

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH ADJECTIVES FROM OLD ENGLISH TO MODERN ENGLISH

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Abstract: This paper discusses the development of adjectives in Old English, Middle English, and Modern English. In the discussion it is found that the Old English adjectives had inflectional modification to indicate numbers, genders, cases, and degrees of comparisons, and there was a distinction of weak and strong declensions. In Middle English, most of the declensional distinctions were lost, the general tendency of the language being to drop all suffixes. Adjectives in Modern English do not change their forms to show changes in number, case, or gender; and only a few adjectives of the pronominal class possess meanings which indicate number. One, and every, each modify singular nouns while several, few, many modify only plural substantives. In Modern English no adjective is capable of indicating gender or case.

Key words: *adjective, inflection, declension, gender, case.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper is intended to discuss about, the development and the changes of *the English adjectives*, in Old English, Middle English, and Middle English. All languages in the world develop and change. A language is developing from time to time, and from generations to generations. Speakers of a certain language cannot prevent the language they speak from developing

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or changing (O'Grady, Dobrovolsky and Katamba 1996:315). The development and the change of a language is not only on the lexicon, but it can be on the other elements of the linguistics, and the causes of the changes are various, such as; the political, social, cultural and technological development.

There is a problem, however, of whether the development of the language can be directly observed or not. According to Wardhough (1992:187), it is the genuine characteristic of a language that a language develops, and the process is for centuries. It is impossible to observe the development of a language directly since the age of man is limited. Something, which can be observed and studied are the proofs or the data of the changes. Unfortunately, not every language can give the proofs. Only languages which have written documents from era to era can provide them. The English, Arabic and Javanese belong to those which can be traced, because they have written documents. According to the documents, English, can be categorized into three periods (Baugh and Cable, 1978). The period from 450 to 1150 is known as Old English, from 1100 to 1500 is known as Middle English, and the last, from 1500 up to now is known as Modern English.

The English language of today reflects many developments and changes of the last centuries. The political and social events had profoundly affected the English. The Christianizing of Britain in 597 brought England into contact with Latin civilization and it made additions to the English vocabularies. The Scandinavian invasions made a considerable mixture of the two peoples and their languages. The English, for two centuries, was only used by the lower class while the nobles and those associated with them used French as the result of the Norman Conquest. In 1066, English regained supremacy as the language of all elements of the population, and it greatly changed in both the form and vocabulary. In a similar way the Hundred Years' War, the rise on an important middle class, the Renaissance, the development of English as maritime power, the expansion of the British Empire, and the growth of commerce and industry of science and literature, have each in its way, contributed to make the English language what it is today. Therefore, the development of the *English adjective* can be traced and discussed.

Wardhough (1992:192) differentiates the language changes into two, the internal and external changes. The first happens on the language itself, such as, the changes of the phonology, morphology, semantic, syntactic, and

lexicon system. And the latter undergoes changes because of the external influence such as contacts with other people having different languages. This happens because of word borrowing, word absorbing, phonological changing etc.

Actually the easiest language change to observe is the lexicon change, but as stated above, this paper is intended to discuss the development and the changes of the English adjective. Since the discussion of the English adjective is quite wide, it is limited on the discussion of the *form* and the *comparative* adjective.

THE ENGLISH ADJECTIVE

Many English words belong to more than one parts of speech. Thus *hope, love, sleep*, etc., may be nouns as well as verbs; *chief, general, vegetable*, etc., may be nouns as well as adjectives; *clean, dead, wide*, etc., are adjectives as well as adverbs; *while* may be either a noun, a verb or a conjunction; *since* may be an adverb, a preposition, or a conjunction; adjectives as well as verbs. The examples are as follows: *They like black shoes*, the word *black* is an *adjective*, and in the sentence, *They black their shoes once a week*, the word *black* here is a *verb*.

So it is not so easy to say whether a word is an adjective just by looking at it in an isolation or form. It should be understood that an adjective is a word which is used with a noun or pronoun to describe the animate or inanimate things designated by the noun or pronoun. In other words, an adjective is a word which functions as a modifier to describe a noun or other substantive and traditionally, an adjective has been considered as a part of speech and used to denote word classes. An adjective has some characteristics such as follows:

1. It can freely occur in attributive position as a pre-modifier of a noun, for example: a beautiful park, naughty boys.
2. It can occur alone after a verb as a subject complement, e.g. The car is beautiful; My father looks old.
3. It can be preceded by very and other intensifying words, for example: The car is very beautiful.
4. It can take comparative and superlative forms whether it is inflectionally or by the addition of pre-modifier, e.g.: happy,

happier, the happiest, and beautiful, more beautiful, the most beautiful.

5. Most of adjectives can be added with *-ly* to form adverbs, e.g.: happy – happily, beautiful – beautifully (Frank, 1972: 109–124).

However, not every adjective has these characteristics. A word can be considered as an adjective when it can function as an attribute and/or predicate and it cannot function as a direct object.

DISCUSSION

A. Old English Adjective

The period of the Old English is from 450 to 1150 and it is sometimes described as the period of full inflections, since during most of this period the endings of the noun, the adjective, and the verb are preserved more or less unimpaired. An important feature of the Germanic languages is the development of a twofold declension of the adjective: one, the strong declension; and the other is the weak one. The strong declension is used when the adjective alone must bear the primary burden of indicating the construction of the noun, and the weak or non-distinctive adjective, or a possessive has already performed the office of case, number and gender indication. Examples:

He geseah Haligne gast.

He geseah pone Halgan gast. (Markwardt 1942:302)

The Old English adjective has three genders: masculine, feminine and neutral. It also has the same cases as on: nominative, genitive, dative, with the addition of an instrumental in the masculine and neutral singular. It is necessary to mention only such distinctive endings as the masculine accusative singular *-ne*, the feminine genitive and dative *-re*, and the genitive plural *-ra* as illustrations of this point. In the sense that this inflectional pattern contains such inflections especially associated with certain case and gender forms, it is a *strong declension*.

It can be seen clearly in the following table (Baugh 1978:58) that we find the ending *-a* for a masculine nominative singular adjective, *-an* for the accusative singular of the same gender, and *-e* for a feminine nominative singular. In fact the weak adjective declension corresponds point for point with the weak noun declension, even to the distinctive *-e* form in the neuter accusative singular. For example: An O.E noun *eag* = *eye* becomes *eage* in the neuter nominative singular, and *nam* = *name* becomes *naman* in the masculine dative singular.

		Strong Declension			Weak Declension		
		Masc.	Fem.	Neut.	Masc.	Fem.	Neut
S I N G U L A R	Nom.	god	god	god	god-a	god-e	god-e
	Gen.	god-es	god-re	god-es	god-an	god-an	god-an
	Dat	god-um	god-re	god-um	god-an	god-an	god-an
	Acc.	god-ne	god-e	god	god-an	god-an	god-e
	Ins.	god-e	-	god-e	-	-	-
P L U R A L	Nom.	god-e	-	god	-	god-an	-
	Gen.	god-ra	god-ra	god-ra	God-ena	-	-
	Dat.	God-um	God-um	God-um	-	God-um	-
	Acc.	god-e	god-a	god	-	god-an	-

The strong declension is used predicatively and attributively without any other defining word, or when the adjective is not preceded by a demonstrative or possessive pronoun, such as follows:

Waes seo faemne geong

the woman was young.

Dol cyning

a foolish king.

The weak declension is used after the demonstrative and possessive pronoun or after a definite article:

<i>Se dola cyning</i>	<u>the foolish king</u>
<i>Se ofermoda cyning</i>	<u>the proud king</u>
<i>Min leofa sunu</i>	<u>my dear son</u>

The comparative adjective was formed by means of the suffix –ra, and the superlative –ost, a few adjectives have –est. Examples:

Positive	Comparative	Superlative	Meaning
earn	earnra	earnost	poor
eald	ieldra	ieldest	old

We also find some words with the comparative formed from an adverb or preposition with the superlative –um, or uma, in Latin loan words: *optimus* (best), *summus* (highest). For the word ending in *m* ceased to be felt as having superlative force, some words taken by analogy the additional ending –est. It makes the double superlative with the suffix –umist-, then becomes –ymist- and develops further into –imest, –emest, and mest, such as in *formest*, *midmest*, and further examples are:

Positive	Comparative	Superlative	Meaning
inne	innemra	innemest	within
æfter	æfter	æftermest	after

There are also some irregular comparisons in Old English adjectives, such as:

Positive	Comparative	Superlative
god	bettra	betst
micel	mara	maest

B. Middle English Adjective

The English language between the year 1150 and 1500 has already been characterized as Middle English. It was marked by momentous changes in English language, changes were more extensive and fundamental than

those that have taken place at any time before or since. The changes of this period affected English in both its grammar and its vocabulary and the changes in English grammar may be described as a general reduction of inflection. Endings of the noun and adjective marking distinctions of number and case and often of gender were so altered in pronunciation as to lose their distinctive form and hence their usefulness.

The result of the changes was that in Middle English the indication of gender distinguishing the masculine form was lost, because the ending *-a* (masculine nominative) and *-e* (neuter nominative – accusative and feminine nominative) fell together in a single forms as *-e*. For example:

<u>Old English</u>	<u>Middle English</u>
<i>Se ealda man</i>	the olde man (masculine)
<i>Se ealde talu</i>	the olde tale (feminine)
<i>Paet ealde swurd</i>	the olde sword (neuter)
	(Baugh and Cable, 1978: 160)

The weak adjective ending *-an* and *-um* had already fallen together as *-en*. And because of the loss of final *-n* they also became to have only *-e*. But, there are very few survivals of the Old English genitive plural in *-ra* as Middle English *-er*, notably in *aller* from Old English *ealra*. Thus, the singular and plural forms of the weak adjective declension, *-a*, *-e*, *-an*, *-ena*, and *-um*, were reduced to a single ending in *-e*.

Middle English monosyllabic adjectives ending in consonants remained uninflected throughout the singular and had *-e* throughout the plural:

Singular	Plural
brod	brode
god	gode
glad	glade

The ending of accusative masculine singular *-ne*, the genitive and dative feminine singular *-e* (*-ere*) and a few isolated forms of the genitive plural were remained unchanged, in Chaucer²:

In modern English many adjectives are formed from words which are other parts of speech by the addition of suffixes (*-ful, -less, -y, -ly, -like, etc.*) French, Latin, and Greek suffixes, including *-ous, -ant, -ent, -ate, -ac (-ic), -able, (-ible), -esque, -ine, -ive, -ory, -ose, etc.* also appear in many English adjectives: *valorous, rampant, fluent, ornate, cardiac, poetic, tolerable, edible, grotesque, canine, civil, juvenile, elective, introductory, and verbose.* In this case, Crystal (1995: 211) proposes some suffixes which typically indicate that a word is an adjective:

Suffix	Add to	Result	Suffix	Add to	Result
-ble	verb	washable	-less	noun	restless
-al	noun	musical	-like	noun	childlike
-ed	noun	ragged	-ly	noun	friendly
-esque	noun	romanesque	-ous	noun	desirous
-ful	noun	hopeful	-some	noun	brothersome
-ic	noun	heroic	-worthy	noun	praiseworthy
-ish	noun	foolish	-y	noun	sandy
-ive	verb	effective	—	—	—

In comparison, adjectives of one syllable are regularly compared by adding to the positive form *-er* for comparative, and *-est* for superlative. The only exceptions to this rule are few monosyllables, which are difficult to pronounce with the *-er* and *-est* suffixes, examples: *real, wrong, like, etc.* Examples are:

Positive	Comparative	Superlative
clear	clearer	clearest
wide	wider	widest
sweet	sweeter	sweetest

More and *most* are employed for more than two syllables adjectives. Examples are:

Positive	Comparative	Superlative
beautiful	more beautiful	most beautiful
difficult	more difficult	most difficult
diligent	more diligent	most diligent

To show special emphasis, some adjectives of one or two syllables have both patterns of comparison: calm, calmer, calmest or calm, more calm, most calm. When it is used in the appositive position adjectives are generally compared with more and most: *I never knew a man more calm or more kind than you*. For phonetic reason many adjectives ending in *-al, -ar, -ard, -en, -ure, -erse, -ful, -ed, -om, -ic, is, ive, ous, -ose, -que, etc.* are compared by the employment of *more* or *most*. Examples are:

Positive	Comparative	Superlative
musical	more musical	most musical
hopeful	more hopeful	most hopeful
heroic	more heroic	most heroic
effective	more effective	most effective
desirous	more desirous	more desirous

Compound adjectives are sometimes compared by inflecting the first element of the compound, for example, (positive, comparative, superlative) *well-known, better-known, and best-known*. There are also some adjectives which are not regularly compared with *-er*, or *-est* have superlative forms in *-est* and comparative with *more*. The *-est* superlative is preferred when the adjective has pronominal function or preceded by the definite article, for example: *He is the handsomest of the boys*.

CONCLUSION

It is right, as stated above in the introduction by Katamba and Wardhough, that a language is changing from time to time. And of course, it happens to English. The English of a thousand years ago was different from the English of five hundred years ago, and so the English of today will be different from the English of the fourth millennium.

The differences of the English from centuries to centuries are not only on a certain aspect, but on many aspects as well as on the English adjective. The Old English adjective had inflectional modification to indicate numbers, genders, cases, and degrees of comparisons, and there was a distinction of weak and strong declensions. In Middle English, most of the



declensional distinctions were lost, the general tendency of the language is to drop all suffixes. Adjectives in Modern English do not change their forms to show changes in number, case, or gender; and only a few adjectives of the pronominal class possess meanings which indicate number. *One*, and *every*, each modify singular nouns while *several*, *few*, *many* modify only plural substantives. In Modern English no adjective is capable of indicating gender or case.

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