CHAPTER TWO

JUNCTURAL METANALYSIS IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

Ut silvae foliis pronos mutantur in annos, 
prima cadunt, ita verborum vetus interit aetas, 
et iuvenum ritu florent modo nata vigentque.

Just as the leaves of the forest change with the passing years, 
and the earliest fall off first, so the old generation of words perishes, 
and those newly born flourish and grow strong in the manner of young men.

(Horace’s Ars Poetica 60–62)

The derivation of words is like that of rivers—there is one real source, 
usually small, unlikely, and difficult to find, far up among the hills; then, 
as the word flows on and comes into service, it takes in the force of other 
words from other sources, and becomes itself quite another word after 
the junction—a word, as it were, of many waters, sometimes both sweet and bitter.

(John Ruskin’s Munera Pulveris, Appendix VI)

Nuncle Lear, nuncle Lear, tarry and take the fool with thee. 
(William Shakespeare’s King Lear I.iv.339)

Before the increased standardization of the English language in the modern period, many new words entered its lexicon in exactly the way just described.¹ A 15th century English cook may once have said something like: “Ah, I found this ewt and this nadder in my napron while baking numble-pie.” A few generations later the cook’s descendent would have said: “Ah, I found this newt and this adder in my apron while baking (h)umble-pie.” Over the course of time these words were misheard and resegmented: ewt became newt, nadder became adder, napron became apron, numble-pie became (h)umble pie. The force behind these particular resegmentations, and by far the most powerful force behind any

¹ For fuller treatments of the following examples, see the pertinent entries in the second edition of The Oxford English Dictionary (J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner [edd.] [1989]). The electronic forms of this work, both the compact disk and web versions, have been exceptionally efficient tools in identifying examples of resegmentation in the English language.
such resegmentations in the English language, was the ‘movable-n’ of the indefinite article *a(n)*, of the possessive pronouns *my(n)* and *thy(n)*, and of the old dative case of the definite article *the(n)*. The biforms *no/none*, the prepositions *in* and *on*, the conditional conjunction *an ‘even,’* the shortened form ‘*n ‘and,’* and the inflectional endings in -*n* may also have played a part. Through the process of prothesis, in which the sound at the end of a word is transferred to the beginning of the word following, or conversely aphaeresis, in which the sound at the beginning of a word is transferred to the end of the word preceding, old words were resegmented and new words formed. So through prothesis *an ewt* became *a newt*. Conversely through aphaeresis a *nadder* became *an adder*, a *napron* became *an apron*, and a *numble-pie* became *an (h)umble-pie*. Many other words in the English language owe their existence to just this type of resegmentation: e.g., *nickname*, *ninny*, *namby-pamby*, *nidiot/nidget*, *nonce-word*, *nother*, and *notch through prothesis of n*; *auger*, *umpire*, *orange*, *eyas*, *atomy*, *emony*, *ouch*, and *aitch-bone*, through aphaeresis of *n*.

Resegmentation of words in the process of human communication has spawned new entries in the English lexicon that in some cases have enjoyed wide acceptance; so much so that a technical term ‘metanalysis’ was coined at the end of the 19th century by the influential linguist Otto Jespersen to describe this peculiar but fairly widespread linguistic phenomenon. The compound ‘junctural metanalysis’ was coined by Louis Marck in the 1960’s to specify the resegmentation

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2 One of the earliest, most thorough, and most well categorized treatments of this linguistic phenomenon in the English language comes from a Classicist, Charles P.G. Scott (1892, 1893, 1894), in a series of three long articles titled “English Words which hav Gaind or Lost an Initial Consonant by Attraction.” Scott means by ‘attraction’ an apparently accidental or unintentional transfer of a final consonant of a word to the beginning of the following word, or of an initial consonant to the end of the preceding word (i.e., precisely what I have been calling ‘ressegmentation’ and will shortly be referring to as ‘junctural metanalysis’). The fact that a Classicist, in an exhaustive series of articles published in the official arm of America’s Classical Association, does not mention a single example of this linguistic phenomenon in Ancient Greek is an indication of the need for the present study.

3 The term ‘metanalysis’ was first applied loosely to this phenomenon by O. Jespersen (1894) in a *Festschrift* for Vilhelm Thomsen. Later, in (1914) section 6.61, he explained: “I have ventured to coin the word ‘metanalysis’ for the phenomenon frequent in all languages that words or word groups are by a new generation analyzed differently from the analysis of a former age.” A fuller description, with several illustrative examples, can be found in (1922) 173, where he attributes metanalysis especially to the period of language acquisition in childhood.