

## **LECTURE 8**

# THE MIDDLE ENGLISH GRAMMAR



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- **General characteristics of the ME grammar.**
  - **Development of Nominal categories in ME.**
- 3. The Noun.**
  - 4. The Adjective.**
  - 5. The Pronoun.**
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# General characteristics

**The ME period was a transitional one from OE to NE. It was a period of swift changes in the English language. We may say that since the OE period **the very grammatical type of the language has changed: from a synthetic or inflected language English has developed into the language of analytical type with analytical means of word connection (auxiliary verbs, auxiliary words, change of stress and word-order) prevailing over the synthetic ones****

The syntax came to play a more important role in the language than the morphology of the word. The proportion of the synthetic forms in ME became very small since many of OE synthetic forms had been lost: (1) **the grammatical prefixes** practically **went out of use**; (2) **suppletive form-building was confined to a few words**; (3) **sound alternations were not productive** and their application was generally reduced; (4) **inflexions continued to be used but they were less varied.**

The main direction of development for the nominal parts of speech –  
**MORPHOLOGICAL SIMPLIFICATION.**

Simplifying changes began in PG, continued in OE and were intensified in ME. The situation in the language gave H. Sweet the right to characterize ME as **the period of leveled endings.** Many scholars tried to find the reasons for so drastic changes in the morphological system of English. Some of them explained it by the reduction of endings, others – by the changes in the manner of thinking.

**The Russian scholar Prof. A. Smirnitsky** considered that as regards English both factors promote each other under specific historical conditions of the development of the English language: **phonetic reduction was caused by the shift of stress which, in its turn, promoted the changes in morphology.** Many morphological forms became homonymous and did not show the difference in the grammatical meaning of the words. These processes were precipitated by the **Scandinavian and the Norman conquests.**

# **Scandinavian dialects were close to English:**

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the roots of the words were identical, while the endings were different. People paid more attention to the root. This promoted weakening and subsequent loss of endings. It can be proved by the fact that the reduction of the morphological suffixes (endings) developed most quickly in the Northern dialects and followed by the changes in Midland. The influence of French was felt mostly in the vocabulary.

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ME division of the words into parts of speech has in the main remained the same. **The only new part of speech was the article which appeared in Early ME.** A special stress should be laid upon the fact that **the nominal and the verbal systems developed in widely different way.** The morphology of the nominal parts of speech (the noun, the adjective and the pronoun) **simplified** due to the reduction of vowels in the unstressed positions. Many grammatical categories were lost.



Other categories underwent simplification. **The number of noun cases was reduced to two** as compared with four cases in OE. **The old division into types of declensions disappeared.** It should be mentioned that the nominal system by the age of G. Chaucer was very much like the modern. **In the verbal system the evolution was less uniform: alongside with many simplifying changes in the verb conjugation, the morphological system was enriched with new grammatical categories.**

**Changes in the grammatical categories of nouns.** The OE noun was characterized by gender, number and case and had a rather complicated system of declensions based on the earlier division into stems and correlated with gender. **Gender** of nouns in English **never was a purely grammatical category.** Nouns were not changed according to different genders, but each noun belonged to a certain gender. **It was a lexico-grammatical category.**

Nouns belonged to this or that gender in accordance with the stem of the noun and its ending. **Already in OE nouns of different genders were often similar in form** (*hand*, N; *land*, F; *sand*, M) and were distinguishable by the forms of adjectives and pronouns they agreed with. In the XI-XII centuries the gender of nouns was deprived of its main formal support – the weakened/leveled endings of the adjectives, nouns ceased to indicate the gender.

**In Chaucer's works gender is already a purely lexical category**, like it is in ModE. The gender is referred to as "**he**" or "**she**", if nouns denote living beings and as "it" if they denote animals or inanimate things. Since the very beginning of the ME period the natural feminine gender of such ME words as ***wimman***, ***meiden*** began to prevail over the grammatical masculine and neuter. The other two categories of nouns, **case** and **number**, were preserved in a modified shape.

**The category of case.** During the ME period **the four-case system** which had existed in OE **turned into a two-case system.** It was a slow process that took many hundred years. Already in OE there were homonymous forms in some declensions: **N.** and **Acc.**, both **Sg.** and **Pl.** of *a*-stem declension (N. Sing. *stān* – A. Sing. *stān*, N. Pl. *stānas* – A. Pl. *stānas*); **G.**, **D.** and **Acc. Sg.** of *ō*-stem declension.

The loss of cases started with the Northern dialects where homonymy was very high: not a single noun had eight case-forms (**Table 75, 76**)

	OE	ME (Southern)	ME (Northern)
N	stān	stōn	stōn
G	stānes	stōnes	stōnes
D	stāne	stōn(-e)	stōn
A	stān	stōn	stōn
N	stānas	stōnes	stōnes
G	stāna	stōnes/(-e)	stōnes
D	stānum	stōnes	stōnes
A	stānas	stōnes	stōnes

The reduction of the morphological suffixes (endings) developed most quickly in the Northern dialects and followed by the changes in Midland because **Scandinavian dialects were close to English**: the roots of the words were identical, while the endings were different. People paid more attention to the root. Under such circumstances the root was the element that would help mutual intercourse while the endings would be an obstacle to it. This promoted weakening and subsequent loss of endings.

**The category of number.** It proved to be the most stable of all the nominal categories. **The noun preserved the distinction of the two numbers** (in countables). The plural forms in OE were formed by different endings, depending on the stem and gender (Table 40). The nouns could have in the Nominative plural the endings **-as, -a, -u, -e, zero, -an**, also **sound interchange** in the roots of nouns of the corresponding declension (e.g. OE stān – stānas, scip – scipu, sunu – suna, nama – naman).



**In Early ME the choice of the plural form endings was conditioned not by the stem but by the gender. Masculine nouns usually had -es; *shipes, endes*. Feminine nouns had -e (which derived from OE -a, and later turned into -en. Neuter nouns with the short root-vowel had -es (the same ending as Masc. nouns); those with the long root-vowel preserved the zero (historical) ending.** In the XIII century the ending -es spread to Fem. and Neuter nouns. The process is called **unification (Table 98, ME).**

**The ME language was characterized by the division into numerous dialects; the tempo and direction of changes were different in various dialects.** In the Southern dialects the declensions were rearranged in accordance with gender and largely under the influence of **-n** - stem nouns; the most frequent endings in the Northern and Midland dialects were **-es** (from former a-stems). In the XIV century the bulk of nouns took the ending **-es** in the plural in all the dialects.

# The development of case forms in English

OE	Early ME	Late ME	The development
∅	∅	∅	OE fēt – ME feet
-u	-e	∅	OE Nom. Pl. caru – ME care
-a			
-e			
-an	-en	-es	OE Dat. Pl. stānum – ME stonen - stones
-um			
-as	-es	-es	OE stānas – ME stones – NE stones
-es			

- ❑ In Late ME the ending –es was a dominant marker of nouns in the Plural
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- ❑ In Early NE it extended to more nouns (English words + new words), which built their Plural in different way. Several nouns (former belonging to root stems) however retain their OE Pl. with the mutated vowel (OE mann – menn, foot – feet etc.).
  - ❑ Children, brethren didn't belong to weak declension!!!
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# The Adjective in ME.

The Adjective in ME underwent greater simplifying changes than any other part of speech. It lost all its grammatical categories (with the exception of the degrees of comparison). In OE the adjective was declined and had five cases, two numbers and two types of declensions, weak and strong, which helped to distinguish between specific meanings of the nouns they referred to. In late OE the agreement with the noun became weaker and in the XII c. was lost altogether.

The Adj. lost its grammatical categories in the following order: Gender – Case – Number

In the 14<sup>th</sup> c.  
only four forms  
of adjectives  
were preserved:

	<b>Singular</b>	<b>Plural</b>
<b>Strong</b>	<i><b>good</b></i>	<i><b>goode</b></i>
<b>Weak</b>	<i><b>goode</b></i>	<i><b>goode</b></i>

The difference between strong and weak forms is shown in the Singular with the help of the ending **-e [ə]**, which was very unstable even in the 14<sup>th</sup> c. ***The loss of final -e*** in Late ME made the adjective an entirely uninflected part of speech.

In OE the forms of the degrees of **comparison** were built with the help of suffixes **-ra** for the comparative degree and **-ost** for the superlative degrees. Sometimes suffixation was accompanied by an alternation of the root vowel. A few adjectives had suppletive forms. **In ME the suffixes were weakened to -er and -est correspondingly. The sound alternation became less frequent.** Besides, there appeared parallel forms with and without alternation: ME ***long – lenger – lengest*** and ***long – longer – longest***. A few adjectives preserved suppletive forms (good, much).

The most important innovation in the adjectival system in ME was the growth of analytical forms of the degrees of comparison (adv. more /most).

**The Pronoun in ME.** In OE personal pronouns had 3 genders (in the 3rd person Sg.), 4 cases, 3 numbers (Sg., Pl., Dual) in the 1st and the 2nd persons. In ME personal pronouns underwent considerable changes:

1. Dual number pronouns have disappeared (1<sup>st</sup> person wit, 2<sup>nd</sup> person zit).
2. **OE *hēō*** (the feminine pronoun of the third person Sg.) is gradually replaced by the **ME *shō*** or ***shē***. The origin of these forms is still disputable. They might have developed from the OE feminine demonstrative pronoun *sēo* or were borrowed from Scandinavian.

**OE *hēō* (f) > ME *hē* (f)**  
**OE *hē* (m) > ME *hē* (m)**



3. The 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural pronoun **hī** is gradually replaced by the pronoun **they** (of Scandinavian origin). The objective case is represented both by **hem** (of OE origin) and **them** (Scandinavian).
4. Initial **h-** of the neuter pronoun **hit** is often lost.
5. The Gen. case forms no longer existed in ME, they developed into possessive pronouns. The forms **min, thin** are used before nouns starting with a vowel, the consonant **h** or before a pause; **my, thy** are found before consonants.
6. **Dative and Accusative cases collided into one case called the Objective case** as both performed the functions of the Object in the sentence. The Nominative case was preserved under its name.

**The Demonstrative pronouns.** In OE the so-called **adjective pronouns** agreed with the head-noun in case and gender and some of them in number. **In OE the paradigm of demonstrative pronouns included 19 forms, representing 5 cases, three genders, two numbers.** In ME all the forms of demonstrative pronouns **underwent phonetic and morphological changes** which took place due to the reduction of vowels in unstressed positions. Thus they lost the forms of cases (like adjectives) and **retained only number and deictic ("far-near") distinctions: *this – that; thes/thise – those.***

**The demonstrative pronouns led to the formation of the definite article.** Already in **OE** these pronouns were often used as noun-modifiers and **very often their demonstrative meaning weakened.** This process continued in ME. Bearing no sentence stress **these pronouns weakened to *the* [θə].** There are different points of view as regards the form of the pronoun the article goes back to: to the form ***sē*** of masculine gender or ***pæ̃t*** of neuter gender.

Already in OE the demonstrative pronouns had the additional meaning of definiteness. **In ME the “supportive” function of the demonstrative pronouns** was gradually **lost** because pronouns lost their “marking” force due to the loss of their categories; the demonstrative pronoun acquired new functions – 1) signaling that the word to which it refers is the noun and 2) adding to the noun **the meaning of definiteness.**

**The opposite meaning of**  
( **indefiniteness** began to be expressed  
**by the numeral *ān* (in OE had 5 cases),**  
the semantics of which was close to  
that of indefiniteness. In ME, in some  
situations, the numeric function of ***an***  
began to weaken and it gradually  
turned into the marker of the noun  
with an additional meaning of  
indefiniteness. Thus there appeared  
**the new category of**  
**definiteness-indefiniteness** realized  
through the opposition of two  
members – ***the*** versus ***a(n) or*** ∅.

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**thank you**

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