

Old English aet 'ate' and the the Preterite Plural Formation of the Strong Class V Verbs (In Honour of Professor Matsuji Tajima on the Occasion of his Retirement)

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Old English *ǣt* ‘ate’ and the Preterite Plural Formation of the Strong Class V Verbs

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1. This paper discusses some problems on the historical development of the lengthened-grade stem of the preterite plural formation of the Old English and other Germanic strong class V verbs, with special reference to the preterite tense formations of the verb **et-* ‘eat’.¹

As has traditionally been accepted, it is a plausible idea that the apparent lengthened-grade vocalism observable in the strong V preterite plural formation was an innovation which took place inside Germanic. Consider, for example, the following statement by Jasanoff (1994: 273): “The **-ē-* of the preterite plural in class IV was borrowed from class V, replacing **-u-* (**burum* < **(bhe)bh₁-mê*), which was analogically extended to the participle on the model of classes II and III. In class V itself the source of the **-ē-* in **gēbum* is unclear. An analogical origin has been suggested, starting, e.g., from forms like **sētum* ‘we sat’ (< **se-zd-*?) and/or **ētum* ‘we ate’ (< **h₁e-h₁d-* or **h₁ēd-*). The participle **gebanaz* shows the substitution, probably ancient, of *e*-grade for the inconvenient zero-grade **gb-*.”

2. In keeping with the tradition introduced above, Mottausch (2000: 54) has recently proposed the following relative chronology for the related innovation (my translation of the relevant parts from German: T. T.):

¹ PGmc. **etan* ‘eat’ as a strong class V verb shows an irregular preterite tense morphology. See the following observation by Wright and Wright (1925: 270): “*etan* ‘to eat’ and *fretan* (Goth. *fra-itan*, pret. sg. *frēt*) ‘devour’ had *ǣ* in the pret. sing. already in prim. Germanic, cp. Goth. *ēt*, O. Icel. OS *āt*, OHG *āz*.” See also Wright and Sayce (1954: p.144, note).

(1)

Stage 1: Introduction of the ‘morphological zero-grade’ *e* firstly into the participle and thereafter into the preterite non-singular formation (early PGmc.?)

Stage 2: Semantic approximation of the perfect to the aorist (the stative perfect > the preterital perfect)

Stage 3: Formal merger of the perfect with the aorist

(a) adoption of non-singular aorist endings

(b) abandonment of reduplication in general

Stage 4: Subsequently to Stage 3 (b), remodelling of **eât*: **eét* into the unitary **ǣt*

Stage 5: Adoption of **ǣt* in the non-singular formations

(a) in verbs with the structure *e + t*, in which case the same adoption occurs also in the singular formations though sporadically

(b) in all other verbs which later belong to Class V (yet no adoption of **ǣt* in the singular)

Stage 6: Adoption of *ǣ* in Class IV verbs

Stage 1 assumes that the vocalism *e* was realised in the participle and subsequently in the preterite non-singular category as new ‘morphological zero grade’, i. e. *CT* → *CeT*. Go. *gibans* ‘given’ may be regarded as directly reflecting this PGmc. innovation. According to Mottausch (2000: 53), PGmc. grammar acquired the rule ‘the vocalism of the preterite non-singular = the vocalism of the past participle’, because the original zero-grade **m̥t-* > **umt* and **l̥z-* > **ulz* as such would have affected the verb’s affiliation to the paradigm.

The assumptions provided for Stages 2 and 3 are long-standing theories which have so far been held plausible by many scholars (see references cited in Mottausch’s work), and I take them as read in the discussion below.

The scheme offered for Stage 4 may be understood as comprising one of the essential points of Mottausch’s contribution to this field of study. Mottausch (1994: 135) presumes that the original reduplicated perfect (or

preterite) **e-át* (sg.) vs. **e-ēt-um* (pl.), the stem (and not the reduplicative syllable) accented, was generalised into **ēt-* by way of the following process: the plural **e-ēt-um* was contracted into **ēt-um*, and this caused the reinterpretation of the singular **e-át* as **ē-at*, in which the sequence *ē+a* was uncommon and which was therefore replaced by **ēt-*.²

The innovations having taken place at Stage 5 was motivated, according to Mottausch (2000: 52), by the need to make a distinctive morphological difference between the present plural and the preterite plural construction. Since the original reduplicative syllable in the preterite had already been lost at this stage (with the exception of vowel-initial verbs such as **et-* 'eat'), the preterite plural formations of class V verbs would have been almost identical with the present plural formations, if the former had retained the previous 'morphological zero-grade' vocalism: e.g. pres. pl. **met-ame*, *-ep/ǣe*, *-anþ/ǣi* vs. preterite **met-um*, *-uþ/ǣ*, *-un*. Mottausch (2000: 45) rejects the view that the original perfect plural **se-zd-mē* 'we (have) sat' > **sǣt-* 'we sat' also provided a basis for the later strong class V preterite plural construction **CǣT-* (cf. Jasanoff's 1994 statement quoted in §1 above); he claims that pre-Gmc. **-Vzd-* changes into *-Vst-* but not into *-Ǫt-*, given the case of **nizdos* > **nistaz* (cf. OE *nest*) 'nest'. Regarding Stage 5 (a), Mottausch (2000: 53) takes OHG *-saaz* as a reflex of PGmc. **sǣt-* 'I sat', whose lengthened-grade stem was created by analogy with **ǣt-* 'I ate'.

It is not a new idea that, after the lengthened-grade preterite plural was established in strong class V verbs (on the model of **ēt-* 'ate'; Stage 5), the same shape was adopted in the class IV preterite plural as well (Stage 6); see Bammesberger (1986: p. 55 §7. 2. 4) and others.

² Mottausch (2000: 51) presents no new idea about the process of generalising **ēt-* (> **ǣt-*) throughout the preterite paradigm (i.e. both in the singular and the non-singular) and only refers to his previous work in 1994. As discussed in §3 below, Mottausch's (1994: 135) postulation of the original preterite plural **e-ēt-um* does not accord with the view offered in his work in 2000, where the reduplicated and 'morphological zero-grade' **e-ēt-um* is posited. Mottausch (1994: p.135 fn.33) leaves open the issue of the origin and development of the lengthened-grade vowel in **ǣt-* 'ate'.

3. As seen in §2 above, Mottausch (2000) claims that the innovation of the strong class V preterite plural formation started on the model of **ǣt-‘ate’*. For the question of whether a single instance can serve as the model of extensive innovation, he submits that a single or a few verbs, if they are used frequently, can trigger such a change. In order to validate this view, he (pp. 48ff.) cites eight independent instances with the inclusion of the case where the French 1 pl. present ending *-ons* developed from the Old French copula *estre* (*sons, somes*).

However, there are some problems in his explanation of the development of the lengthened vowel in the class V preterite plural form. Firstly, we may note that, in contrast to the case of the participle, there is no direct empirical evidence for his assumption that the ‘morphological zero-grade’ *e* had once been realised in the preterite plural configuration. Preterite-present verbs, if they are a more conservative category than strong verbs (cf. Tanaka 2005: Chapter 3), may give credence to the idea that the original ‘morphological zero-grade’ for the perfect non-singular was realised as **u* rather than **e*: **nugun* ‘they are sufficient’ (cf. OE *-nugon*).

Moreover, Mottausch’s scenario remains unconvincing as for his view that the original singular **e-at-* was altered into **e-et-*, no plausible motivation for which can be discovered. He maintains that the plural **e-ét-*, the reduplicating syllable plus the ‘morphological zero-grade’ stem,³ was contracted into **ĕt*, which caused the singular **e-ât-* to change into **ĕ-at-*. Obviously, this argument presupposes that the relevant contraction took place before the period of the Gmc. accent shift (into the fixed word-initial accent). Prior to the Gmc. accent shift, there was no motivation for a singular formation to adjust its accent position to that of the corresponding non-singular construction; e.g. the OE pair *wǣs* ‘was’ (sg.) vs. *wǣron* ‘were’ (pl.) indicates, given Verner’s Law, that the singular form had an accented stem and the plural an accented ending. Mottausch contends,

³ As mentioned in note 2 above, Mottausch (2000) has already given up his idea (1994) that the earlier shape of the PGmc. perfect or preterite plural was **e-ēt*, i. e. the reduplicative *e* with the lengthened-grade stem.

furthermore, that a resulting **ē-at-* was superseded by **ēt-* because the former was morphologically rare. He only asserts, but gives no independent evidence for, a morphological change due to the supposed rarity of the morph **ēa-* in the pre-accent-shift PGmc. era.

Last but not least, Mottausch follows the conventional view that the preterite plural morphology *CēT-* spread from Class V verbs to Class IV verbs. The question of why the Class IV preterite plural had to conform to the Class V pattern, instead of retaining its original *CuR-* shape, remains unaddressed.

4. The PIE durative-iterative Narten (or acrodynamic) verb* **h₁éd-* (sg.), *h₁éd-* (non-sg.)⁵ was surely inherited into the pre-Gmc. lexicon; yet, as far as the present tense formation is concerned, the original athematic shape was reanalysed according to the thematic conjugation pattern. In the time of thematisation, the PGmc. word formation rule must have had the rule, "the stem-vocalism of a thematic verb is to be the same throughout the present tense conjugation so that there may be no difference between the singular and the non-singular formations." On the model of many other ordinary strong verbs, the verb under discussion must have generalised the short *e* as the stem vowel (i.e. it generalised the originally non-singular short *e* into the singular stem). This innovation must have taken place at the latest in the PGmc. period.⁶ How, then, was the preterite paradigm

⁴ Although Narten (1968) herself has termed the relevant type of verbs 'proterodynamic', it is more usual today to call them 'acrodynamic' verbs; see also Tanaka (2005: p.96, note 27). I shall employ a simpler label 'Narten verb' in the discussion below.

⁵ This is evidenced by Hit. *ēdmi* 'I eat' vs. *adanzi* (← **ēdanzi*) 'they eat', Gk. *ἔδομεναι* 'to eat', OLith. *ēmi* 'I eat' and OCS *jamb* 'I eat'; see *LIV* (2001: 230). This Narten verb was derived, according to Kümmel (1998: 203f.) and *LIV* (2001: p. 230, note 3), from the original aorist root **h₁ed-* 'bite' by means of *ē*-infixation with the function of 'durativisation'; the primitive non-Narten telic verb as such was lost but left its trace in the participial noun **h₁d-ónt-* 'tooth' (cf. Kümmel 1998: 203; *LIV* 2001: p.230, note 2).

⁶ This innovation in conjunction with thematisation might perhaps have started in the late Proto-Inner-Indo-European (PIIE) period (in the sense of Jasanoff 2003), given Lat. *ēdo* 'I eat'. If this is true, Ved. *ādmi* 'I eat', in contrast to Lith. *ēmi*, should be interpreted as an innovated athematic root present formation (cf. *LIV* 2001: p.230 note 5).

created? I would like to propose that the preterite conjugation of the PGmc. verb **et-* ‘eat’ was essentially a merger of a perfect and an imperfect formation. In the PIE period, there was no morphological distinction between an athematic root aorist and an imperfect: a verbal root with a telic meaning (or Aktionsart) preferred to form a root plus the secondary endings (i.e. **-m, -s, -t*) as a root aorist whilst a root with an atelic meaning tended to construct the same formation as an imperfect: e.g. a root aorist **deh₃-m/s/t* ‘put, set’ vs. an imperfect **bher-m/s/t* ‘was/were carrying’. The PIE verb **h₁ēd-* ‘bite repeatedly’ or ‘keep biting’ > ‘eat’ was undoubtedly a(n) (iterative-)durative verb and therefore the pre-Gmc. lexicon must have taken over the athematic imperfect **h₁ēd-m/s/t* ‘was/were eating’ from the PIE lexis, where there was no (primary) aorist for this verb.

As for the singular forms, in my view, the original perfect stem **h₁e-h₁od-h₂e/th₂e/e*⁷ and the imperfect **h₁ēd-m/s/t* were conflated into **h₁ēd-h₂e/th₂e/e* > **ǣt-*, as a result of the adoption of the (Narten) imperfect stem and the perfect endings. The plural category, on the other hand, would have primarily been **h₁ēd-me/te/nt*; the mixture of the original Narten imperfect stem with the perfect endings (except for the third plural, where the original imperfect ending was retained).⁸ However,

⁷ LIV (2001 : 230) reconstructs this perfect form for the PIE period. Yet it is worth doubting availability of a canonical *o*-grade perfect from the root **h₁ed-* in the late P(I)IE period, given that no direct reflex of the supposed formation can be observed in the non-Gmc. data. As mentioned in 5 above, it seems more plausible to consider that the original aorist root **h₁ed-* ‘bite’ was lost to the iterative-durative Narten formation **h₁ēd-* ‘eat’, leaving the earlier aorist participle **h₁dont-* ‘(a) biting (one)’ > ‘tooth’ as a remnant of the original aorist root; any primary aorist or perfect formation (i.e. **h₁ed-m/s/t* ‘bit’ or **h₁e-h₁od-h₂e/th₂e/e* ‘have bitten’) had already been lost in the late P(I)IE period. Pre-Gmc. **h₁e-h₁od-h₂e/th₂e/e* or PGmc. **e-at-*, if any, must have been an independent Gmc. creation, just like the case of the perfect/preterite **bhe-bhor-h₂e/th₂e/e* or **be-bar-* ‘have borne’ > ‘bore’ (cf. Tanaka 2005: 80f. and 200). See also Mottausch (2000: p. 55 note 9).

⁸ With reference to the third plural preterite category, not only strong verbs but also preterite-present verbs retained a non-perfect ending; i.e. the root aorist ending for the strong verb and the present middle ending for the preterite-present. For details, see Tanaka (2005: Chapter 4).

soon after this creation, there took place a subsequent morphological alteration. It is reasonable to understand that the PGmc. verb system had the rule "the preterite stem of a strong verb is supposed to subsume a stem vocalism different from that of the present stem,"⁹ as also claimed by Mottausch (2000); see §2 above. The present plural stem had the short *e* vowel, inheriting the original Narten weak stem, which caused the preterite plural stem to acquire a vocalism other than *e*. In other words, the preterite plural stem inherited the long *ē* from its singular counterpart, so as to make a morphologically unmistakable distinction from the present stem.

Why, then, did only **ǣt-* inherit a lengthened-grade vowel in the preterite singular, among other strong class V verbs, which show the original *o*-grade vocalism in their preterite singular stems? I believe that this ought to be ascribed to its unique parental Narten morphology, in contrast to which other strong V verbs originally allowed non-Narten ablaut.¹⁰

Finally, we should address the question of why strong class IV verbs substituted *CēR-* (or *CǣR-*) for their earlier preterite non-singular shape *CuR-* on the model of the innovative *CēT-* (or *CǣT-*) preterite non-singular shape in strong class V verbs. The morphological reanalysis having taken place in the preterite non-singular of classes V and IV strong verbs would be best understood as a movement towards establishment of a newer ablaut pattern *CaT/R-* (sg.) vs. *CēT/R-* (non-sg.) instead of the older *CaT/R-* (sg.) vs. *CuT/R-* (non-sg.), presumably because the difference in (not only vowel quality but also) vowel quantity was more effective in morphological distinction between the preterite singular and non-singu-

⁹ This holds true with classes I–VI strong verbs; yet class VII strong verbs are exceptions. Proto-Germanic must have acquired the rule that a strong verb is to distinguish its present stem from its preterite stem by either ablaut or reduplication; see also Mottausch (2000: p. 52 §3.2.3.1 and p. 56 note 15).

¹⁰ Bammesberger (1986: p. 57 §7.4.4) proposes that PGmc. **ǣt-* reflects an augmented imperfect **e-ed-m/s/t* (the **e-* here being the augment but not reduplication). However, there is no unequivocal evidence that the Gmc. stock inherited an augmented imperfect formation from the proto-language (cf. Mottausch 2000: p.50 §3.2.1). It is reasonably assumed that in the parent language the augment **e-* was optionally prefixed to a preterite category; see Comrie (1998: 85) and others.

lar than the difference in vowel quality alone (i.e. **a* vs. **u*).¹¹ The older *CaT/R-* (sg.) vs. *CuT/R-* (non-sg.) contrast was preserved only in the present tense formation of classes V and IV preterite-present verbs as archaism.

5. We pointed out that Mottausch's account of the origin and development of the preterite singular **ēl-* remains unconvincing, and claimed that it is more likely for **ēl-* to have developed from the morphological conflation of an inherited Narten imperfect formation (yet without a Greco-Aryan style augment) with an innovative reduplicating perfect construction. Its unique lengthened-grade singular form should be ascribed to its original distinctive morphological characteristic as a Narten present/imperfect verb. In conclusion, I would like to present the following relative chronology instead of Mottauch's (i.e. (1) offered in §2 above)

(2):

Stage 1: Introduction of the 'morphological zero-grade' *e* firstly into the participle (i.e. *CT* → *CeT*); but not into the preterite non-

¹¹ This understanding would give a sufficient account of why strong class II verbs did not undergo a similar morphological remodelling. The preterite configuration of a strong class II verb was **CauT-* (sg.) vs. **CuT-* (non-sg.), where the contrast of the singular diphthong *au* with the non-singular monophthong *u* must have been satisfactorily conspicuous. Even if a morphological alteration analogous to classes IV and V verbs had been introduced into class II verbs, the resulting **CēuT-* would have phonologically developed into **CēuT-* (because of Osthoff's Law, $\bar{V}RC > \check{V}RC$, cf. Jasanoff 1994: 274; and others), which would have created the same stem vocalism as the present plural formation **CēuT-(a-)*; therefore, this option was in fact far from feasible. The replacement of the preterite non-sg. **CuT-* with **CēT-*, on the other hand, would have been completely impossible, for it would have deleted the *-u-* that belonged to the verbal root itself, having damaged the affiliation of the relevant formation to the rest of the paradigm. The older type of the opposition, *a* in the singular vs. *u* in the non-singular, appears to remain in the strong class III preterite paradigm, i.e. **CaRT-* (sg.) vs. **CuRT-* (non-sg.). Yet it was impossible to improve this pattern by inserting the lengthened **ē* vocalism, just like the case of class II verbs: if the non-singular form had been reinterpreted as **CēRT-*, Osthoff's Law would have changed it into **CēRT-*, which would have been unfavourably identical with the present (plural) construction **CēRT-(a-)*.

singular formation (in which case the innovation was presumably $CT \rightarrow CuT$, given an archaic preterite-present morphology such as **nugun* 'they are sufficient')

Stage 2: Semantic approximation of the perfect to the aorist/imperfect (the stative perfect > the preterital perfect)

Stage 3: Formal merger of the perfect with the aorist/imperfect

- (a) adoption of non-singular aorist/imperfect endings
- (b) abandonment of reduplication in general

Stage 4: Subsequently to Stage 3 (b), remodelling of the plural $*\bar{e}t-$ into $*\bar{e}t- > *\bar{e}t-$ (on the model of the preterite singular), in consequence of the word-formation rule "the preterite stem of a strong verb is supposed to subsume a stem vocalism different from that of the present stem."

Stage 5: Adoption of $*\bar{e}t$ in the non-singular formations

- (a) in verbs with the structure $e+t$, in which case also in the singular formations though sporadically
- (b) in all other verbs which later belong to Class V (yet no adoption of $*\bar{e}t$ in the singular)

Stage 6: Adoption of \bar{e} also in Class IV verbs, so as to replace the older ablaut variation $*CaR/T-$ (sg.) vs. $*CuR/T$ (non-sg.) with the newer, more distinct $*CaR/T-$ (sg.) vs. $*C\bar{e}R/T$ (non-sg.)

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