

Late West Saxon palatal diphthongization*

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1 Introduction

Palatal diphthongization is generally taken to be a diphthongization process, affecting stressed vowels when preceded by palatal consonants. In this study we deal with palatal diphthongization of front vowels, which resulted in <ea>, e.g. *sceal* (<**scael*) ‘shall’¹ and <ie>, e.g. *giefan* (<**gefān*) ‘give’ (Section 2). The digraph <ie>, which is virtually restricted to Early West Saxon (EWS), appears as <i> and <y> in Late West Saxon (LWS); thus *gīfan*/*gyfan*. It seems certain that <i> in *gīfan* represents /i/, but what is the phonetic value of <y> in *gyfan*? Although the monophthongization is distinct from palatal diphthongization, it may be worth considering the possible phonetic signification of <y> in the circumstances of palatal diphthongization. We will also provide evidence to suggest that palatal diphthongization of front vowels is a real sound change.

Then, we deal with palatal diphthongization of back vowels (Section 3). After /j/ we regularly find <eo> for /u(:)/ and /a/ + nasal, e.g. *gēong* ‘young’ *begeond* ‘beyond’. After /ʃ/ we find <ea> for /a(:)/ (including /a/ + nasal), e.g. *sceaðan* ‘criminal’, *sceamel* ‘stool’, <eo> for /o/, e.g. *sceolde* ‘he should’, and <eo, eu, u> for /u(:)/, e.g. *sceolon* ‘they shall’, *sceucca* ‘demon’, *sçufe* ‘shove’. It is difficult to determine whether they represent diphthongs, or the <e> is merely a diacritic indicating the palatal nature of preceding consonants. These problems will be discussed in terms of the difference in place of articulation between /j/ and /ʃ/. We will show that this accounts for the different phonological behaviors after /j/ and /ʃ/ in connection with the diphthongization.

2 Palatal diphthongization of front vowels

2.1 Palatal diphthongization of /æ(:)/ gave the digraph <ea> representing /æ(:)a/, see Campbell (1959 : §37), Kuhn (1961 : 531). Our examples are as follows : *ceaster* ‘city’, *forgeaf* ‘he forgave’, *onġēan* ‘against’, *ġeat* ‘gate’, *sceade* ‘shadow’, *sceal* ‘he shall’; *ġear* ‘year’, *ġeaton* ‘they got’, *sçēap* (*-e, -a, -um*) ‘sheep’, etc.² In addition to <ea> forms, there occur <e> forms, due to what is called “Late West-Saxon Smoothing” (Campbell 1959 : §312) : *ġere* ‘certainly’ (1x, <ea> 0x), *ġet* ‘gate’ (1x, <ea> 2x), *-ġēn* ‘against’ (1x, <ea> 29x), *sçēp* ‘sheep’ (1x, <ea> 9x). In *-ġēn*, the monophthongization is assumed to have taken place after loss of the following *ġ*, followed by compensatory lengthening, since we find *-ġēan* without smoothing : *-ġeaġn* > *-ġēan* > *-ġēn* rather than *-ġeaġn* > *-ġēġn* > *-ġēn*, see Sprockel (1965 : §1.1.10). It is to be noted that <ea> from breaking of /æ(:)/ and Gmc *au* was also subject to monophthongization; thus we find *exla* ‘shoulder’ (1x, <ea> 0x), *flox* ‘flax’ (1x, <ea> 0x), *geseh* ‘he saw’ (5x, <ea> 20x), *ofsleh* ‘kill!’ (1x, <ea> 0x), *þweh* ‘wash!’ (1x, <ea> 0x), *wexan* ‘grow’ (2x, <ea> 0x),

nēhstan ‘nearest’ (4x, <ea> 0x) ; *drēhniað* ‘they drain’ (1x, <ea> 0x), *ēge* ‘eye’ (2x, <ea> 24x), *hēh-* ‘high’ (3x, <ea> 4x), *þēh* ‘though’ (2x, <ea> 10x).

The examples listed above show that palatal diphthongization of /æ(:)/ took place in open syllables before a front vowel, e.g. *sēade*, *sēape*, or in closed syllables, e.g. *sēal*, *gēar*. But the change also took place in open syllables before a back vowel, as in *gēaton*, *sēapa*. The pret. pl. *gēaton* presupposes the existence of **gēaton*, in which restoration of *ā* failed to occur. It seems likely that the leveling out of /a:/ occurred in the gen. dat. pl. *sēapa*, *-um*, in which *ē* was diphthongized to *ēa* after *sē*.

The absence of diphthongization is found in *sēwðe* ‘sheath’, where *ē*, the *i*-umlaut of /a:/, remains. No occurrence of <ea> is found in *carað* ‘he cares’, *gafol* ‘tribute’, *gatu* ‘gates’ and the forms from the stem *gadr-* (e.g. *gadrian* ‘gather’), in all of which the stressed *a* is due to restoration of *a*, which prevented palatalization of the preceding consonant. The late Latin loanword *calic* ‘chalice’³ remains without diphthongization. By contrast, early Latin loans show the same developments as native forms, as in *ēaster*. We also find the absence of diphthongization in *togædere* (<**gaduri*), where *æ* is due to *i*-umlaut. It should be noted that the occurrence of palatal diphthongization is restricted to stressed syllables. Therefore <ea> spellings occurring in unstressed syllables do not represent diphthongs, as in *byrgeað* ‘they bury’, *cyrcean* ‘church’, *wīnbergean* ‘wine-berry’. This use of <e> as a diacritic often occurs before unstressed *o*, as in *mænigeo* ‘multitude’. But Hogg (1992 : §2.68) states that the diacritic <e> rarely occurs in many LWS mss, adding : “Thus in the *Homilies of Ælfric* the only regular use of a diacritic is in *biscep*, alongside *bisōp*, and the only other forms are ÆHom 6(H), 27(H) *wyrceað* ‘they make.’” The variation between our text and Ælfric perhaps needs further exploration.

2.2 Palatal diphthongization of /e(:)/ gave the digraph <ie>, which later became monophthongized to the sound represented by both <i> and <y> in LWS. Our examples are as follows : *gīfan* (24x)/*gyfan* (3x) ‘give’, *gildan* (2x)/*gyldan* (7x) ‘reward’, *gīt* (1x)/*gīt* (7x) ‘yet’, etc. In addition to these, we find *gescī* (1x)/*gescȳ* (1x) ‘shoes’, which shows that palatal diphthongization of /e:/, the *i*-umlaut of /o:/, took place ; cf. *sēwðe* without diphthongization, see above. Instead of *gīe* ‘ye’, we always find *gē*, presumably because of the development in unstressed syllables, see Campbell (1959 : §185).

As suggested by Quirk and Wrenn (1957 : §193), the phonetic representation of *gīfan* would be [jivan] and of *gīt* [ji:t]. The occurrence of both <i> and <y> in the same word would suggest that they are phonetically similar. Or should we regard <y> as an inverted spelling for <i>? To clarify the possible phonetic signification of <y> in the circumstances of palatal diphthongization, we will look at the occurrence of <y> for /i(:)/ from various sources : (1) Original /i/ tends to appear as <y> in various contexts. Hogg (1992 : §5.170) interprets <y> for /i/ as representing [ɪ], the laxing of /i/. It is highly probable that <y> in such weakly stressed forms as *hym* ‘him’, *hyt* ‘it’, *þys* ‘this’, *ys* ‘is’, *myd* ‘with’ is due to lack of stress, see Ladefoged (1993 : 84–88). Then, the occurrence of [ɪ] appears to have been extended to non-palatal contexts, as in *byddan* ‘pray’, *dryncan* ‘drink’, *nyman* ‘take’, *syttan* ‘sit’, and finally to palatal contexts, as in *dyht* ‘he arranged’, *fysc* ‘fish’, *nygen* ‘nine’, *tyccenu* ‘kids’, *tygel* ‘tile’. (2) /y(:)/ from *i*-um-

laut of /u(:)/ was unrounded to /i(:)/ in palatal contexts, as in *biċġan* (1x)/*byċġan* (2x) ‘buy’, *drihten* (13x)/*dryhten* (38x) ‘lord’, but was retained in other positions, as in *bytta* ‘cask’, *pytt* ‘hole’, *ymb* ‘round’, *brȳde* ‘bride’, *fȳr* ‘fire’. (3) <ie> due to *i*-umlaut of diphthongs was simplified to /i(:)/ in palatal contexts, as in *niht* (2x)/*nyht* (6x) ‘night’, *ġesihð* (3x)/*ġesyhð* (1x) ‘he sees’, *dīġle* (6x)/*dȳġle* (2x) ‘secret’, *ġīmað* (2x)/*ġȳmað* (1x) ‘heed!’, *onlīhte* (2x)/*onlȳhte* (1x) ‘lightened’, but to /y(:)/ in other positions, as in *yldra* ‘older’, *hyrde* ‘shepherd’, *hrȳman* ‘carry out’. (4) Palatal umlaut gave /i/, as in *cniht* (4x)/*cnyht* (72x) ‘boy’, *riht* (7x)/*ryht* (8x) ‘right’.

Gradon (1962 : 75) argues that [ɪ] occurred except in palatal contexts, where [i] was retained. But our examples show that /i(:)/ of whatever origin was subject to laxing to [ɪ(:)] usually spelled <y>, regardless of the context. The *y*-spellings for /i(:)/ cannot be taken to be inverted spellings for <i>, since /y(:)/ in non-palatal contexts still remains, i.e. general unrounding of /y(:)/ has not taken place (e.g. *bytta*, *yldra*, see above). Hogg (1992 : §5.57n.2) suggests that <y> in the circumstances of palatal diphthongization represents /y(:)/, but if the laxing of /i(:)/ occurred in *ġȳmað*, the same would be true of *ġȳfan*. Thus the phonetic representation of *ġȳfan* would be [jɪvan], and of *ġȳt* [jɪ : t]. We can say that [i(:)] and [ɪ(:)] are in free variation, since they involve the same word.

2.3 Campbell (1959 : §185) and Hogg (1992 : §§5.50, 5.53) hold the view that the change of <æ> to <ea> and <e> to <ie> after a palatal consonant indicates a genuine diphthongization. Stockwell and Barritt (1951), Lass and Anderson (1975), and Colman (1985) treat the digraphs as no more than orthographic, with <i> and <e> being purely diacritic, indicating the palatal nature of the preceding consonant. Accordingly, they claim that there was never any palatal diphthongization. There is, however, some evidence to support a diphthongal interpretation of <ie> and <ea> after a palatal consonant. Firstly, not only <ea> from breaking and from WGmc *au*, but <ea> from palatal diphthongization was subject to monophthongization to /e(:)/ – just as *ġeseah* > *ġeseh* and *ēaġe* > *ēġe*, so *ġeat* > *ġet*, *-ġēan* > *-ġēn*, *sċēap* > *sċēp*. These identical developments suggest that <ea> in the circumstances of palatal diphthongization represented a real diphthong. Secondly, <ie> both from palatal diphthongization of /e(:)/ and *i*-umlaut of diphthongs in palatal contexts can be assumed to have merged with original /i(:)/. Then, /i(:)/ of whatever origin was subject to laxing to [ɪ(:)] usually spelled <y>. If <ie> from *i*-umlaut of diphthongs represented a diphthong, it might be correct in claiming that <ie> from palatal diphthongization also represented a diphthong.⁴ Thus we accept a diphthongal interpretation of <ie> and <ea> in the circumstances of palatal diphthongization rather than a diacritical interpretation.

3 Palatal diphthongization of back vowels

3.1 We find <geo> spellings when /j/ is followed by /a/ + nasal and /u/.⁵ Our examples are as follows: *beġeondan* ‘beyond’ (2x) beside *beondan* (= *beġeondan*) (1x), *eond* (= *ġeond*)⁶ (4x); *ġeoc* ‘yoke’ (2x), *ġeonga* ‘young’ (2x). There occur <scea> for /ʃa(:)/ (including /ʃa/ + nasal), <sceo> for /ʃo/, and <sceu>, <scu> for /ʃu(:)/.⁷ Our examples are as follows: *asċeacað* ‘shake!’ (1x), *sċeaðan* ‘criminal’ (2x), *sċeamel* ‘stool’ (3x) beside *sċeamol* (1x), *ġesċeād*

‘account’ (1x), *sceān* ‘shined’ (2x) ; *sceolde* ‘he should’ (3x), *sceoldon* ‘they should’ (2x) ; *sceolon* ‘they shall’ (3x), *sceucca* ‘demon’ (1x), *sceūfe* ‘shove’ (1x), *onscununge* ‘abomination’ (1x). The above examples show the regular occurrence of <eo> after /j/ when followed by a back vowel. On the other hand, after /f/ we find <ea> for /a(:)/, <eo> for /o/, but <eo>, <eu> and <u> for /u(:)/.

3.2 The question is whether these digraphs represent real diphthongs or whether the <e> is merely a diacritic. There are at least some cases where the <e> could be regarded as purely a diacritic, indicating the palatal nature of the preceding consonant, as in *sceād* [ʃa:d], *sceān* [ʃa:n].⁸ But the whole situation appears not to have been so simple as would be expected. Hogg (1992 : §5.59) suggests that the general problem is not easily resolvable ; there are particular cases where a diphthongal development apparently has to be postulated, but other cases where this is, at least, less certain. In the former cases, i.e. where a diphthongal interpretation seems preferable, we would then assume a development of a rising diphthong rather than a falling diphthong, due to the insertion of a glide after /j/, e.g. *geong*, and also occasionally after /f/, e.g. *sceolon*. The phonetic processes underlying such diphthongization seem to be a natural development, but it is, in some cases, difficult to interpret the signification of these spellings.

There are principally three different arguments with regard to the diphthongization of back vowels after initial palatal consonants. Stockwell and Barritt (1951), Lass and Anderson (1975) and Colman (1985) are in agreement about the diacritic interpretation of <e> in <ge> and <sce> before back vowels. Accordingly, they claim that there was no diphthongization of back vowels as a sound change. In contrast, Campbell (1959 : §§171, 177, 179) holds the view in favor of the diphthongal interpretation, i.e. the development of a glide vowel and thus of a diphthong. He regards the sequence of <ge>/<sce> + back vowel, in most cases, as being rising diphthongs with stress on the second element. Brunner (1965 : §§90, 92) appears to consider all such diphthongs as rising. Finally, Hogg (1992 : §§5.59–70) accepts the reality of palatal diphthongization of back vowels after /j/, as in *geong*, where a nonsyllabic high front vowel developed between /j/ and /u/. But he denies that there occurred any sound change in the case of <sce> + back vowel, where <e> is purely a diacritic, with the exception of the sequence of <sce> + /u/, as in *sceolon*.

3.3 In fact, there are occurrences of <ea> and <eo> in which <e> can be merely a diacritic in unstressed syllables, see §2.1. But it seems doubtful whether the same is true of such stressed forms as *geong*, *geond*, where the use of <geo> spellings might be better taken to indicate the diphthongal developments of [j̥i̯u] for original [ju], and [j̥jo] for original [jā].

Spellings with <e> are also common after <sc>. It is well known that the digraph <sc> was used ambiguously, representing both /f/ (e.g. *wasce* ‘I wash’) and /sk/ (e.g. *tosca* ‘frog’), according to the contexts where it occurred, i.e. /f/ before front vowels, /sk/ before back vowels, see e.g. Campbell (1959 : §440). The <e> in the sequence of <sce> + back vowel would then be best treated as no more than a diacritic, indicating the palatal nature of <sc>. It is for this reason that <e> is frequently found before a back vowel. Thus we find <scea> for /ʃa/,

as in *asceacað*, *sceaðan*, *sceamel*, and <sceo> for /ʃo/, as in *sceolde*.

If at this point we temporarily ignore the cases involving /ʃ/ before /u(:)/, then what we find is that palatal diphthongization takes place after /j/, but not after /ʃ/. But this leaves us with a problem, namely how do we deal with the actual cases where /ʃ/ precedes /u(:)/? To repeat our earlier discussion, we have seen three views : (1) <e> is always a diacritic (e.g. Stockwell and Barritt) ; (2) <e> forms a genuine sound change (e.g. Campbell) ; (3) sometimes real, sometimes diacritic (Hogg). If the assumption we have just made is correct, then our view differs from all three, in that it claims that palatal diphthongization is genuine after /j/ and that after /ʃ/ all changes are purely diacritic.

3.4 It will be clear from the preceding discussion that the views for or against an interpretation of palatal diphthongization as a genuine sound change are finely balanced. What motivation, therefore, can there be for distinguishing between the behaviors after /j/ and the behaviors after /ʃ/ ?

We have argued above that <sce> was used before /a(:)/ and /o(:)/ only to indicate the palatal nature of the digraph <sc>, i.e. /ʃa(:)/ and /ʃo(:)/. If the same explanation were assigned to /ʃ/ before /u(:)/, then there would be no reason to assume different phonological behaviors of /ʃ/ before /u(:)/ from /ʃ/ before /a(:)/ and /o(:)/. Therefore, if no palatal diphthongization takes place in the case of /ʃa(:)/ and /ʃo(:)/, the same would be true of /ʃu(:)/.

After <sc> we find the three alternative spellings <u>, <eu> and <eo> for /u(:)/. There is no doubt that Old English scribes very often replaced <scu> by <sceu> for the reason given above, as in *sceucca* [ʃukka]. Then, <eu> spellings, because of the unusual digraph, were substituted for by <eo> spellings, the normal digraph in WS. Thus <sceo> was used for both /ʃo(:)/ and /ʃu(:)/. The <eo> in *sceolon* (= *sculon*) was probably borrowed from the pret. *sceolde* (= *scolde*) [ʃoldə].

Now in answer to the two paragraphs above question, we can say that there will be no need to accept identical phonological behaviors of /j/ and /ʃ/: *geong*, where a glide is expected to have developed between /j/ and /u/, and *sceucca*, where no glide has developed. It would therefore be wrong to regard <e> as a glide vowel in the latter example. Note that /ʃ/ is phonetically palato-alveolar, which can be taken to mean that its place of articulation is partly palatal, partly alveolar. If one makes /ʃ/ too palatal, it will sound like [ʃj] with the result that a glide develops after /ʃ/, see Jones (1957 : §735). The different phonological behaviors after /j/ and /ʃ/ probably rest on their different places of articulation.

4 Summary

We accept a diphthongal interpretation of <ea> and <ie> after initial palatal consonants, in the light of their later developments. Not only <ea> from breaking of /æ(:)/ and Gmc *au*, but <ea> from palatal diphthongization of /æ(:)/ was subject to monophthongization ; thus we find *seh*, *þēh* and *gere*. The monophthongization of <ie> from palatal diphthongization of /e(:)/ and *i*-umlaut of diphthongs in palatal contexts resulted in /i(:)/, spelled both <i> and <y> (e.g. *gīfan*/*gyfan* ; *niht*/*nyht*, *gīmað*/*gymað*). It may be difficult to interpret the signification of <y> in the circumstances of palatal diphthongization, but we could regard it as representing [I(:)].

Hence <y> in *gyfan* should be distinguished from <y> in *yldra*. As for palatal diphthongization of back vowels, it seems most probable that a glide developed between /j/ and a back vowel, as in *geong*, while <e> in such forms as *sceolde*, *sceolon* and *sceucca* is purely diacritic, indicating the palatal nature of the preceding <sc>. This is probably due to the difference in place of articulation between /j/ and /f/.

Footnotes

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- 1 The examples are taken from the West-Saxon version of the Gospel of St Matthew. The edition used for this study is that of Grünberg (1967).
- 2 Instead of *geafe*, pret. subj of *gifan* 'give', we find the hapax legomenon *gafe*, which is probably a scribal error.
- 3 There occur no palatalization, *i*-umlaut, or syncope in *calic*.
- 4 Colman (1985) interprets <ie> from *i*-umlaut as /i(:)y/.
- 5 We find no <gea> spellings for /ja/ + nasal.
- 6 Campbell (1959 : §303) states that the absence of <g> points to a tendency for initial *geo-*, *gea-* and *eo-*, *ea-* to become identical in sound.
- 7 Bosworth and Toller (1898) record : *sculon*, *sceolon* ; *scucca*, *sceucca*, *sceocca*, *scocca* ; *sceúfe*, *sceófe*, *sciúfe*.
- 8 The pret. sg. *sceān* would not deviate from the ablaut variation of strong class I verbs : *ī-ā-i-i*.

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