

This paper discusses the loss of initial consonant clusters (#CC- > #C-) in words like \*hnece, ‘neck’, \*hlæpan, ‘leap’, or \*hræfn, ‘raven’ in the historical evolution of English. With the exception of /hw-/, which survives in contemporary varieties (and thus provides important clues as to the factors that condition – and may have conditioned – variation with regard to initial clusters in earlier English), \*/hn-/, \*/hl-/ and \*/hr-/ were lost between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. A corpus-based study (based on the Helsinki corpus; Kytö 1993) traces and dates these changes in Early Middle English more precisely. The paper argues that the reduction of these clusters (which effectively resulted in a merger with /n/, /r/, and /l/) is both a language-internal and an externally-adduced process, in that an ongoing change in English was catalysed through language contact with Norman French. Internal variation is thus more prone to permanent change when external events co-occur and reinforce it. This is shown by the analysis of changing spelling conventions in Old and Early Middle English texts, which (1) attests to the chronological development of this change, and (2) indicates that the process at hand adhered to common and persistent patterns of language change (proceeding in similar fashion to other linguistic innovations, namely in an S-curve trajectory). This claim is supported by similar developments that lead to the levelling-out of /hw-/ in contact scenarios that involved inputs with both /hw-/ and /w-/ (exemplified by New Zealand; Bauer 1986, Schreier et al. 2003), and from cases where contact between English, Dutch and French affected the rate and trajectory of an ongoing morphosyntactic change in East Anglian English (Trudgill 1998).

#### References:

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