A Constraint on Vowel Deletion in Old English

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This oral report was concerned with Old English High Vowel Dele-
tion (henceforth, OE HVD), which has been one of the central topics
in Enlgish historical phonology for about hundred years.

In the first place, I pointed out that there are two sorts of
exceptions to the previous generalization on OE HVD in (1), which is
formulated in terms of heavy syllable (H) and light syllable (L).

    (1)   A high vowel is deleted when it is contained in an L which
         immediately follows one H or two L's.

The first kind of exceptions are such forms as tacnu (cf. tacen 'token')
and wolcnu (cf. wolcen 'ball'), both of which are the nominative and
accusative plurals of the TUNGOL-type nouns. The second kind of exceptions
are preterite and imperative forms of the HYNGRAN-type and GIERWAN-
type verbs. Typical examples are hyngrede (cf. hyngran 'to be hungry')
and gierede (cf. gierwan 'to dress'). In these cases, high vowels are
retained even though they are in a deletion environment. I argued that
as for these exceptions, a generalization can be made such that the
sequence -(C)C[+cons, +son]- is derived after the deletion of a high
vowel, and that a sonorant in sequence-final position is taken as
syllabic in accordance with the syllabification convention. ·If this
observation is correct, a question arises such as in (2).

    (2)   Why is it that a high vowel cannot be deleted if a syllabic
         consonant is derived by the application of OE HVD?

I claimed that problem (2) can be solved only by a universal
principle on the grounds that the results of the application of HVD to
exceptional cases do not necessarily violate lexical redundancy rules
in OE and that syllabic consonants are able to occur in both word-medial
and word-final positions. I also maintained that the relevant factor
in the retention of a high vowel in a deletion environment is the mar-
kedness value of a segment which is in the position of a peak. For ex-
ample, in *tacn (cf. tacnu) as a nominative and accusative plural,
after the deletion of the word-final /u/, the markedness value of the

peak in the word-final syllable becomes higher than that of a stage where the high vowel /u/ is retained. That is because a sonorant is a marked segment in a peak, while a vowel is the unmarked segment in the position.

On the basis of the above arguments, in order to solve problem (2), I proposed a constraint on vowel deletion as in (3), called the Principle of Markedness for Phonological Derivation.

(3) Principle of Markedness for Phonological Derivation
    Lexical rule application must produce a syllable stucture in which the markedness value of the peak is equal to or lower than that of the immediately preceding stage in a derivation.

I argued then that the proposal in this oral report substantiates the claim that the methodology adopted in current syntactic theory is to be applied to an analysis of a phonological phenomenon. That is, my proposal implies the shift from a rule-based analysis to a principle-based analysis in phonological investigation.

Finally, I claimed that principle (3) is supported by examples in Modern German such as those in (4). The retention of a schwa in each of the cases cannot be treated properly in terms of violation of lexical redundancy rules in the language. In fact, its retention must be handled in exactly the same way as that of a high vowel in OE, suggesting that the proposed principle is not implausible.

(4) a. atme/*atm (imp. of atmen 'to breathe')
    b. ebne/*ebn (imp. of eben 'to level')
    c. öffne/*öffn (imp. of öffnen 'to open')