

Middle English

Changes in Grammar System

- underwent profound changes in ME period.
- From a **synthetic (inflected)** language with well developed morphology English transformed into a language of the **analytical type**.

The division of words into parts of speech was one of the most **permanent** language characteristics.

Parts of Speech in ME

- the noun
- the adjectives
- the pronoun
- the numeral
- the verb

- the adverb
- the preposition
- the conjunction
- the interjection

The **new** part of speech

- **the article** which split from the pronoun in Early ME

Inflexions (grammatical suffixes and endings) continued to be used in all inflected parts of speech. But they became less varied.

OE period is described as a period of **full endings**, ME – a period of **leveled endings**. In ME the vowels in the endings were reduced to the neutral [ɪ] and many consonants were leveled under [n] or dropped.

- The **analytical** way of form-building is a new device.

- Analytical forms** developed from free word groups (phrases, syntactical constructions).

The first component of such phrases weakened or **lost** its lexical meaning and turned into a **grammatical marker** and the second component retained its lexical meaning and acquired new grammatical value in the compound form.

OE *he hxfde þa* –

he had them (the prisoners)

Hie hine ofslæ Zene hxfdon - they
had him killed

Morphological simplification

- the main direction of development of the nominal parts of speech

The period between 1000 and 1300 was called an “**age of great change**” by A. Baugh.

Some nominal categories **were lost** (gender and case in adjectives, gender in nouns).

Noun cases were reduced as well as numbers in personal pronouns. Morphological division into types of **declension** practically disappeared.

In Late ME **the adjectives** lost the distinction of number and the distinction of weak and strong forms.

The **decay of inflectional endings** affected **the verb system** but to a lesser extent than the nominal system.

On the other hand, **the paradigm of the verb grew** as new grammatical forms and distinctions came into being.

The verb acquired the categories of **Voice and Aspect**.

Within the category of Tense the **Future Tense** forms developed.

New forms of the Subjunctive appeared within the category of the Mood.

The Noun

- a strong tendency to **simplification of the declensions.**
- the decline of the OE declension system lasted over 3 hundred years.

In Early ME the southern dialects used only four markers *-es*, *-en*, *-e* and *the root vowel interchange*. Masculine and neutral nouns had only two declensions – weak and strong.

In the Midland and Northern dialects the system of declension was simpler. There was only one major type of declension. The majority of nouns took the endings of OE masculine a-stems:

- *(e)s in the Genetive singular*
- *(e)s in the plural irrespective of the case*

The OE *Gender* disappeared. In the 11-th and 12-th centuries the gender of nouns was deprived of its main formal support – the weakened and leveled endings of adjectives and adjective pronouns ceased to indicate gender.

In Chaucer's time gender is a lexical category, like in Modern English: nouns are referred to as "he"/"she" if they denote human beings:

Examples

***She wolde wepe, if that she saw a mous,
Caught in a trappe, if it were deed or
bledde (Chaucer)***

***She would weep, if she saw a mouse
Caught in a trap, if it was dead or it bled***

OE *mous* was feminine

Category of case

- The category of *case* underwent **profound changes** in Early ME
- OE 4-case system ☐ ME 2-case system

In OE the forms of the Nominative and Accusative were not distinguished in the plural and in some classes they coincided in singular too. In Early ME they **fell together** in both numbers.

In strong declension the Dative was sometimes marked by *–e* in the Southern dialects though not in the North or in the Midlands.

The form without the ending soon prevailed in all areas, and three OE cases **Nominative, Accusative and Dative** fell together.

They can be called **the Common Case**.

In the 14-th century the ending *–es* of the Genitive singular became universal with only several exceptions. In the plural the Genetive case had no special marker.

OE

Early ME

Late ME

Nominative

Accusative

Dative

Genitive

Common

Dative

Genitive

Common

Genitive



The Genitive case

- Though the Genitive case survived as a distinct form, its use became **limited**.
- Unlike OE it **could not** be employed in the function of an object

In ME the Genitive case is used only **attributively** to modify a noun but even in this function it has a rival – prepositional phrases (of-phrases).

The category of Number

- was one of **the most stable** of all the nominal categories

The ME Pronoun

In Early ME OE heo (she) was replaced by the group of variants *he, ho, sce, sho, she*.

One of them ***she*** finally prevailed over the others.

- ME demonstrative pronoun ***seo***
<(OE *se, seo, þæt* (that)).
- It was first recorded in the North Eastern regions and extended to other areas.

The descendant of OE *heo* is ME *he*
OE heo > ME he

Lexical replacement

OE *hie* (3-d person pl.) was replaced by the Scandinavian loan-words **they** [Tel].

It came from the North-Eastern areas and was adopted by the mixed London dialect.

“They” ousted the Nom. case OE *hie*, and **“them”**, **“their”** (from the same Scandinavian loan) replaced OE case forms *“hem”* and *“heora”*.

The two sets of forms (coming from *they* and *hie*) occur side by side in Late ME texts:

- *That hem hath holpen, whan that **they** were seeke.*

Who has helped them when they were sick.

Category of Number

The category of **Number** was brought in conformity with the corresponding categories of nouns and verbs.

The forms of **the dual number** went into disuse in Early ME.

Category of Case

The category of Case underwent **great changes**.

The forms of the **Dative** and the **Accusative** cases began **to merge** in OE.

This syncretism took a long time and in Early ME it spread to the 3-rd person and it was completed in Late ME.

Possessive pronouns

- The **OE Genitive case** of personal pronouns turned into a new class of pronouns – possessive.

Demonstrative Pronouns

Development of the Article

In Early ME the OE demonstrative pronouns *se, seo, þæt, þes, þeos, þis* lost most of their inflected forms. The ME descendants of these pronouns are **that** and **this**

Singular

Plural

this

thise / thes(e) *(this – these)*

that

tho / thos(e) *(that – those)*

The other direction of the development of the demonstrative pronouns *se*, *seo*, *pxt* led to the formation of **the definite article**.

In OE texts these pronouns were frequently used as noun determiners with a **weakened meaning** approaching that of the modern definite article.

In the manuscripts of the 11-th and 12-th centuries this use of demonstrative pronouns becomes **more and more common.**

- as a demonstrative pronoun “that”
preserved number distinctions
- but as a definite article – usually in the weakened form the [Tq] - it was **uninflected**.

The meaning and functions of the definite article became more specific when it came to be opposed to the indefinite article, which developed from the OE numeral and indefinite pronoun “an”.

OE interrogative and indefinite pronouns were subjected to the same simplifying changes as all nominal parts of speech.

The paradigm of the OE interrogative pronoun *hwa* was reduced to two forms:

- *who* (the Nom. Case)
- *whom* (the Objective case).

The ME Adjective

- simplifying changes
- lost all its grammatical categories
except the degrees of comparison

The **OE adjectives** had **five-case** paradigm and two types of declension (**strong and weak**). By the end of the OE period the agreement of the adjective and the noun became loose and in Early ME it was lost.

The peculiar suffix **–en** (from OE **–an**)
of the weak declension lost its **n**

ME	Singular	Plural
<i>Strong declension</i>	yong	yonge
<i>Weak declension</i>	yonge	yonge

The degrees of comparison

In OE the forms of the comparative and superlative degrees were **synthetic**:

- *-ra*
- *-est/-ost*

- in ME the suffixes were weakened to *-er, -est*
- the **interchange of the root-vowel** was **less common** and soon fell in disuse

Analytical forms of degrees

- analytical forms of degrees of comparison
- the basis for it was developed by the OE adverbs **ma**, **bet**, **betst**, **swiþor** – more, better.

When the phrases with ME “more” and “most” became more common, they were used with **all kinds of adjectives** regardless of the number of syllables and were even preferred with mono- and disyllabic words.

e.g. more swete (sweeter)

better worthy (worthier)

more hard (harder)

Two sets of forms, synthetic and analytical were used in **free variation** until the 17-th and 18-th centuries.

The ME Verb

The morphology of the verb displayed such distinct tendencies:

- considerable **simplification** which affected the synthetic forms

- **complication** owing to the growth of
now analytical forms and new
grammatical categories
- development of **finite and non-finite**
forms of the verb

Number distinctions were not only preserved in ME but even became **more consistent and regular.**

In the 13-th and 14-th centuries the **ending *-en*** turned into universal marker of the plural forms of the verb.

The **ending** *-en* was frequently missed out in the late 14-th century and was dropped in the 15-th century.

The **Past tense** stems of the strong verbs merged into **one form**.

All **number distinctions** were lost with the exception of the 2-nd and 3-rd person Present tense Indicative Mood. The singular forms were marked with: **-est** and **-eth/-es**.

Person

The differences of the forms of Person **were maintained** in ME. They became more variable. The OE endings of the 3-rd person singular -**þ**, -**eþ**, -**iaþ** merged into **-(e)th**.

Owing to the reduction of endings and leveling of forms the formal differences between the **moods** were also greatly obscured.

In OE only a few forms of the Indicative and Subjunctive Mood were **homonymous** (the 1-st person singular of the Present and the 1-st and the 3-rd person singular of the Past).

In ME the homonymy of the mood forms grew.

The **distinction of *tenses*** was preserved in the verb paradigm through all periods.

The Past tense was built with the help of the dental suffix in the weak verbs and with the help of the root-vowel interchange – in the strong verbs.

The only exception was the small group of verbs which came from OE weak **verbs of Class I**.

In such verbs the dental suffix merged with the last consonant of the root *-t* – and after the loss of the ending its three principal forms coincided.

e.g. OE settan – sette – Ze-set(ed)

ME seten – sette – set(set)

Verbals

The system of verbals in OE consisted of the Infinitive and two Participles. In the Late ME a new verbal, **the Gerund**, developed. The Gerund can be traced to **three sources:**

- the OE verbal noun in **–unZ/ –inZ**
- the Present Participle
- the Infinitive

The earliest examples of a verbal noun **resembling Gerund** date back to the 12-th century.

Strong and Weak Verbs

The two morphological types of verbs – strong and weak, were well preserved in ME.

The number of **weak** verbs was constantly **increasing** at the expense of the newly borrowed and newly created verbs, but the number of **strong** verbs was **diminishing**.

Some of them became **obsolete**

e.g. OE weorþan (become)

- others became weak

OE slxpan (sleep)

Sometimes the distinctions between different classes of verbs were obliterated.

*e.g. suffix **-ode** of the weak second class verbs was reduced to **-ede** and coincided in the **-ede** suffix of the 1-st class*

The marker of the Past Tense and Participle II employed by the weak verbs is the dental suffix

-d/ -t was very productive in all historical periods.

This simple and regular way of form-building, employed by the majority of OE verbs, attracted hundreds of new verbs in ME.

Many former strong verbs began to build weak forms alongside with strong one, the **strong forms fell in disuse**. The reverse process (weak \rightarrow strong) was of rare occurrence.

Several **preterite – present** verbs died out. The surviving verbs lost some of their old forms and grammatical distinctions.

ME *can* (OE *cann*, Pres.Ind., singular, 1-st and 3-rd person) was used not only in the singular but also in the plural (by the side of *cunnen*).

ME *shall* (OE *sceal*) has lost many of its old forms: the plural forms, the forms of the Present Subjunctive, the Infinitive and has retained only two forms shall and should (ME *sholde*, *sholde(n)*).

The OE *willan*, though not a preterite-present by origin, has acquired many features typical of the group. In ME it was commonly used as a modal verb expressing volition.

In the course of time it formed a system with *shall*. These verbs began to weaken their lexical meanings and to change into **auxiliaries**.

The Future Tense

In the OE language there was no form of the Future tense (only Past and Present).

In ME the use of modal phrases, especially ***shall*** became increasingly common.

Shall + Inf. – future action.

Shall could remain its modal meaning of necessity, but often weakened and denoted “**pure**” **futurity**.

The Subjunctive Mood

In OE the forms of the Subjunctive Mood were **synthetic**. In the course of ME there sprang up several new **analytical forms** of the Subjunctive Mood.

In OE modal phrases consisting of *sculan*, *willan* and *maZan + Inf.* indicated future actions.

If the modal verb has the form of the Subjunctive (Present and Past) the meanings of the phrase approached that of the Subjunctive Mood.

Modal phrases expressing problematic and imaginary actions occur in the works of Chaucer along with the old synthetic forms:

***In al the pari sshe wif ne was ther
noon***

***That to the offrynge before hir sholde
goon***

(In all the parish this was not one wife
who would go before her to the offering).

Category of Voice

In OE the finite verb had no category of voice. The analytical passive forms developed from OE verb phrases:

OE beon + Participle II of transitive verbs

In ME *ben + Past Participle*
developed into an analytical
form.

Syntax

1. In ME the word order was less pliable than in OE, but not so rigid as in ModE. The number of sentences with **direct word order** was growing at the expense of those with **inverted or synthetic** word order.

Closely connected with it was the necessity to express **the subject** even in **impersonal** sentences. The structure *Me thinketh it ...* gradually yielded to the order *It seemed me ...It thoughte me* “*It seemed to me, It occurred to me*”.

2. The weakening and loss of inflections resulted in the **weakening** and loss of **agreement and government**. The tendency grew to place the modifiers as closely as possible to the words which they modified.

3. The widespread use of **prepositions** in ME was another remarkable development in the language. In OE most prepositions had governed the dative case.

With the disappearance of the dative case prepositions came to be used freely with the common case of nouns.

OE On þxm oprum þrim daZum - On those other three days

ME in that seson (season) on a day.

4. The OE system of relative and correlative elements (*pe, pa ...etc.*) was replaced by new relatives developed from OE interrogative and demonstrative pronouns: *who, what, which, that, etc.*

5. The **single negative** began to be used in the fourteenth century, particularly in the north, though the cumulative negation was still widely spread.

e.g. Ne schal non werien no linnene cloth - No one shall wear any linen clothes

Middle English Vocabulary Changes

Borrowings played a much greater role in ME than in OE. They came mostly from two sources: Scandinavian and French.

Apart from many place names (over 1400) in **–by, thorpe, -thwaite**, etc. the number of **Scandinavian borrowings** was not very great but they were mostly everyday words of very high frequency.

Some of them found their way into the oral speech of Anglo-Saxons as early as the ninth century, but it was not until ME that they became part and parcel of the English vocabulary.

e.g. *ME lawe (law) < OE laZu < Sc. lagu*
(n., pl., the sg. in OE DanelaZ)

ME taken (take) < OE tacan < Sc. taka

ME callen (call) < OE ceallian < Sc. kalla

The extent of the Scandinavian influence can be inferred from the fact that even **personal** pronouns were borrowed.

The Scandinavian forms **þeir** (they), **þeim** (them), **þeirra** (their) gradually ousted the respective OE forms **hie**, **him**, **hira**.

The Scandinavian conjunction **þo** (though) replaced the OE conjunction **peah**.

Other borrowings are the Modern English: *husband, fellow, window, egg, skirt, sky, skin, skill, anger; wrong, ill, happy, ugly, low, odd; cast, want, die, drown*, and many similar simple words.

Owing to the intimate relationship between the two languages, it is often difficult to say whether the form of a given word is **Scandinavian or English.**

The word *sister*, for instance, is usually regarded as a development of the Scandinavian *systir*, but it might also be considered as a development of the OE *sweostor* under Scandinavian influence.

OE *Ziefan*, *Zietan* would have normally developed into E. *yev* (*yiv*), *yet*, but under the influence of Sc. *giva*, *geta* they have become E. *give* *get*.

French borrowings

- The number was much greater than that of Scandinavian loanwords, and their character was different since **the relations** between both the peoples and their languages were different.

A great part of French loans were **aristocratic words** testifying that the French were the conquerors, the rulers of the country.

- **designations of rank** (sovereign, prince,-princess, duke, duchess, marquis, marquise, count, countess, baron, baroness, peer, noble)

- **titles of respect** (sir, madam, mistress)
- **governmental and administrative words** (state, government, parliament, crown, court, reign, royal, majesty, country, nation, people, tax)

- **legal terms** (justice, judge, jury, bar, bill, decree, crime, verdict, sentence, accuse, punish, prison)

- **military terms** (army, navy, defence, enemy, war, battle, victory, siege, castle, tower, soldier, sergeant, captain)

- **religious terms** (religion, faith, clergy, parson, pray, preach, saint, miracle)
- words reflecting **the life and habits** of the nobility of France (pleasure, leisure, feast, dance, dress, fashion, jewel)

- their dominance in the arts and literature (art, colour, beauty, paint, column, music, poem, romance).

The relation between the English people and the French aristocracy is also reflected in the semantic correlation of some English words and some medieval French borrowings.

As Walter Scott pointed out in "Ivanhoe", the domestic animals kept their English names while the English were looking after them in the fields (E. ox, cow, calf, sheep, swine), but were given French names when they appeared on the Norman lord's table (E. beef, veal, mutton, pork).

Compare also the E. **house** and the Fr. **palace**; the E. **mill**, **blacksmith** and the Fr. **painter**, **tailor**; the E. **breakfast** and the Fr. **dinner**, **supper** the E. **hand** and the Fr. **face**.

Naturally, there were also numerous "**neutral**" French loan-words like the E. aim, air, dozen, error, grief, clear, double, easy, carry, change, envy, etc.

Two varieties of French borrowings:

- Norman French (NI)
- Central French (CF).

The Norman conquerors brought with them a peculiar **northern dialect** of French that differed in a number of ways from Central French or Parisian French, the source of Modern French.

For instance, NF [k] corresponded to CF [C], and NF[C] to CF [s]. Up to the 13th century French borrowings came mostly from NF.

Later the overwhelming majority of French loan-words came from CF. It often happened that a word was borrowed twice, first from NF then from CF, thus forming **etymological doublets**.

E. g. canal ($< \text{NF}$) and
channel ($< \text{CF}$), catch ($< \text{NF}$) and
chase(CF).

The heavy influx of Scandinavian and French loan-words could not but affect the native elements of the English vocabulary.

Many Old English words grew out of use and were ousted by foreign synonyms:

e. g. *niman* "take", *clipian* "call",
sweltan "die", *andian* "envy",
xwnian "marry", etc.

Many others changed their meanings and usage. Compare, for instance, the Old English verb *steorfan* "to die" and its modern outgrowth *to starve*, or the Old English *hærfest* "autumn" and the Modern English *harvest*.

Very often the **basic** word remained in the language, while **its derivative** was replaced by a loan-word. For instance, OE. *þyncan* has developed into E. *think*, while OE. *ofþyncan* was ousted by *repent* (< OF. *repentir*);

the verb **perceive** (< OF. percevoir)
has replaced ME **ofseen** (< OE.
ofseon), while OE seon > ME seen >
E. see; the verbs deserve, pass,
precede have replaced OE. ofZan,
forZan, foreZan, while Zan has
normally developed into go.

Such cases undermined the Early English system of affixation. But new affixes appeared instead.

The **suffix -able** from such French borrowings as *admirable, tolerable*, came to be used with native Germanic roots as well: *eatable, readable, bearable*. Similarly, the Romanic prefixes *re-, en-* in the words *rewrite, endear*.

Sometimes the native affixes
were used with foreign roots:
beautiful, charming, unfaithful.

The divergence between native and borrowed **synonyms** assumed different forms. Sometimes they became **stylistically different**, as in the case of E. foe (< OE Zefa) and E. enemy (< OF ennemi) or E. begin (ME beginnen) and E. commence (< OF cumencer).

Sometimes they acquired different shades of meaning, as in the regularly quoted pairs:
swine— pork, calf—veal,
ox – beef, sheep — mutton.

If they had been historically cognate, but changed both form and meaning, they formed **etymological doublets**. For instance, skirt, scatter (< Sc.) and shirt, shatter (< OE).

One of the most important ME innovations was the development of **conversion** as a new type of derivation. Owing to the leveling of endings and the loss of –n in unstressed syllables, OE ende and endian fell together as ME ende ['endq].

OE lufu and lufian as ME love ['luvq].
Such cases of homonymy served as
models for the creation of new
nouns from verbs

(smile v. □ smile n.) and vice versa
(chance n. □ chance v.).