

# Middle English: Historical Background, Orthography, Phonetics, Morphology

Lectures 5-6

Middle English

(1066 – 1475)

# Before 1066

Scandinavian invasions



English was significantly  
**changed and simplified**

# Before 1066

- ◉ the English kings were in exile; Edward the Confessor + William, Duke of Normandy;
- ◉ In 1042 English kings regain the rule in England;
- ◉ After Edward's death Williams wants the throne, crosses the English Channel (October 14, the battle of Hastings).

# The Norman Conquest

- ◉ William becomes the King of England;
- ◉ suppresses any signs of disobedience;
- ◉ thousands of French-speakers come to England;
- ◉ knowledge of French is the sign of higher standing and social prestige;
- ◉ three languages: Latin, French and English.

# The Norman Conquest

- ✓ English is mostly spoken rather than written;
- ✓ Rich literary tradition developed in OE is almost lost;
- ✓ The first step to the come-back of the English language: 1258, King Henry III and his Proclamation

# Various changes

- ◉ spelling (set up the basis for the present-day English spelling);
- ◉ a great number of borrowings;
- ◉ grammar was simplified and virtually unaffected by the Conquest.

# INTERESTING

English surnames appeared in ME:

OE – Æthelred, son of Alfred



the suffix -son: Johnson, Thompson;

Later – place names, occupation and even nationality.



# Middle English Written Records

- ◉ later entries made in Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, the Peterborough Chronicle;
- ◉ Ormulum, paraphrases of Gospels by the monk Orm;
- ◉ a romance (a story about the adventures of knights) Brut by Layamon (part of which is about Arthur and his knights);
- ◉ Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, etc.

# Changes in Orthography

- ✓ French graphic habits were introduced;
- ✓ specifically English sounds (marked by Runic letters) were replaced by digraphs.

# Spelling Changes

OE **ƿ** [g'], then [dʒ] like in **bryƿ** was replaced with **g, dg** [dʒ] (native words) and j (borrowings): **bridge**

OE ligature **æ** [æ] in **Ælfred** fell into disuse: Alfred

OE **þ, ð** [ð, θ] in **ðæt** *was replaced with* **th: that**

# Spelling changes

OE **u** [u:] hūs, ūt, lūfu, mūnuc could be replaced with **ou, ow, o:** ME hous [hu:s], how, cow [hu:]; [ku:]; love [luve]; monk [munʃk];

OE **hw** hwæt was reflected as ME what [hwat]

# Spelling changes

- ◉ OE **o** [o:] bōk was replaced with ME **oo**  
book [bo:k];
- ◉ OE **ē** [e:] fēld, fēt was reflected in ME as  
either **ie**, **ee**, or **e** [e:]: field, feet

# Spelling changes

OE **c, sc** [k', sk' , then tʃ, ʃ] scip, cild were replaced with **ch, sh (ssh, sch)**: ship, child;

OE **c** [k] cnāwan was substituted with **k** before consonants: known;

OE **h** [x, x'], [h] was reflected as **h** (he [he:]) or **gh** (knight [knix't]) ME.

# Middle English Vocalism: unstressed vowel

## ✓ leveling of sounds

(final and medial position) —→ *shwa*, [ə]  
marked as *e*

OE    *cara*    *cam*    *care*    *carum*

ME    *care* (*the paradigm is simplified*)

# Middle English Vocalism: stressed vowel

- **readjustment of quantity:** vowel + two consonants – the vowel remains short or is shortened; exception – clusters *mb*, *ld*, *nd*

OE *wild* [wild] > ME *wild* [wi:ld];

OE *bewildran* [i] > ME *bewildren* [be'wildren]

OE *fifti* [fi:fti] > ME *fifty* [fifti].

- **lengthening of short vowels in open syllables**

OE *mete* > ME *mete* [mɛ:te],

OE *nosu* > ME *nose* [nɔ:ze].



# Middle English Vocalism: stressed vowel

## ⦿ **monophthongization of diphthongs:**

(not new to the English language)

long [eo:] > [e:] OE *deop* > *deep* [de:p]

## ⦿ **cases of returning to previous quality:**

Early OE *arm* > Late Old English *earm* (OE Breaking) > ME *arm*

Goth *pata* > OE *ðæt* (splitting) > ME *that*

# Middle English Vocalism: stressed vowel

- ◎ **changes in individual sounds:** [a:] – [ɔ:]

OE *stān* [sta:n] – ME *stone* [stɔ:nə]

→ OE *hām* – ME *home*

# The case of *y*, *y:* reflection

[*y*], [*y:*] → gave [*i*, *i:*] in the north and east;  
→ [u, u:] in the west;  
→ [e, e:] in the south west.

OE *fyllan* – ME *fillen* (to fill)

OE *dyde* – ME *dide* (did)

OE *bryc3* – ME *bridge*

OE *bysi* – ModE *busy*, *business*

# Middle English Consonantism

- ⦿ OE [k'] – ME [tʃ] marked by **ch**;
- ⦿ OE [sk'] – ME [ʃ] marked by **sh**;
- ⦿ **h** at the beginning of the word was lost in clusters hr, hl, hn, hw:

OE *hrinȝ* – ME *ring*, OE *hrōf* – ME *roof*

# Middle English Consonantism

## ***n at the end of the verbs:***

preserved in the forms of the participle,  
and tended to be lost in the infinitive

OE writan > ME written (Part 2) and ME  
write (infinitive)

Lost in the numeral ***ān*** (one) that became  
in indefinite article (***a***)

# MORPHOLOGY

- profound alteration: the grammatical type starts changing (synthetic to analytic);
- the changes in morphology are closely related to changes in the sound system (inflection were reduced, paradigms simplified).

# Middle English Noun

## The category of number

- ✓ preserved (semantically) and changed formally:
- ✓ **-es used most often** (even for borrowings: *two felawes; the chambres and the stables; fresshe floures*);
- ✓ **-en** (some *n*-stems retain their old uninflected plurals (oxen));
- ✓ former root stems retain their: *man - menn, foot -feet, etc.*);
- ✓ nouns naming some domestic animals (such as **sheep, swyn, hors**) – uninflected plurals;
- ✓ the plural of **child** developed in a unique way (suffix of the former **-s-** stems (it was **-r-** through rhotacism) and additionally got the **-en** suffix – **children, also brothren**).

# Middle English Noun

- **The category of gender** was lost;
- **the category of case**: from 4 to 2 (the Nominative and the Genitive);
- Nom., Dat., Acc. fall together, while Gen. is separate from the other forms;
- in the 14<sup>th</sup> c. the ending **-es** for singular and plural in Genitive;
- in ME Gen. is used mostly attributively, to modify a noun (but of-constructions are also becoming quite popular; the animate/inanimate differentiation appears in the 13<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> c.).



# Middle English Adjective

- simplification started in OE;
- towards the end of the ME – only some relics of the old system of declension (no strong vs. weak declension);
- **degrees of comparison:** the analytical way with “more, most” (French influence).

# Middle English Pronoun

- morphology of pronouns was simplified;
- some lexical replacements should be mentioned:

OE *hēo* (3<sup>rd</sup> p., sin., fem. 'she') was replaced by a group of variants *he*, *ho*, *sce*, *sho*, *she*, out of which the last finally prevailed;

OE *hīe* (3<sup>rd</sup> p., pl. 'they') was replaced by the Scand. loan-word *they* [θei], its forms *them* and *their* (from Scand. *too*).

# Middle English Pronoun

- New classes: possessive, reflexive, relative;
- personal pronouns: 4 to 2 case;
- the Gen. case of personal pronouns → possessive pronouns;
- two variants of them in ME: myne/my;
- myne/my were used in free variation (n before a vowel);
- demonstrative pronouns (lost their case and gender distinction; preserved pl./sg. forms: this – thes(e), thise / that – thos(e), tho.

# Middle English Verb

- ◉ simplification of the morphological paradigm;
- ◉ increase in the number of verbal categories.

# Middle English Verb

- ◉ **gradual verbalization** of non-finite forms;

- ◉ Strong verbs: 300 in OE → 200 in ME:

E.g.: to help, to climb, to walk turned from strong into weak verbs, which then turned into regular verbs.

As to the **preterite-present**: modal meanings are preserved, paradigms are changed (defective verbs);

suppletives (anomalous verbs) have always been the same: to be, to go.

# The development of the analytical forms

- word groups, phrases, syntactical constructions, the first component of which gradually weakened or even lost its lexical meaning and turned into a grammatical marker (grammaticalization);
- most productive in verbs.

# The development of the analytical forms

## The category of time correlation

- ✓ the verb *to have* in its main meaning + an object + an attribute, which referred to the object (to have something done).

## The Continuous forms:

- ✓ a compound nominal predicate with the verb *to be* as a link-verb and Participle I as a predicative.
- ✓ it didn't express a process until later in the 16<sup>th</sup> c.

# The development of the analytical forms

## The passive voice:

- ✓ a compound nominal predicate with the verb *to be* + Participle II as a predicative.

## The future tense:

- ✓ a combination of a preterite-present verb (later modal) *sculan* or anomalous verb *willan* (later modal) with the infinitive.



# The Article

- In OE demonstrative pronouns *sē*, *sēo*, *þæt* were used as noun-determiners with a weakened meaning;
- by the 14<sup>th</sup> c. – a separate word-form;
- Later – an indefinite article appeared (from the numeral and the indefinite pronoun *ān*)

# Syntax

- ◉ Word order – more strict; every place in a sentence came to be associated with a certain syntactic function;
- ◉ SVO (SPO) order;
- ◉ the use of the subject became obligatory;
- ◉ the use of prepositions more extensive;
- ◉ the growth of auxiliaries;
- ◉ further development of complex and compound sentences.

# Middle English Vocabulary

- Almost 80 % of OE words went out of use in succeeding periods: losses; replacements; additions (e.g. OE *werzeld* ‘money paid to the family if one of the relatives was murdered; OE *weorðan* – ME *become*; ME *duke*);
- the great role of external sources in the extension of vocabulary.

# Middle English Vocabulary

- ◎ **Scandinavian Influence**: recorded in the 13<sup>th</sup> c.;
- ◎ especially numerous – place-names;
- ◎ more in the Northern dialects;
- ◎ Everyday life; early – military and legal matters;
- ◎ Bag, band, cake, egg, score, scrap, seat, skim, skirt, sky, ill, happy, loose, low, happen, scatter, rid, want.

# Middle English Vocabulary

- ◉ The French Influence: a large number of French borrowings in ME;
- ◉ Several semantic spheres: governments and administration (council, power); military terms (aid, army); law (accuse, case, cause, prove); church and religion (divine, honour, rule, sacrifice) and others;
- ◉ Not only words but also affixes could be borrowed.

# Middle English Vocabulary

- ◉ Borrowing from Classical Languages: not very numerous compared to French borrowings.

# Dialects in Middle English

- great variety; difficult to decide on the number;
- in a rough way: four principal dialects (group of dialects): Northern, East Midland, West Midland, and Southern;
- the dialects differed in pronunciation, vocabulary, inflections;
- The London Dialect (predominantly South-Western, later – East Midland influence).

# Dialects in Middle English

the ending of the pl., pr. ind. of verbs:  
in OE *-th* with some variation of the  
preceding vowel.

in ME: *-eth* in the Southern dialect,  
in the Midland district – *en*,  
in the north it was altered to *–es*,  
*Loves; loven; loveth*