymond Hickey through his publication of *A sourcebook for Irish English* (2002), followed by the *Corpus presenter* containing a corpus of medieval Irish English texts. It is owing to the aforementioned sources that this present study was possible and was greatly facilitated.

This study focuses on a single aspect of the verbal system in medieval Irish English, namely on the developments in the strong verb system. As is generally

acknowledged, strong verbs tended to develop weak forms in the Middle English period. According to Welna (1996) “although in Middle English only a few former strong verbs became totally weak ... almost all verbs developed weak endings which survived in parallel use with the strong forms” (Welna 1996: 120). For instance, according to Krygier (1994) there was a significant rise in the number of strong verbs which developed weak forms in the 13th century in England (Krygier 1994: 148). A century later as many as 70% of the remaining 230 strong verbs developed weak forms (Krygier 1994: 188).

One could expect that the developments in the strong verb system in medieval Irish English would parallel those in the South West and South West Midlands in England. It is from these areas that the first waves of colonists arrived in Ireland. The settlers arrived in the late 12th century from West and south-west of England, bound for East and south-east of Ireland (Hickey 2002: 39). However, the linguistic situation is more complex due to the fact that the colonists were made up of people from various regions of England. According to Hickey (1997) “English was represented by different varieties due to diverse regional origins of the English followers during the original invasion/settlement and ... this fact led to a compromise standard arising in the thirteenth century which is intermediary between dialect features of various speakers” (Hickey 1997: 182). A term which is often applied with regard to this particular linguistic situation is “dialect mixture” (Kallen 1994: 165). An example of the disparity between morphological developments in medieval Irish English and the language of south-west England is the use of the third person plural personal pronouns. The forms which were used in the south-west of England at that time were either *ham* or *hom* for PDE *them*, whereas only *ham* is found in medieval Irish English (Kallen 1994: 165, after Irwin 1935: 91).

Apart from the dialect mixing, another significant feature of medieval Irish English is its conservatism. For instance, the archaic character of medieval Irish English has been pointed out by McIntosh and Samuels (1968: 4), who observed that in medieval Irish English, longer than in southern English, infinitive suffixes *-y* and *-i* were retained. In the present paper it will be postulated that the conservative, archaic character of medieval Irish English is not only reflected in the aforementioned morphological features, but it also extends to other morphological developments such as the retention of unshifted strong verbs in particular.

2. Sources

The text of *Kildare poems* composed in the fourteenth century and supplied by Raymond Hickey (2003) in an electronic version in the *Corpus presenter* was the basis for the present study. *Kildare poems* is contained in the British Mu-

seum Harley 913. It is a collection of sixteen poems. Its paper edition is available in Heuser (1904).

3. Data

The strong verbs analyzed in the present study were selected according to two criteria. First of all, only those strong verbs that were used in Old English were chosen. Secondly, the requirement for the morphological comparison which focuses on the development of weak forms by strong verbs was to select only those verbs which were analyzed in the study conducted by Krygier (1994). The list of strong verbs which indicated their development in the fourteenth century England served as a comparative tool for the present study. The developments, according to Krygier (1994) were the following:

- a) a strong verb failed to develop a weak form
- b) a strong verb developed a weak form (and was in this case referred to as *mixed*)
- c) a strong verb became weak

Only the developments in the fourteenth century were compared as this was the time when *Kildare poems* were composed. Two types of verb forms were analyzed in the present study: preterite and past participle forms. The aim of this study is to demonstrate the tendency for conservatism in medieval Irish English strong verb system developments. The assumption is that the development of weak forms by strong verbs is the innovative tendency as opposed to the retention of the strong form exclusively. Therefore, the following discussion focuses only on forms which developed weak counterparts in England, but show no such variation in the text of the *Kildare poems*.

4. Strong verbs in the *Kildare poems*

The total number of the unique occurrences of strong verbs which developed parallel weak forms in England, but remained exclusively strong in the text of the *Kildare poems* is thirty four. There are differences in the stability of the classes of strong verbs, as some tend to develop weak forms in English of England more frequently than others.

4.1. Preterite forms of Old English strong verbs

Among strong verbs of Old English class II which remain strong throughout the text of the *Kildare poems* are *forbade*, *bidde*, *sok*, and *les*. These forms are illustrated below:

- 1) KP *forbede*, OE *forbēodan*
 Saf o tre he him forbede
 ‘only one tree He excluded him from’
 (*Fall and Passion*: 46)
- 2) KP *bidde*, OE *beodan*
 Moche misanter þat for him bidde
 ‘Much bad luck [to the one] who prayed’
 (*Song*: 24a)
- 3) KP *sok*, OE *sucan*
 Ðat sok þe milk of maid is brest
 ‘who sucked the milk of a Virgin’s breast’
 (*Ten Commandments*: 78)
- 4) KP *les*, OE *leosan*
 Ðer for sso ne les noht hir flure.
 ‘Because of it she did not lose her virginity.’
 (*Fall and Passion*: 104)

Class IV is represented by the OE verb *beran*, whose counterpart in England at that time developed a parallel weak form according to the tables provided by Krygier (1994).

- 5) KP *ber*, OE *beran*
 Ðat þe dogtir ber þe fader.
 ‘That the daughter bore the father.’
 (*Fall and Passion*: 100)

Three verbs of Old English class VI which are exclusively strong throughout the entire text of the *Kildare poems* and to which their counterparts in England developed a weak form have been found. These forms are *slow*, *woke*, and *swor*.

- 6) KP *slow*, OE *slēan*
 Ðer ich slow a motune
 ‘There I killed a sheep’
 (*Song*: 13c)
- 7) KP *woke*, OE *wacian*
 Wel he woke and slepe rigte nowgte.
 ‘without doubt, was awake and did not sleep at all’
 (*Satire*: 12f)

- 8) KP *swor*, OE *swerian*
 Hi swor and tok an hond
 ‘they swore and undertook’
 (*Pers of Birmingham*: 12b)

By far, the most numerous group of strong verbs which developed parallel weak forms in England and were found in the text of the *Kildare poems* are verbs of class VII.

- 9) KP *het*, OE *hātan*
 Ðat het Iosep of Arimathie
 ‘who was called Joseph of Arimathea’
 (*Fall and Passion*: 142)
- 10) KP *wep*, OE *wēpan*
 Hit nas no wonder, þog go wep
 ‘It was no wonder that she wept’
 (*Fall and Passion*: 157)
- 11) KP *sadde*, OE *sc(e)ādan*
 Of sinful man þat sadde þi blode
 ‘on your behalf, on sinful man who shed your blood!’
 (*Sarmun*: 124)
- 12) KP *vnderfo*, OE *underfon*
 And þe catel vnderfo
 ‘and the property received’
 (*Song*: 6b)
- 13) KP *beheld*, OE *bihealdan*
 As whan þat hi him beheld
 ‘when they looked upon Him’
 (*Fall and Passion*: 167)

4.2. Past Participle forms of Old English strong verbs

Two strong past participles of Old English class I, which developed parallel weak forms in England include *flitte* and *ismitte*.

- 14) KP *flitte*, OE *flītan*
 He sal sitte in helle flitte

‘He must sit deprived in hell’
(*Hymn*: 10g)

- 15) KP *ismitte*, OE *smītan*
He was ibobid and ismitte
‘He was buffeted and struck’
(*Fall and Passion*: 117)

There are two instances of past participle forms of Old English class II in the text of *Kildare poems*. These past participle verb forms are *forlor* and *ycor*.

- 15) KP *forlor*, OE *forlēosan*
Man, þou hast þe forlor
‘Man, you have brought yourself to ruin’
(*Christ*: 19)

- 16) KP *ycor*, OE *cēose*
Ðat bi no man þat was ycor
‘by any man that was chosen’
(*Fall and passion*: 90)

Class III is represented by the form *istunge*, from Old English *stingan*. Among verbs which belonged to Old English class IV one finds two participle forms: *benome* and *ynom*.

- 17) KP *istunge*, OE *stingan*
Mi side dep istunge, mi hondes sore bleding
‘my side deeply pierced, my hands bleeding sorely’
(*Christ*: 18)

- 18) KP *benome*, OE *beniman*
Ðer for god him hauiþ benome
‘therefore God has taken away from him’
(*Seven*: 14)

- 19) KP *ynom*, OE *niman*
Ynom and ibund he was.
‘He was taken and bound.’
(*Fall and Passion*: 116)

- 20) KP *ibor*, OE *beran*
 And ful neig to helle ibor
 ‘and are carried very close to hell’
 (*Christ*: 20)

Past participles of class V are more numerous in terms of unique forms than those of class IV. The examples found in the *Kildare poems* include: *ilor*, *iwrogte*, *bemette*, *imeten*, and *ifrette*.

- 21) KP *ilor*, OE *lēosan*
 Be þou þre nigȝt in a þroug, þi frendſchip is ilor.
 ‘if you are three nights in a grave, your friendship is dissolved.’
 (*Erthe*: 4f)
- 22) KP *iwrogte*, OE *wreccan*
 Ðan god þat haþ ham of erþe iwrogte
 ‘more than God, who has made them from dust’
 (*Seven*: 49)
- 23) KP *bemette*, OE *bemetan*
 Lollai, lollai, litil child, to kar ertou bemette
 ‘Lullay, lullay, little child, you are destined to sorrow.’
 (*Lullaby*: 2e)
- 24) KP *imeten*, OE *metan*
 Alast he haþ is leinþ miſeiſlich imeten.
 ‘he receives a length of it miserly measured.’
 (*Erthe*: 5f)
- 25) KP *ifrette*, OE *fretan*
 Ðat hiſ fleiſ be al ifrette
 ‘that his flesh be thoroughly tortured’
 (*Song*: 16d)
- 26) KP *ispoke*, OE *spreccan*
 And þenç þoſ wordiſ her iſpoke
 ‘and think about those words spoken here’
 (*Sarmun*: 147)

Old English strong verbs class VI is represented in the *Kildare poems* by past participle forms such as *forfare*, *forsake*, and *isowe*.

- 27) KP *forfare*, OE *forfaran*
 Mine hed is hore and al forfare
 ‘My head is grey and completely disfigured’
 (*Elde*: 3g)
- 28) KP *forsake*, OE *forsacan*
 Nogt on nas forsake
 ‘not one was refused’
 (*Pers of Birmingham*: 20e)
- 29) KP *isowe*, OE *sawan*
 And of one foule erþe isowe
 ‘and sown from the same foul earth’
 (*Seven*: 3b)

The unique forms of the past participle which belonged to class VII in Old English are less numerous than their counterparts in the preterite in the text under investigation. These include: *ifalle*, *ihold*, and *let*.

- 30) KP *ifalle*, OE *feallan*
 Ðat wer ifalle for prude and hore
 ‘who had fallen because of pride and defilement’
 (*Fall and Passion*: 34)
- 31) KP *ihold*, OE *healdan*
 And ihold in fast prisund
 ‘and kept in a secure prison’
 (*Song*: 17c)
- 32) KP *let*, OE *lætan*
 And gouþe me haþ let
 ‘and youth has forsaken me’
 (*Elde*: 2f)

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the conservatism of medieval Irish English has been previously demonstrated in terms of phonology and other morphological features, such as the longer retention of the past participle suffixes *-y* and *-i*. The present investigation was aimed at demonstrating that conservatism of medieval Irish English could have extended beyond the phenomena described so far in the previous studies.

The present study was comparative in its form as the findings of the study conducted by Krygier (1994) were confronted with the situation present in the fourteenth century text of the *Kildare poems*. Both in the case of the preterite and the past participle forms, which developed parallel weak forms in England in the corresponding period, the forms found in the text of the *Kildare poems* failed to display such variation. The situation observed in the text of the *Kildare poems* may be indicative of the tendency to retain archaic forms also with regard to one of the most important developments in the verb system from Old to Middle English. Naturally, more research is needed as the present study presents an investigation of a single text only.

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