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Linguistic change and metre: the demise of adjectival inflections and the scansion of ‘high’ and ‘sly’ in Chaucer, Gower and Hoccleve

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This article examines the inflectional system of adjectives in Chaucer, Gower and Hoccleve, with particular reference to the adjectives ‘high’ and ‘sly’. Since these poets were careful metrists, scansion allows us to determine the syllabic status of adjectives in their verse. While in Chaucer and Gower, the grammatical system for the inflection of monosyllabic adjectives (final *-e* for weak and plural adjectives) is generally observed, there is good evidence to show that the system was breaking down in the case of ‘high’ and ‘sly’, which frequently appear without inflection in weak position. The article also shows that in Hoccleve’s poetry inflectional *-e* had disappeared altogether in these adjectives, except at line ending. Editorial emendations that depend on this inflection are therefore incorrect. The explanation for the irregular behaviour of ‘high’ and ‘sly’ is probably related to the vulnerability of schwa after front vowels.

Keywords: Chaucer, Gower, Hoccleve, final *-e*, pentameter, weak adjectives

1 Introduction

For anyone interested in how language change unfolded in a period for which we possess only written evidence, metered language offers certain advantages that prose does not. One advantage in particular will concern us here. We can often tell from syllable-counted poetry whether a word was to be realised, say, as a monosyllable or as a disyllable. The poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower and Thomas Hoccleve is especially valuable in this regard, since all three took great care with their metre as well as their rhymes. Since evidence based on scansion of their metre is crucial to the argument that follows, I should briefly recapitulate the basic metrical ground rules governing their verse. These should not be controversial. Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* is in iambic tetrameter with the exception of the concluding poem *In Praise of Peace*, which is in iambic pentameter (Duffell 2008: 89–92). Gower strictly observed the principle that his tetrameter lines must have eight syllables (or nine if the line ends in an unstressed syllable) and his pentameter lines ten (or eleven, if the final syllable is unstressed). Chaucer also wrote in iambic tetrameter in his earliest poems, before shifting to iambic pentameter (Minkova 2009a; Putter 2019). Unlike Gower, however, Chaucer occasionally dropped the first unstressed syllable of the line, that is, he

tolerated headless lines. Finally, Thomas Hoccleve, who wrote a generation after Chaucer and Gower, wrote decasyllables, but for him the syllable count actually mattered more than the regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables (Jefferson 1987; Myklebust 2012: 575–646). Not all of Hoccleve's lines can be made to scan as iambic pentameters, but their syllable count is invariably fixed at ten syllables (or eleven in lines with feminine endings).

Just as these three poets cared about the syllable count, so they cared about rhyme: final vowels and consonants needed to be identical. This aspect of verse provides historians of the language with another heuristic advantage: rhymes sometimes provide insight into the phonology of words in rhyme position.

With these broader considerations and metrical parameters in mind, I turn now to the adjectives 'high' and 'sly', which give rise to all kinds of interesting complications in the language of Chaucer, Gower and Hoccleve. In all three of these poets these adjectives behave in unexpected ways, repeatedly offending against the inflectional rules that govern other monosyllabic adjectives in their verse. Because those rules were a little different for Hoccleve, who was writing in the fifteenth century, I leave Hoccleve for later and will begin with Chaucer and Gower.

2 Adjectival inflection and the problem of 'high' and 'sly' in Chaucer and Gower

The unruly behaviour of the adjectives 'high' and 'sly' in Chaucer and Gower must be seen in the context of the grammatical system for adjectival inflection that Chaucer and Gower inherited from earlier writers. For monosyllabic adjectives the system was as follows.¹ In attributive position a monosyllabic adjective took an inflectional final *-e* when the noun it modified was plural (*smalē fowles*) or when it was definite, that is, after a definite article, demonstrative or possessive pronoun or noun (*this oldē wyf*, *my levē brother*, *the oldē daunce*) and in other instances where the noun is *de facto* definite, as in the case of vocatives and names (*grete God*; *O godē sir*). In other contexts, when the noun was singular and indefinite, monosyllabic adjectives were uninflected, as in *a hard thyng*. The indefinite adjective is called 'strong' and the definite adjective 'weak' (Burnley 1983: 13–15).

In predicative position, the distinction between singular and plural was less systematic: plurals adjectives here often have final *-e* but sometimes they do not (Ten Brink 1901: 156–7). This provided poets with useful options when they needed to meet the demands of rhyme and metre. So in *House of Fame*, 645, Chaucer wrote 'Of Loves folk if they be gladē', rhyming with *madē* (3rd ps. pret.), but in *The Clerk's Tale*, IV, 375, 'Of which these ladyes werē nat right glad', uninflected *glad* is confirmed not only by the spelling of the best manuscripts (Ellesmere and Hengwrt) but also by the monosyllabic status of its rhyme fellow, 'she was *clad*', and its vowel quality (short *a*,

¹ By referring to monosyllabic adjectives I mean to exclude that class of adjectives that had organic final *-e*, a class consisting mainly of reflexes of Old English (OE) adjectives with nominative *-e* (*grene*, *wilde*, *blithe*, etc.) and some adjectives with etymological *-e* in Old French (*pure*, *riche*, etc.). See further below.

not long *a*).² Gower exploited the same ‘phonology of opportunity’, to borrow a phrase from Minkova (2009b: 78). Compare ‘She made hem in the pettes wete’ (*Confessio Amantis*, V, 4087, rhyming with ‘hetë’ (< OE *hete*, heat), with ‘Hire chekes ben with teres wet’ (I, 1680), rhyming with ‘set’ (p.p.).³

Chaucer and Gower, and indeed their earliest scribes, were remarkably regular in operating this system, and final *-e* was an indispensable instrument in their metrical toolkit. The iambic rhythm of their verse would be wrecked without this variable, and their mastery of it deserves respect. For instance, when Chaucer wrote ‘Al ful of freschë floures, whyte and reedë’ (*General Prologue*, I, 90), inflectional *-e*’s (here for plural adjective) provided him with the metrically required offbeat after the second beat and with the sounded schwa needed for rhyme (with *meedë* ‘meadow’),⁴ and when metre requires its suppression Chaucer had to put it in eliding position (‘whyte and’). Where Chaucer and Gower have syllabic *-e* after monosyllabic adjectives it is regularly to be explained by the inflectional rules just described, as in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, I, 859, ‘Whilom as oldë stories tellen us’ (plural adjective) and I, 871, ‘And eek hir yongë suster Emelye’ (weak adjective).

Violations of these principles, whether by omission of a historically justified final *-e* or by its addition where metre requires it but grammar does not justify it, occur only rarely. As far as omissions are concerned, Macaulay concluded that ‘exceptions are few’ (1900–1: cx) and found only 13 instances in the whole of Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*.⁵ As noted by Minkova (1990: 317; 1991: 174), most of these involve adjectives in eliding position such as ‘His *full* answe’ (I, 1629) and ‘hire *good* atast’, where any final *-e* would not have been pronounced and may for that reason not have been written by the scribe. Setting aside adjectives in eliding position, and leaving cases of ‘sly’ and ‘high’ for later, we are left with just three anomalies: ‘here wrong condicion’ (II, 295), ‘my *riht* hond’ (III, 300), and ‘the *trew* man’ (III, 2346). The last of these is analysable as the compound *trueman* (see *OED*) and ‘my *riht* hond’ also becomes less anomalous than might first appear when we read in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, I, 2953, ‘Upon the left hand with a loud shoutynge’. The likely explanation for the loss of inflectional *-e* in the phrase ‘the left/right hand’ is that in this frame it is the adjective (being defining) rather than the noun that is stressed, so a final *-e* would have been elided.

As far as the ungrammatical addition of final *-e* is concerned, this phenomenon is more apparent than real. In some set phrases of duration (e.g. *longë tyme agon*, *Troilus and*

² Quotations from Chaucer are from Benson (1987). Readings from Ellesmere (San Marino, California, Huntington Library, EL 26 C 9) and Hengwrt (Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 392D) have been taken from F. J. Furnivall’s transcription (Furnivall 1869–77), accessible online at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/AGZ8232.0001.001> (Ellesmere) and <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/AGZ8233.0001.001> (Hengwrt).

³ Quotations from Gower are from Macaulay (1900–1).

⁴ The word is invariably disyllabic in Chaucer, the final *-e* being not etymological, but influenced by the variant *medewe*, based on the oblique forms of the OE etymon (see *OED* s.v. *meadow*).

⁵ This number does not include Romance adjectives where ‘the want of inflexion is more frequent in proportion to the whole number of instances, e.g. “the *vein* honour”, ProL. 221, “the *fals* emperour”, ProL. 739, “Hire *clos* Envie”, ii. 684, &c.’ (Macaulay 1900–1: cxi). It should be noted, however, that in these examples an inflectional *-e* would have been in eliding position. It may not have been written by the scribe because it was not pronounced.

Criseyde, V, 1325), the final *-e* can be explained as a petrified dative. Some of the cases noted by Minkova in her foundational study of the loss of final *-e* (1991) are also readily explicable. In her corpus of late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century poetry, including Gower and Chaucer, she observed two classes of exceptions in an otherwise regular system. In Gower, '[t]he only exceptions to the expected behaviour are syllabic final *-e*'s within the frame Prep. + Adj. + Noun: *of pure dette* (1501), *for pure dredde*, (4976), *under guile faith* (2049), *in strange place* (4791), where the meter requires them to be pronounced' (Minkova 1991: 172). In the Sloane songs and carols, 'the violations are most frequent in the direction of ungrammatical addition of an *-e*, which must be syllabic, after the indefinite article: *a newe ger* (2), *a clene maydyn* (2), *a powre man*, cf. *a riche feste* (Gower, CA: ii.4702)'. If such forms are excluded, the picture is more rigid' (Minkova 1991: 175). Such forms, and those in the examples from Gower, should certainly be excluded, because the adjectives in question are in fact historically disyllabic, with final *-e*'s that are organic, justified by etymology (OF *pure* (fem.); *guile*, *estrange*, OE *niwe*, *clæne*, OF *povre*, OE *rice* / OF *riche*). It is important not to confuse such adjectives with organic *-e* with monosyllabic adjectives where addition of final *-e* depended on grammatical context. For the former were *regularly disyllabic in all contexts* (weak, strong, plural, singular), except of course in eliding position, that is, before vowels and unstressed *h-*.

We should also set aside another possible exception noted by Ten Brink: 'it is doubtful whether, beside *hy* (*high*), *hye* also occurs in an inflected form' (1901: 156). The doubt is raised by cases such as *The Miller's Tale*, I, 3384, 'He pleyeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye', where disyllabic *hye* may look like an adjective but is actually an adverb ('high up'). David Burnley (1983: 37–8) cleared up the confusion, and it is now up to editors to follow suit. The misleading footgloss offered in *The Riverside Chaucer*, '**scaffold hye**: stage' (Benson 1987: 71), shows there is still work to be done here.

There was a time when some Chaucerians found this grammatical system oppressive and rebelled against it by arguing that final *-e* was unregulated or that a poet such as Chaucer should be at liberty to do as he pleased. However, Michael Samuels struck a fatal blow to this argument in his essay on Chaucerian final-*e* (Samuels 1988). It is worth citing a paragraph from that essay, because it takes us directly to adjectival *high* in Chaucer's works:

One may suspect that the critics of the traditional view often do not appreciate the full significance of the linguistic details they discuss. [Mr Robinson] proposes to replace the grammatical criterion for *-e* in the adjective by a rhetorical one. He had read through the occurrences of *hy(e)*, *heigh* 'high' in the Tatlock-Kennedy *Concordance*, and quotes the following cases of a rhetorical, not grammatical distinction:

- 1) This goddesse on an hert ful hye seet
- 2) Myn is the ruine of the hye halles
- 3) To telle his hye royal magestee
His hye pride, his werkes venymus
- 4) And short and quyck and ful of hy sentence
- 5) Now looketh, is nat that an heigh folye

But if the distribution of *-e* is rhetorical, it is by no means obvious that it is required in (1) or (2), whereas it is expected in (4) and (5). The distinction is grammatical, and if Mr Robinson cannot see that (1) demands an adverb, (2) and (3) a weak adjective but (4) and (5) a strong adjective, then there is no common ground for discussion. (Samuels 1988: 9–10)

The grammatical distinctions are crucial and Samuels rightly pointed out that it is grammar and not ‘rhetoric’ (whatever Robinson meant by that) that explains the system. Robinson’s woolly thinking is painfully exposed in his observation that ‘the *-e* in *hye* is usually pronounced in the proverbial phrase “*hye* God” for which the explanation is itself obviously rhetorical’ (Robinson 1971: 156). The correct explanation is that God is a name and so any adjective preceding it is weak.

I have no wish to undermine Samuels’ general position, but I do want to point out that he was unwise to pick ‘high’ as his example. In the selection of lines he cited, the grammatical explanation works perfectly well, but there are numerous exceptions. Below are some examples from *The Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde* and the poem *Truth*. Citations are from *The Riverside Chaucer* (Benson 1987), but, of course, it is the manuscripts that matter. In the case of *The Canterbury Tales*, the base manuscript is Ellesmere, and I have listed any relevant variant readings from Hengwrt (transcribed in Furnivall 1869–77). In the case of *Troilus*, the base manuscript is Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 61, and I have given variants from the Campsall manuscript, New York, Morgan Library, MS M. 817 (transcribed in Furnivall 1888). In the case of *Truth*, the base manuscript is London, British Library, MS Add. 10340, and I have provided the variant reading from Ellesmere.⁶ Where no variants are listed it may be assumed that the above-mentioned manuscripts are in agreement.

- (1) (a) For his science and for his heigh renoun (*General Prologue*, I, 316)
- (b) The lord hath of his heih discreiou (*Knight’s Tale*, I, 2537; Hengwrt *heighe*)
- (c) As wel to shewen his heighe magnificence (*Man of Law’s Tale*, II, 1000, with syncope in *shewen*)
- (d) Of thyne auncestres, for hire heigh bountee (*Wife of Bath’s Tale*, III, 1160; Hengwrt *hye*)
- (e) Hir hye malice? She is a shrewe at al (*Merchant’s Prologue*, IV, 1222, with second-syllable stress in *malice*)
- (f) Oother than this, God of his hygh myracle (*Merchant’s Tale*, IV, 1660; Hengwrt *hye*)
- (g) I yow assoile by myn heigh power (*Pardoner’s Tale*, VI, 913, rhyming with *cleer*)
- (h) Was dryven out of his hye prosperitee (*Monk’s Tale*, VII, 2013, with syncope in *dryven*; Hengwrt *hey*)
- (i) What for his strengthe and for his heigh bountee (*Monk’s Tale*, VII, 2114)
- (j) He wan by strengthe, or for his hye renoun (*Monk’s Tale*, VII, 2635; Hengwrt omits)

⁶ Transcribed from the digitised images at https://dpg.lib.berkeley.edu/webdb/dsheh/heh_br?CallNumber=El+26+C+9

- (k) Wheras at leiser al this heighe matere (*Troilus and Criseyde*, III, 516, rhyming with *yfere*; Campsall *heigh*)
- (l) Right thorgh the vertu of youre heigh servyse (*Troilus and Criseyde*, III, 1288; Campsall *heighe*)
- (m) Hire heigh compleynte, and therfore ich it pace (*Troilus and Criseyde*, IV, 805; Campsall *heyghe*)
- (n) Hold the heye wey and lat thy gost thee lede (*Truth* 20; Ellesmere, fol. viii^v *hye*)

The last of these examples arguably deserves separate treatment, because ‘highway’ could be considered as a compound, with the earliest attestation in *OED* (s.v. *highway*, *n.*) dated to 1257: ‘*Usque ad quandam altam viam que vulgariter vocatur “the Heywey”*’. However, Chaucer does not treat ‘high’ as a compound element on the other occasion ‘high way’ occurs in his work, *Knight’s Tale*, I, 898, ‘Where that ther kneled in the heighē weye’, and the metre of the line in *Truth* does not suggest a compound either. Where Chaucer departs from strict iambics, the line either has initial inversion or (less commonly) is headless (Putter 2017), so the likely scansion is ‘Hóld the heye wáy’, with monosyllabic ‘heye’ and with nuclear stress on the noun rather than compound stress on the adjectival element.

It is probable therefore that in all these examples we are dealing with adjectives which are weak, and which, for all the reasons explained by Samuels, should be expected to take a final *-e*. In the spelling of the scribes, that *-e* is sometimes written and sometimes not. However, metrical scansion of all these lines shows that, regardless of whether final *-e* was written or not, it is not to be pronounced. Admittedly, the word ‘high’ is very common in Chaucer, and many more lines could be cited where ‘high’ behaves exactly as one might expect: it is monosyllabic when it is strong and singular, disyllabic when it is plural, weak, or when it is the adverb rather than the adjective. However, the exceptions I have quoted are too numerous to ignore (and more could have been cited: *Monk’s Tale*, VII, 2635, *Clerk’s Tale*, IV, 991, etc.). They show that *-e* in ‘high’ had become optional, at least in the weak inflection. In plurals, I have only found disyllabic and inflected *hye*.

Adverbial ‘high’ seems to have retained final *-e* consistently in Chaucer. The only possible exception occurs in the *House of Fame*, in the couplet ‘That blew so hydously and hye / That hyt ne left[e] not a skye’ (1599–1600). Here the final *-e* was certainly written by the scribes of the manuscripts, but the issue is that *hye* rhymes with *skye* (< ON *ský*), which had no etymological final *-e*. Hard evidence that the word could be disyllabic in Middle English is lacking: it is monosyllabic on the only other occasion Chaucer uses it (*under the sky* : *faste by*, *Squire’s Tale*, V, 503–4) and Gower, who uses it more frequently, exclusively has monosyllabic *sky*. But there is some reason to think, as did Ruth McJimsey (1942: 104), that the word had a disyllabic variant, because in *Genesis and Exodus* (c. 1250, MS c. 1325), which was composed in remarkably regular iambic tetrameter, there are two forms, *skie* (monosyllabic: 3294, 3643) and *skige* (3255), the latter apparently disyllabic, ‘Biforen hem fleg an skigē brig’ (Arngart 1968: 17).

The variability of final *-e* in adjectival ‘high’ demands attention and explanation. Was Robinson after all right to conclude that syllabic final *-e* was for Chaucer a matter of ‘rhetoric’ or metrical convenience? I doubt it. The grammatical principles governing adjectival inflections are generally applicable, but ‘high’ is a hard case, and hard cases make bad law. A comparison with Gower will clarify the point. Of all Middle English poets, his metre is the most regular, and certainly stricter than Chaucer’s, whose iambic verse allowed for licences that Gower did not countenance (Putter 2017). His syllabic final *-e* in adjectives strictly follows grammar, and the rules that apply to monosyllabic adjectives in Chaucer also apply to Gower. The scribes of the Fairfax manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian, MS Fairfax 3, the base text of Macauley’s edition of the first recension) and the Stafford manuscript (Huntington Library MS EL 26 A 17, the base-text for Macauley’s edition of the second recension) knew the system and applied it regularly. As Macauley showed (1900–1: cx–cxiii), and as Smith (1985) and Minkova (1991) confirmed, Gower and his earliest scribes rarely deviated from the grammatical system of final *-e*. This makes the irregular behaviour of *high* so remarkable. In these manuscripts this adjective normally appears as *hih* or *hyh* when uninflected and as *hihe* or *hyhe* when inflected (Smith 1985: I, 42, 45), but again there are notable exceptions:

- (2) (a) The king knowende his hih lignage (IV, 2064; Fairfax)
 (b) The hih prouesse which thei ladden (V, 6426; Stafford)
 (c) Betwen hire hih astat and me (V, 6597 Fairfax)

Example (2c) is rather ambiguous, as any pronounced final *-e* in the adjective would be in eliding position and would thus not be pronounced, and that fact that may have led the scribe not to write it, though contrast the spelling at II, 2095 (Fairfax), ‘His hihe astat, that wot he noght’. The first two examples, however, are unambiguous: although the adjective is weak, final *-e* would be in non-eliding position, that final *-e* was assumed absent both by the scribe and by Gower the poet, for the metre of the line precludes it.

How to explain these irregularities? Macauley conjectured that ‘his hih lignage’ (IV, 2064) may have been influenced by the idiom ‘of hih lignage’, but an explanation that works for just a single occurrence is obviously inadequate when there are other examples and when exactly the same kinds of irregularities are found in Chaucer. Moreover, in Gower as in Chaucer, this same pattern applies to an adjective that is and was phonologically comparable: the adjective ‘sly’. We will come to the phonology shortly, but for now consider the following cases:

- (3) (a) Of anglis and of slye reflexiouns (*Squire’s Tale*, V, 230, rhyming with *by composiciouns*;
 Hengwrt *sly*)
 (b) And stonden with his slyh compas (*Confessio Amantis*, II, 2341; Fairfax MS)

The first *sly*, being plural, should have final *-e*, but metre indicates that it was not pronounced and Hengwrt omits it; the second *sly*, being weak, should also have it, but neither the scribe nor Gower’s metre assumed it.

Our irregularities have just multiplied, and Macauley's sticking plaster is not going to cover the area. Before advancing my own theory, I should mention one explanation for these irregularities that has already been suggested. This explanation involves the disappearance of the final consonant in 'sly' and 'high'. In Early Middle English, the final palatal fricative in these words was generally preserved. The spelling of Chaucer manuscripts, however, reveals a language in flux. According to Wild 1915 (still the best study of the language of Chaucer and his scribes), Chaucer kept the final fricative, except in voiced surroundings. This is the pattern that was inherited from Old English (Wright 1923: 171). So in *The Wanderer*, masculine nominative singular *heah* (98) alternates with accusative *heanne* (82) (Baker 2003). Chaucer probably pronounced the strong singular as /*heiç*/ or /*hiç*/ and the inflected form as /*hiə*/. Rhyme evidence confirms this: the inflected form is allowed to rhyme with words like *maistrye*, but the uninflected forms rhyme only with words that also ended historically in a palatal fricative, such as *sigh* ('saw'). The usual forms in Chaucer's language were thus *heigh* (uninflected) and *hye* (inflected). We know, however, that the final fricative was disappearing from the language. Donka Minkova (2006) provides evidence from spellings and rhyme that show this development had started in the fourteenth century. The spellings in Gower, <hih> and <hihe>, might already suggest lenition of the final fricative, but it is in Chaucer that we find, admittedly in an exceptional case, the rhyming of 'sly' with the suffix *-ly*:

Telle how he dooth, I pray thee hertely,
Syn that he is so crafty and so sly. (*Canon Yeoman's Prologue*, VIII, 655)

Rhymes of this kind can be also be found in Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Chronicle* (Sullens 1996), 'No man may of þe affye, / Þou turnes hym down þat er was heye' (MS L, 2451–2), and in *Kyng Alisaunder* (probably composed in London earlier in the fourteenth century), which rhymes *slygh* with *annye* (10) (Ikegami 1984: 16). In Gower, such rhymes are not attested (*hih* rhymes only with *sih*, *nih*, *slih*, etc.).

The situation that might have resulted from the loss of the fricative in 'high' is described as follows by David Burnley (1982: 173):

Consequently two systems were available to contemporary speakers of London English:

	<i>Sing.</i>	<i>Plural</i>
(a)	heigh	hye
(b)	hy	hye

In system (a) the contrast between singular and plural is likely to have been perceived as one of form, perhaps supported by the inflectional ending; in system (b) it depended purely upon the pronunciation of the inflectional *-e*. It is, however, unlikely that speakers who encountered both systems could keep them rigorously apart, since the plurals are identical in forms. In system (a) the importance of final *-e* is likely to have been diminished by concentration on the formal contrast.

Burnley thus argues that, because in Chaucer's established usage the distinction between inflected and uninflected 'high' was supported by a different form of the root syllable, the loss of that difference following the infiltration of the new form (*hy*) caused that distinction to collapse altogether. The fact that *sly* shows the same instability as *high* is not something that Burnley remarked upon, but, of course, the same explanation might apply, since the loss of the palatal fricative affected this word in the same way and perhaps even a little earlier. Certainly, spellings in Ellesmere and Hengwrt are more conservative for 'heigh' than for 'sleigh'. On the eight occasions that 'sly' occurs in the uninflected form in *The Canterbury Tales* it is only once spelt with <gh> in Ellesmere (I, 3201) and only twice in Hengwrt (I, 3201, I, 3940). After those instances (the earliest in the scribe's exemplar), the scribe went over to *sly(e)*, which was probably the form in his own active repertoire.

It is, however, questionable that the competing systems encountered by London speakers were, as Burnley suggests, both consistent with regard to the retention of final *-e* for inflected forms. If both system (a) and system (b) were mutually confirming in this regard, there would be no reason why interference between them should have brought about the loss of an inflection that, according to Burnley, was enshrined in both systems. My own hypothesis is that the main factor behind the irregular behaviour of *high* and *sly* was not the sound change affecting the consonant in the uninflected form, but rather the vulnerability of final *-e* following vowels. As Minkova (1991) shows, this was a factor in the loss of final vowels over the long term. The first words in which final *-e* was lost in Early Middle English were words such as **lady** (OE **hlaefdige**) and **many** (OE **manige**), where final *-e* followed a weakly stressed vowel. In words ending on the suffix *-ly*, final *-e* was also lost early on. If fourteenth-century rhyming or alliterative poets wanted an inflectional *-e*, they had use the suffix *-lych*, which offered better support for the final vowel than *-ly* could. So Chaucer could say 'For certes, fresshe wommanlichē wif' (*Troilus and Criseyde*, III, 296), but he could not say *'fresshe wommanlyē wif' (Putter, Jefferson & Stokes 2007). In the monosyllabic adjective *free*, inflectional *-e* was also gone by the fourteenth century.

In fact, the loss of final *-e* after /i/ can be documented in other contexts in Chaucer and Gower. An interesting case is the adjective 'dry'. This was historically disyllabic (<OE *dryge*) and so regularly has syllabic final *-e* in Chaucer and Gower in all grammatical contexts, but not, it would appear, in *The Merchant's Tale*, IV, 1463: 'And blosmy tre nys neither drye ne deed'.

In French nouns ending in /iə/ the schwa was also becoming unstable, even though Chaucer's treatment of these nouns was notoriously conservative. Words like *chevalrye* and *folye* have syllabic final *-e* at line ending in all cases except in *Sir Thopas*, Chaucer's parody of the popular chivalric romances of his day, which blithely rhymes *Of Beves and Sir Gy* (899) with *chivalry* (902). The rhyme incidentally shows that Chaucer knew very well that the pronunciation of these words without *-e*, though beneath his own dignity, was actually commonplace. It is significant that such rhymes occur in exactly the romances that Chaucer alludes to. Thus *Sir Bevis of Hampton* (Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.2.38, 4443–4) rhymes *Sir Gye* with *hardy*

(Fellows 2017) and *Guy of Warwick* (1834–5) rhymes *Sir Gii* with *felonie* (Wiggins 2004). Chaucer's 'good ear' (Everett 1947) had clearly picked up on these 'inferior' rhymes. However, while Chaucer's scrupulousness in preserving final *-e* in French nouns of this type is well known (Benson 1987: 917), it has not been pointed out that his treatment of these words was by no means consistent. Compare 'By Theseus and by his chivalrye' (*Knight's Tale*, I, 878) with 'And in his hoost of chivalrie the flour' (*Knight's Tale*, I, 982; Hengwrt *chivalrye*), and 'Now looketh, is nat this an heigh folyë' (*Knight's Tale*, 1798), with 'More than that fool of whos foly men rime' (*Troilus and Criseyde*, I, 532).

In verbs, too, inflectional *-e* after /i/ seems to have been unstable. For instance, for the verb 'to lie, to tell an untruth', Chaucer regularly has infinitive *lye* or *lyen* as a disyllable, but in *The Book of the Duchess*, he could produce the line 'To lyen, for that is her nature' (630). The third person for 'lies' (< OE *lecgan*) is 'lyeth but also 'lith' (Ten Brink 1901: 179). The third-person present tense of 'cries' is disyllabic in 'He wepeth, wayleth, criëth pitously' (*Knight's Tale*, I, 1221; Hengwrt *cryeth*), but monosyllabic in 'She kneleth, cryeth, that routhe is to devyse' (*Legend of Good Women* 1311, based on Cambridge University Library, MS Gg.4.21).

In short, final *-e* after /i/ was unstable in many grammatical contexts (nouns, verbs, adjectives with organic final *-e*). The irregularities we see in Chaucer and Gower's treatment of the adjectives 'high' and 'sly' can now be explained. We are in the early stage of a long-term grammatical change, the loss of the inflectional system in adjectives, and that change naturally started in a phonological environment where final *-e* was (and had been) vulnerable, after vowels.

3 'High' and 'sly' in Hoccleve's works

The poetry of Hoccleve, who was writing in London a generation or so later, confirms this diagnosis. In Hoccleve the grammatical system of adjectival inflection has partly broken down. As shown by Burrow (2013), in plural monosyllabic adjectives Hoccleve maintained final *-e* with remarkable accuracy: in Hoccleve's holograph poetry Burrow found inflectionless plurals in only 6 per cent of cases. In weak adjectives, on the other hand, the *-e* had gone in 59 per cent of all cases. The lower retention rate for the latter may be due to the fact that the definite forms are 'functionally weaker, contributing less to the meaning of an utterance: the good man is quite definite enough without inflecting the adjective' (Burrow 2013: 49). The proportions of inflectionless 'high' and 'sly' in Gower and Chaucer show the same tendency: examples in the definite inflection are numerous, but in the plural I found only one instance ('Of anglis and of slye reflexiouns', *Squire's Tale*, V, 230).

In Hoccleve, too, however, the words 'high' and 'sly' defy expectations. Burrow's statistics would lead us to expect the retention of final *-e* in plurals in 94 per cent of all cases and in weak adjectives in 41 per cent, but we find nothing of the sort. As far as I can tell, Hoccleve *never* retained final *-e* in weak 'hy' and 'sly', while in the plural he did so exclusively at line ending. The poems and the one prose item (*The Joys of*

Heaven) that survive in his own handwriting show this very clearly.⁷ Plurals forms are rare (3 instances), so we can cite them all. They are inflectionless mid-line:

- (4) (a) Yee, with your sly coloured arguments (*To Sir John Oldcastle*, 281)
 (b) all the celestial and hy vertues (*The Joys of Heaven*, 3)

At line end, on the other hand, ‘high’ appears with final *-e* (and rhymes with a word with historically justified *-e*):

- (c) Almighty fadir of the heuenes hye (*Inuocacio ad Patrem*, 45)

Weak singular adjectives, on the other hand, are numerous (33 instances), but uninflected in all cases. Below are some representative examples:

- (5) (a) His hy presumpcioun nat list consente (*To Sir John Oldcastle*, 84)
 (b) And moder for the hy dileccion (*To the Blessed Virgin*, 113)
 (c) Of the hy louë þat God twixt yow two (*To the Blessed Virgin, Mother of God*, 129)
 (d) Wel Thomas trowest þou his hy noblesse (*Dialogue*, 624)

Disyllabic *hye* is only found in Hoccleve’s holographs for the adverb and once at line ending for the plural adjective.⁸

This surprising fact cannot have been well understood by Hoccleve’s editors, because it is in two editorial emendations that we find a disyllabic form for the weak adjective. The first of these is an emendation by Furnivall and Gollancz that actually overrules Hoccleve’s own spelling:

- (6) (a) And byseeche hir’ / of hir hy[e] bontee (*Jereslaus’ Wife*, 144)

The second is an emendation of the Selden manuscript’s version of Hoccleve’s *Complaint* (not extant in Hoccleve’s own hand) in J. A. Burrow’s edition of the *Complaint and the Dialogue* (Burrow 1999):

- (b) Of his hye might / and benigne grace (*Complaint*, 53)

Burrow’s note on the line reads: ‘S adds a second *his* before *benigne*, failing to recognise the disyllabic form of the weak adjective *hye*’.

Both emendations are dubious, even if the basic principle guiding them, that Hoccleve wrote masculine lines of ten syllables and feminine lines with eleven, is correct. In (6a), the required unstressed syllable is already present in MS *hir’*, where the abbreviation must be expanded. As noted by Burrow & Doyle (2002: xxxviii), ‘in Hoccleve’s practice the horizontal stroke through **-ll** and the backward hook over **-r** do regularly signify *-e*’. Moreover, as Furnivall & Gollancz themselves observed, Hoccleve frequently ‘turns the pronoun *hirē* her, into two syllables’ (1970: xli). The formulation implies that Hoccleve was doing something untoward, but Chaucer, too, had both monosyllabic *hir*

⁷ Quotations from the Hoccleve holographs are from Furnivall & Gollancz, revised by Mitchell & Doyle (1970), and have been checked against the facsimile edition by Burrow & Doyle (2002).

⁸ I am not concerned here with disyllabic forms of the verb ‘hurry’ (*hye*), which are not uncommon at line ending.

and disyllabic *hire* in the dative and accusative (examples in Kittredge 1891: 153). It is true that this final *-e* is here in eliding position, but in Hoccleve as in Chaucer (Solopova 2001) elision is by no means systematic, especially before a caesura. In the case of (6b), the Selden scribe was correct in ‘failing to recognise the disyllabic form of the weak adjective *hye*’, since after all Hoccleve in his holographs no longer recognised it either. The line that Hoccleve would have written is ‘Of his hy might and his benigne grace.’

Hoccleve’s *Regiment of Princes* (Blyth 1999) confirms everything I have said. Since this poem does not survive in Hoccleve’s own hand, we must rely on his metrical principles to establish the syllable count, but the results are unambiguous. Mid-line the adjectives ‘high’ and ‘sly’ are consistently monosyllabic in plurals – ‘He bisyeth him so in sly portraytures’ (441, rhyming with *scriptures*, with synzesis in *bisyeth*); ‘Thow that yclomben art in hy honoures’ (904) – and it is only the at line end that the plural adjective is disyllabic: ‘To our lord God that sitte in hevenes hye’ (334). In weak position, the adjectives ‘high’ and ‘sly’ are frequent, but never inflected. For instance:

- (7) (a) Be waar the feendes sly conclusioun (278)
- (b) His name slee; his hy vertu astertith (1971)
- (c) For that I wolde that the hy degree (2453)

I counted in all 34 instances and found no exceptions.

4 Conclusion

Returning to Samuels’ claim that Chaucer’s grammar of final *-e* for adjectives was systematic and determined by grammar, we can now see that that this rule needs to be qualified. The rule applies generally to monosyllabic adjectives, but not to ‘high’ and ‘sly’, where pronunciation of final *-e* had become optional. The main reason for this, I would suggest, is that final *-e* was recessive after /i/. As I hope to have shown, Gower’s language shows the same pattern. His grammatical system of final *-e* was rigid in monosyllabic adjectives, but ‘high’ and ‘sly’ again prove to be exceptions. Since Gower and Chaucer were both contemporaries and Londoners, it is reasonable to suppose that the loss of inflectional *-e* in this specific phonological environment reflected developments in the language of London.

The loss of inflections in the end extended to all adjectives, and historical linguists have given us impressions of the date by which that process was completed: ‘By 1400 final unstressed *-e* had been abandoned in all parts of the country’ (Minkova 1991: 30). ‘By the early fifteenth century all final /ə/ [*sic*] have probably dropped’ (Lass 1992: 81). It would be wrong, however, to think that the process affected all words at the same time or at the same rate. The evidence I have presented here suggests that in the written language of two Londoners, Chaucer and Gower, the process had kicked in with inflectional *-e* after /i/, and affected principally weak adjectives rather than plurals. Burrow’s statistics on Hoccleve, another Londoner, confirm the differential rates of loss in weak and plural adjectives and also tell us that the process was still ongoing. What is clear, however, is that the process was much more advanced in ‘high’ and ‘sly’ than

in other adjectives: the retention rate for monosyllabic adjectives in Hoccleve (94 per cent for plurals; 41 per cent for weak adjectives) compares with 0 per cent in weak adjectives and 0 per cent in plural adjectives except at line end, where Hoccleve retained final *-e*. That being the case, editorial emendations of Hoccleve's poems based on disyllabic *hye* in weak adjectives should be rejected.

Metrical analysis of poets who cared about the syllable count thus reveals things about language change as it unfolded, just as it reveals things about their poetry. For it is certainly not the case that Chaucer, Gower and Hoccleve were at liberty to sound final *-e*'s as and when they liked. Their poetry was an extension of what was unfolding in the language around them, and precise knowledge of these processes can help us understand why in certain contexts the usual rules do not apply.

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