

The comparison and contrast of noun categories in Old and Middle English written standards

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Abstract

Nobody can argue that language does not undergo changes. Language is not static but on the contrary it is alive and it is on a path of constant shifts and changes. English is no exception. There have been substantial changes in the pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, so too have been substantial changes in every other aspect of the structure of the English language. Fundamental changes were brought by the Middle English period in the English language. Many Old English grammatical features were simplified or disappeared. The process of gradual development from the highly synthetic language of the Old English period to the analytic language of the Late Middle English and Modern English period can be observed through the reduction of inflections. However, my paper is concentrated only on some of the inflectional changes (such as: gender in nouns was lost, the number of cases was diminished, the morphological division into stems or types of declension disappeared) that the nominal system underwent from the Old English period to the Middle English period. Furthermore, it describes the process of reduction of inflections in nouns in Middle English period and observes its advancement through the course of the period.

Keywords: *Old English, Middle English, history of English, morphological modifications, nominal system.*

Introduction:

The study of language change is essential as it sheds light on earlier periods of human society. It provides information about the identity of people. Thus, language is a reflection of the realities of the people that lived in these societies. Moreover, language change tells us something about our own reality; it conveys what is in fashion and what is about to fall into disuse as regards language.

The English language is thought to have its starting point with the commencement of the Anglo-Saxons settlement in Britain. Britain was controlled by Romans until 410. At that time the Celts, who spoke Celtic, were the native inhabitants of the British Isles. However, during the Roman domination, many Celts were driven out of England.

The commonly accepted, traditional periodization divides English history into three periods: Old English (OE), Middle English (ME), New English (NE).

The language we refer to as Old English began with the settlement of the Germanic tribes (i.e. the Angles, Saxons, Jutes etc.) who spoke a language called Englisc and was spoken from about AD 500 to about AD 1100, with the first texts appearing around AD 700. By 1100, enough changes had accumulated in Old English for linguists to mark the beginning of the Middle English period. There were four main dialects of Old English: Northumbrian, Mercian (both of which are referred to as Anglian), Jutish dialect (Kentish), and Saxon (West Saxon). Old English itself can be divided into two phases, Early old English (from about 700-900) and Late Old English (from about 900 to 1100). The people who spoke Old English are referred to as Anglo-Saxons, their ancestors coming from the lowland area of northern Germany and possibly from Frisia along the North Sea coast of Germany and the Netherlands.

Although the largest number of texts are in West Saxon, the direct ancestor of Chaucer's Middle English, and hence, Modern English, is the Mercian or Midland dialect.

In the evolution from Old English to Middle English, all parts of the language changed. Many Old English grammatical features were simplified or disappeared. In this paper, I will discuss only the change in the noun system.

Old English is a member of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family. All Indo-European languages had at one time a system of nouns classes referred to as gender. This system still exists in most modern Indo-European languages, with either a three-way distinction between masculine, neuter, and feminine, or a two-way distinction between masculine and feminine. Old English was of the former type. Masculine and neuter forms are similar. Unfortunately, the label "gender" is misleading, since inanimate objects may be masculine or feminine, as well as neuter, and animate things may be neuter, as in **dæg** 'day', masculine, **bōc** 'book', feminine, and **mægden** 'maiden', neuter. The gender of nouns was important in Old English grammar since it governed the correct forms of the adjectives and referring pronouns.

e.g. of *þysum stanum* 'of these stones', masculine, dative, plural
of *eallum/þam dagum* 'in all/those days', masculine, dative, plural
ælc treow 'every tree', masculine, nominative, singular
of *ðæra treowa* 'of these trees', masculine, genitive, plural
ðam wife 'that woman', feminine, dative, singular
ðære næddran, 'that snake', feminine, dative, singular
of *ðæs treowes wæstm* 'the fruit of the tree', masculine, genitive, plural.
The OE Gender, being a classifying feature (and not a grammatical category proper) disappeared together with other distinctive features of the noun declensions.

Besides gender, Old English nouns had two numbers, singular and plural, indicated by different endings. They were well distinguished formally in all declensions. Number proved to be the most stable of all the nominal categories. The noun preserved the formal distinction of two numbers through all the historical periods. Old English nouns also had a system of endings referred to as cases. There were five cases: nominative (for the subject), genitive (possessive), dative (indirect object), accusative (direct object), and instrumental (for agency, instrument, or means). In nouns, the instrumental was not different in form from the dative (and for this reason, in some books, the instrumental is not recognized as a separate case), but a separate instrumental case did exist for the masculine and neuter forms of the definite article and for the set of adjective endings referred to as strong. They were not distinguished formally in all the cases. In most declensions 2 or even 3 forms were homonymous. Besides their basic grammatical functions, all the cases except the nominative were governed by the various prepositions, as for example, the preposition **in** 'into' governed the accusative. However the number of cases in the noun paradigm was reduced from five (distinguished in OE) to two in ME. In OE the forms of the Nominative and the Accusative cases were not distinguished in the plural, and in some stems they coincided also in the singular. The Dative case fell together with the former Nominative-Accusative into what can be termed the Common case. Only the Genitive case was kept distinctly separate from the other cases.

The various endings (case and number) were organized into patterns called declensions which were the most remarkable feature of OE nouns. They were differentiated by the phonetic nature of the noun stem, i.e., whether the stem ended in a consonant or vowel. The total number of declensions exceeded 25. There were only 10 distinct endings and a few relevant root-vowel interchanges used in the noun paradigms. OE system of declension was based on a number of distinctions: the stem-suffix, (1) the gender of

nouns, (2) the phonetic structure of a word, phonetic changes in the final syllables. The declension labels ā-stem, ō-stem, and n-stem come from the field of Germanic philology. Paradigms (Moore & Knott. 1972, pp. 20, 23, 26, 29) of the major declensions are shown below (**stān** ‘stone’, **word** ‘word’, **giefu** ‘gift’ **hunta** ‘hunter’). A paradigm, which is an essential feature of Old English, shows the variety of different forms which any given word can use according to certain principles.

	ā-stem (masc.)	ā-stem (neut.)	ō-stem (fem.)	n-stem
Singular	N stān	word	gief-u	hunt-a
	G stān-es	word-es	gief-e	hunt-an
	D stān-e	word-e	gief-e	hunt-an
	A stān -e	word-e	gief-e	hunt-an
Plural	N stān-as	word	gief-a	hunt-an
	G stān-a	word-a	gief-a	hunt-ena
	D stān-um	word-um	gief-um	hunt-um
	A stān-as	word	gief-a	hunt-an
	I stān-um	word-um	gief-um	hunt-um

Each of these major declensions has a number of variants.

A number of factors contributed to the breakdown of the Old English noun system, among them, the natural process of language change, and contact with Old Norse spoken by the Danes who settled the Midland area in the 800s. Old Norse and Old English were closely related, as can be seen in the comparison of the Old English ā-stem and Old Norse a-declension.

	OE ā-stem (masc.)	ON a-declension (masc) (2)
Singular	N stān	arm-r
	G stān-es	arm-s
	D stān-e	arm-i
	A stān	arm
	I stān-e	
Plural	N stān-as	arm-ar
	G stān-a	arm-a
	D stān-um	orm-um (the ending with u caused a to change to o)
	A stān-as	arm-a
	I stān-um	

Due to the similarity in languages, the Danes were more easily assimilated into Anglo-Saxon society, and a large amount of bilingualism must have existed. (Bloomfield & Newmark, pp. 174-175)

The greatest factor which led to the breakdown of Old English, however, was the Norman Invasion in 1066, when William the Conqueror (Duke of Normandy and, later, William I of England) invaded the island of Britain from his home base in northern France, and settled in his new acquisition along with his nobles and court. After that the Norman French imposed their culture and French language on the native Anglo-Saxon peoples they conquered.

Due to phonetic changes that had begun already by the end of the 10th century, and hastened by the Norman Invasion, word final vowels and vowels in inflectional endings had been leveled to e [ɛ] or [ə], thus the Old English nominative plural **stānas** became the Middle English **stōnes** (the **ō** was pronounced like the aw in saw). The result was a great simplification and reduction in the noun case endings; Old English was rich in inflections while Middle English was poor in them. (Mossé, 1968, p.44)

The endings -a, -u, -e became -e, the endings -as and -es became -es, and the endings -an, -on, -un, -um all became -en and later -e in Middle English. Subsequently, the final -e disappeared itself around the 15th century. The Old English masculine stan `stone´ with all its suffixes -es (gen), -e (dat) in singular and -as (nom), -a (gen), -um (dat) and -as (acc) in plural would become stoone in singular and stones in plural in Middle English. Eage `eye´ and eagan became iye and iyen. This loss of endings makes Middle English appear more modern.

Specific changes in the noun system included a reduction in the number of case endings with a resulting loss in the distinction of grammatical gender. (Mossé, 1968, p.45).

What follows are paradigms for **stōn** ‘stone’ (former masculine **ā**-stem, **trē** ‘tree’ (former neuter **ā**-stem), **soule** ‘soul’ (former feminine **ō**-stem, OE form: **sāwol**), and **nāme** ‘name’ (former n-stem, OE form: **nama**). (Mossé, 1968, p.47)

Singular N stōn	trē	soul-e	nām-e
G stōn-es	trē-s	soul-es	nām-e
D stōn-(e)	trē	soul-e	nām-e
A stōn	trē	soul-e	nām-e

Plural	N stōn-es	trē-s	soul-es	nām-en
	G stōn-es	trē-s	soul-es	nām-ene
	D stōn-es	trē-s	soul-es	nām-en
	A stōn-es	trē-s	soul-es	nām-en

During the course of the Old English period, the **nāme** type disappeared and merged with the **soule** type. Later, the **soule** type merged with the **stōn** type of declension by eliminating the final **-e**, so that by the end of the Middle English period, other than a few exceptions, there was a single type of declension: **stōn** (N, D, A), **stōn-(e)s** (G), and **stōn-(e)s** (plural).

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