Čermák, Jan

# A diachronic perspective on old English deadjectival nouns ending in -þ(u)/-t(u)

JAN ČERMÁK

# A DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE ON OLD ENGLISH DEADJEC-
# TIVAL NOUNS ENDING IN -Þ(U)/-T(U)

## 0.

Modern English deadjectival nouns ending in -*th* (*length*, *mirth*, *warmth* etc.) are examples of a closed and unproductive word-formation set whose members have, from a diachronic perspective, frozen into lexicalisations. *Sloth* is no derivative of *slow* for present-day speech feeling. In *warmth*, -*th* is analysable, but the suffix cannot be added synchronically to an adjective to provide a noun (cf. Bauer 1983.48-9, with examples such as *\*psychedelicth*, *\*surrealth*). What follows is an attempt to explore some of the historical prerequisites of this lexicalisation process. Its roots must be sought in Old English where -*th*, 'a substantival suffix of doubtful currency' in Modern English (Marchand 1969.349), still ranked, in its corresponding Old English forms, among 'common affixes' (Quirk and Wrenn 1957.114, 118). The lexicalisation process is likely to have been complex and, owing to the nature of linguistic evidence we have of (Late) Old and (Early) Middle English, difficult to reconstruct in its entirety.

## 1.

Modern English deadjectival nouns in -*th* go back to Old English abstract nouns ending in -*þ(u)/-ð(u)/* and -*t(u)* (the latter form arose by assimilation, after consonants such as *d*, *h*, *s*, etc.). These were formed from adjectives and denoted states and qualities (*fāh*, 'hostile' – *fæhð*, 'hostility'; *cēne*, 'bold' – *cēn?u*, 'boldness'). The same suffix also formed nouns of quality and state from verbs and nouns (cf. *ābelgan*, 'to irritate' – *æbylgþu*, 'anger'; *þeof*, 'thief' – *þiefþ(u)*, 'theft').

**1.1.** Variant forms that existed in the nouns of this word-formation and inflectional pattern (-*þu* nouns represented a subtype of *ō*-stems) were largely due to the joint workings of i-mutation, syncopation, apocopation, and to subsequent remodelling by analogy. A typical word-formation structure of this pattern at the dawn of the Old English period, e.g. *\*lang-iþo* (> OE *lengþu*, ModE *length*),

contained an -i- in the suffix that triggered an i-mutation of the vowel in the preceding syllable (*lang- > leng-). The medial syllable of originally trisyllabic nouns was syncopated in Old English owing to the fact that most of these nouns had a long root syllable (*lengi- > leng-). The final -u should have then remained phonologically, but was often dropped on the analogy of long-syllable ō-stem nouns of the type lār, wund. Subsequently, there was other intervention by analogy, due to such factors as extraction of forms from oblique cases into the nominative, etc.[1]

## 2.

For the present analysis, a sample of the Old English abstract deadjectival nouns ending in -þ(u)/-t(u) and their variants has been collected from *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* by Clark Hall (and Meritt). The sample has been checked against Bosworth and Toller's *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* and, in spurious instances, against *A Microfiche Concordance of Old English*. Only nouns of undisputed etymological and derivational background have been included in the sample, with an exclusion of their compounds and derivations (see the Appendix).

## 3.

The sample contains 56 nouns. Out of these, 24 are based on a very productive subtype of derivation from adjectives in -lēas (ModE -less: mete, 'food' – metelēas, 'without food' – metelēast, 'lack of food, starvation'). Twenty-four nouns of the sample have a parallel formation ending in a hugely productive suffix -nes/-nis with what appears to be little or no difference in meaning (mærð, 'glory, fame, famous exploit' – mærnes, 'greatness, honour, fame'; gelēaflēst – gelēaflēsnes, both meaning 'unbelief'). Five nouns out of the 56 (marked by (†) in the Appendix) are attested in poetic texts only; another 10 occur very rarely in prose without being recorded in poetry (marked by (=) in the Appendix). This means that more than one fourth of the sampled nouns seems to have had no more than a marginal existence in the corpus of Old English. Altogether, these figures and ratios indicate that—despite the appraisals by Quirk and Wrenn (1957.114, 118) and Marchand (1969.349) of the suffix -þ(u)/-t(u) as productive in Old English—this type of word-formation was by then past its prime.[2]

**3.1.** While it is evident that such a loss of productivity was bound to pave the way for the lexicalisation process of later centuries, it also had its specific synchronic causes. These should primarily be looked for in the effects of the processes that were briefly described in 1.1. above: i-mutation, syncopation and apocopation due to rhythmical conditioning.

**3.1.1.** Out of 94 spelling variants attested for the 56 nouns in the sample, 77

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[1]  For details, see e.g. Campbell (1959, §§ 585-589).
[2]  Cf. a passing comment by Mirosław Nowakovski in *A Study in Generative Historical Linguistics. On Language Change. Some Aspects of Old English Nominalizations*, Poznań 1978, about a 'doubtful productivity' of this suffix (103).

are conditioned by effects of i-mutation and/or syncope and/or apocope. Except for two instances, i-mutation in the -*þ(u)/-t(u)* nouns is always accompanied by syncopation. Syncopation occurs even when rules of i-mutation do not apply. Fifty-one occurrences out of the 77 spelling variants exhibit a maximally reduced syllable structure due to syncopation and apocopation. This cumulative effect of i-mutation, syncopation and apocopation contributes to the tendency towards increasingly short word forms, which becomes favourable to incipient typological isolation. Moreover, this effect has another two highly important structural aspects. Firstly, by widening the gap between deadjectival nouns and their respective adjectives (*earm*, 'poor, wretched' vs. *iermðu, iermð,* 'misery, poverty'; cf. PG *\*arm* vs. *\*armiþo*), this cumulative effect helps to increase the opacity of the morphophonemic system of Old English. As an alternation-bound derivational strategy, it works counter to the progression of the language from root-based to stem-based to word-based inflection and derivation.[3] Secondly, by vowel deletion it increases the number and variability of consonant clusters (e.g. *\*rūmi?ō > rymþ*, 'amplitude', cf. *rūm*, 'roomy, wide, ample'; *\*wargiþo > wyrgðu*, 'curse, condemnation, punishment wickedness'; cf. *wearg*, 'wicked, cursed, wretched; outlaw'). This is another typologically highly relevant feature: progressive isolation in the system of the language will favour a smaller functional load of such 'consonant combinations',[4] ousting in the long run to peripheral use and ultimately disallowing many of them.[5]

**3.1.1.1.** In this respect, an increased presence in the lexical system of the suffix -*nes* is highly significant. While the more ancient PG *\*-iþō* (attested, apart from Old English and Old High German, also in Gothic) moves away, through vowel deletion in syncopation and apocopation (> -*þ(u)*), from agglutination,[6] the younger, solely West Germanic -*nes* retains its agglutinative character. The syllabic structure of this 'heavy derivative suffix' (Campbell) allows smoother syncopation (cf. *þicce*, 'thick, dense' – *þicnes*, 'thickness, density') and easier distribution of consonant clusters between two neighbouring syllables (cf. *þweorh*, 'perverse' – *þweorhnes*, 'perversity'). With regard to the effects of i-mutation, it shows less phonological and morphological variation: of its two variants, it is -*nes*, disallowing i-mutation, which is West Saxon and therefore much more general in the corpus of Old English (in contrast to -*nis*, non-West Saxon and mutating the back vocalic element in the preceding syllable). Moreo-

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3    For an overall perspective of Old English word-formation, see Kastovsky (1992.397-400).

4    See Skalička (1964).

5    Though the overall situation with regard to an increased presence of consonant clusters in Old English seems to have been very dynamic and vacillating, numerous examples could be quoted to show how the language resisted the creation of consonant clusters: by frequent assimilations, by lack of syncopation (cf. e.g. Campbell 1959, § 589 (5), by loss of consonants in triple groups (cf. e.g. Campbell 1959, § 476), by developments of parasite vowels (cf. e.g. Campbell 1959, § 359), etc. Cf. also the incipient simplification of consonant clusters in the nouns in the Appendix: hlēow? > hlēo?; ierg?u > yrðu, yrcðu; myrgð > myrð; strengð > strenð.

6    The term is used here in accordance with the theory of the Prague School Typology; cf. Sgall (1995).

ver, the mutated forms that did exist seem to have been well integrated in the lexical subsystem of Old English abstract nouns by employing parallel non-mutated and mutated formations for semantic differentiation (cf. e.g. *hālnes*, 'wholeness' vs. *hælnes*, 'salvation'; *weargnes*, 'cruelty, hardship' vs. *wyrgnes*, 'abuse, cursing'). The continuing productivity of *-nes(s)* into the present is in keeping with the typological fact that agglutination plays a prominent role in Middle, Early Modern and Modern English word-formation.

**3.1.1.2.** The role of the productive subtype of the *-þ(u)/-t(u)*-formation in *-lēas* may well have been similar. Only five nouns of this pattern show, as a variant form, effects of i-mutation (*\*lēas-i?ō > līest* (later > *līst*; *list/lyst* in spelling): *gīemelēast/gīemelīest*, etc.). This insensitiveness to i-mutation indicates that, after vowel deletion and consonant assimilation in the *-iþo* suffix, the chain of two originally agglutinative suffixes (*\*lēas + iþo*) had perhaps been reinterpreted into one (*lēast*, *lēst* rather than *līest*; '-lessness'), perhaps on association with the superlative adjectival form *-lēast*, *læst*. This new nominal suffix would then be partially divorced from the corresponding adjectival form *-lēas*. These developments seem to be corroborated by the fact that a number of adjectives in *-lēas* and of nouns in *-lēast* lack a corresponding noun/adjective, cf. e.g. *wæpenlēas*, 'weaponless', *hlāfordlēas*, 'lordless', *mæglēas*, 'without relatives', *mægðleas*, 'not of noble birth', *trēowlēas*, 'faithless, treacherous'; *lārlēast*, 'want of instruction, ignorance', *hlāflēast*, 'want of bread', *werodlēst*, 'lack of fighters'. The reinterpretation could also be linked to the fact that nouns in *-lēast* seem to be in the sample distinctly associated with the language of Ælfric and so be, in contrast to the decreasing productivity of other *-þ(u)/-t(u)* formations, of late Old English origin.

**3.2.** The destinies of *-þ(u)/-t(u)* nouns in Middle English are beyond the scope of the present study but some of the lexicalisation process in the pattern is clear enough to describe briefly. There seems to be a continuing formal separation between the nouns and their formative adjectives, often with one and/or the other transferred into a marked, specialised and increasingly peripheral use (cf. OE *cū?*, 'known, certain' and *cyððu*, 'acquaintance, knowledge; friendship; kinship; kinsfolk, native land, etc.' vs. Modern English *couth* and *kith*; now dialectal *lew* 'sheltered from the wind' and *lewth* 'shelter' from OE *hlēow, hlēow?*; cf. also *slow* and *sloth* mentioned above). This process of formal separation corresponds with the general increase of dissociative vocabulary and word-formation in the language (Kastovsky) and its transition to typological isolation.[7] In new coinages, phonological and morphological conditioning gives way to lexical/semantic motivation (cf. e.g. *depth* (1393), modelled on *length* and *height*,[8] followed by *lowth* (1526) and *width* (1627); *coolth* (1547) coined

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[7] Cf. also Bohumil Trnka's concept of *etymological* (= *word*) *feeling* and its relationship to the analytical tendency in English (see e.g. his "Analysis and Synthesis in English", *English Studies* X, 1928.138-144).

[8] Cf. Old English *hīeh?(u)*, *hēah?u*; from the 13th century onwards, the final *-th* varied with *-t*, with the latter prevailing in literary language after 1500 but the former abundant in writing in the south of England till the 18th century.

after *warmth* (c. 1175, probably based on unrecorded OE *\*wærmðu, wiermðu*); *wealth* (c. 1250) modelled on *health* in the sense of 'well-being' (attested till 1652), etc.). On the whole, however, many more factors are likely to have intervened and the whole problem must also be seen in connection with issues of lexical mortality, borrowing and synonymic/homonymic clashes in (Early) Middle English.

## Appendix: Old English Deadjectival Nouns in -þ(u)/-t(u)
### (based on Clark Hall, J. R. 4th ed., with Supplement by H. D. Meritt 1960)

(†) – poetic use only          (= ) – marginal use in prose

*andgietlēast* ('want of understanding' > *andgietlēas*, 'foolish, senseless')

(†)   *ārlēast* ('disgraceful deed' > *ārlēas*, 'dishonourable, base')

(=)   *bearnlēst* ('childlessness' > *bearnlēas*, 'childless')

(=)   *behēf?, behēf?u* ('want, need' > *behēfe*, 'suitable, necessary')

*bierhtu, beorhtu, birihto* ('brightness, brilliance' > *beorht*, 'bright, brilliant, noble')

(†)   *cēn?u* ('boldness' > *cēne*, 'bold, fierce, powerful')

*cyðð, cyððu* ('acquaintance, knowledge; friendship; kinship; native land, home' > *cū?*, ('known, certain, familiar')

*earmðu, iermð, iermðu* ('misery, poverty, disease, crime' > *earm*, 'poor, wretched, miserable')

*ēa?mēttu* ('humility, weakness, impotency' > *ēa?mōd, ēa?mēde*, 'humble-minded, gentle, obedient, benevolent, friendly')

(†)   *fægð* ('imminent death' > *fæge*, 'doomed , fated')

*fæhð, fæhðe, fæhðu* ('hostility, violence, revenge, feud' > *fāh*, 'hostile, guilty, proscribed')

(=)   *frēondlēast* ('want of friends' > *frēondlēas*, 'friendless')

*frymð, frumð, frymðu* ('origin, beginning, foundation; created things' > *frum*, 'primal, original, first')

*fylð* ('filth, uncleaness, impurity' > *fūl*, 'foul, unclean, impure')

(=)   *gedrīh?* ('sobriety, gravity' > *gedrēoh, gedrēog*, 'fit, sober, serious')

*gelēaflēst, gelēaflyst* ('unbelief' > *gelēaflēas*, 'unbelieving')

(=)   *gemyndlest* ('madness' > *myndlēas*, 'foolish, senseless')

*(ge)sælð* ('hap, fortune; happiness, prosperity; blessing' > *sēl*, 'good, excellent; noble; happy, prosperous')

*(ge)synto* ('soundness, health; prosperity, welfare, salvation' > *gesund*, 'sound, safe; whole, uninjured, healthy, prosperous')

*gīemelēast, gīemelīest* ('carelessness, neglect' > *gīemelēas*, 'careless, negligent')

*hafenlēast* ('want, poverty' > *hafenlēas*, 'destitute, poor')

*hǣlð, hǣlðo* ('health, salvation, healing' > *hāl*, 'whole, entire'; 'uninjured, healthy, sound')

*hīeh?u, hīeh?; hēah?u* ('height, summit, heaven' > *hēah*, 'high, tall, lofty')

(=) *hlāflēast* ('want of bread' > *\*hlāflēas*, '(being) without bread')

*hlēow?, hlēo?* ('shelter, covering, warmth > *hlēow*, 'sheltered, warm, sunny')

(=) *hrīf?o* ('scurfiness' > *hrēof*, 'rough, scabby, leprous')

*hygelēast* ('heedlessness, folly' > *hygelēas*, 'thoughtless, foolish, rash')

*hyðð, hyð, hyððo* ('gain, advantage' > *gehyðe*, 'appropriate, convenient')

*iergð, iergðu, yrcðu, yrgð, yrgðo, yrhðu* ('remissness, sloth, cowardice' > *earg*, 'slothful, sluggish; cowardly; wretched; useless')

*lārlēast* ('want of instruction, ignorance' > *\*lārlēas*, 'ignorant')

*lǣðð, lǣððo* ('wrong, injury, hatred, malice' > *lā?*, 'hated, hateful, hostile, loathsome')

*lengðu* ('length' > *lang*, 'long')

*līflēast, līflǣst* ('loss of life, death' > *līflēas*, 'not endowed with life; inanimate; dead')

*mǣgenlēast, mǣglēast* ('weakness, feebleness; inability' > *mǣgenlēas*, 'powerless, feeble, helpless')

*mǣrð, mǣrðu, mēr?u, mār?u* ('glory, fame, famous exploit' > *mǣre*, 'famous, great, excellent')

*metelīest, metelēast* ('lack of food, starvation' > *metelēas*, 'without food')

*mōdlēast* ('want of courage, despondency' > *mōdlēas*, 'spiritless')

*myrgð, myrhð, myrð* ('mirth, joy, pleasure; sweetness (of sound)' > *myrge, myrig*, 'pleasing agreeable; sweet')

*ofermētto, ofermǣto, ofermēdu* ('pride' > *ofermōd*, 'proud; insolent', *ofermǣte*, 'excessive, immoderate')

*rēccelīest, rēcelīestu, rēcelēast* ('carelessness, negligence' > *rēcelēas*, 'careless, negligent')

(=) *rymð* ('amplitude' > *rūm*, 'roomy, wide, ample')

*scamlēast* ('impudence, immodesty' > *scamlēas*, 'impudent, immodest')

*slǣplēast* ('sleeplessness' > *slǣplēas*, 'sleepless')

*slǣwð* ('sloth, indolence' > *slāw, slǣw*, 'slow, sluggish, torpid, lazy')

*sorglēast* ('security' > *sorglēas*, 'free from sorrow or care')

*strengð, strengðu, strenð* ('strength, force, vigour; ability; firmness, fortitude; violence' > *strang*, 'powerful; able; firm; brave; violent')

*trēow?* ('truth', faith, fidelity, pledge, covenant' > *trēow(e)*, 'true, faithful, honest')

*trymð* ('strength, support; staff, prop' > *trum*, 'firm, fixed, secure, strong, sound')

(=)  *unlættu* ('sin' > *unlæd(e)*, 'poor, miserable, wretched, accursed, wicked')

*wæterlēast* ('want of water' > *wæterlēas*, 'waterless')

(=)  *weglēast, weglīst* ('trackless place, wilderness' > *weglēas*, 'out of the way, erroneous; without a road')

(†)  *werodlēst* ('lack of fighters' > *\*werodlēas*, 'having no fighters')

*wīflēast* ('lack of women' > *wīflēas*, 'unmarried')

*witlēast* ('folly, madness' > *witlēas*, 'foolish, mad')

*wræð(ð), wrā?ðo, wræð, wrēo?* ('wrath, anger, indignation' > *wrā?*, 'wroth, furious, angry, hostile; evil, cruel)

(†)  *wyrgðu* ('curse, condemnation, punishment, evil, wickedness') > *wearg*, 'wicked, cursed, wretched')

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