

Lecture 9 The Middle English Period. The Noun.

The Middle English period (c. 1100–1500) represents a critical transitional phase in the history of the English language. Following the Norman Conquest of 1066, English underwent profound French and Latin influence, especially in vocabulary, law, administration, and culture. Grammar was simplified compared to Old English, with reduced inflections and more fixed word order, laying the groundwork for later English development.

Literature flourished during this period, exemplified by Geoffrey Chaucer and other Middle English writers, reflecting the evolving language and social realities. Despite strong regional dialects, Middle English gradually regained prestige as the language of the people, preparing the way for Early Modern English. Overall, this period illustrates the dynamic interplay between social change, cultural influence, and linguistic evolution, making it a foundational era in the development of the English language.

The Middle English period spans roughly 1100 to 1500, following Old English (c. 450–1100) and preceding Early Modern English (c. 1500–1700).

Key historical events shaped this period: Norman Conquest (1066): William the Conqueror's victory introduced Norman French as the language of the court, law, and administration. Feudal system: Social hierarchy influenced literacy, education, and official language use. Hundred Years' War (1337–1453): Strengthened English national identity. Black Death (1347–1351): Caused population decline, labor shortages, and social mobility, affecting language use among common people.

2. Linguistic Features of Middle English: English absorbed a large number of French words (especially in law, administration, art, and cuisine). Examples: court, justice, judge, castle, beef, pork. Latin remained important for religion, scholarship, and education. The Great Vowel Shift began toward the end of the period, gradually changing vowel pronunciation. Regional accents and dialects were prominent; no single standard existed.

During the Middle English Period the E noun lost its types of declensions so that towards the end of the Middle English Period (by the 14th century). They didn't distinguish declensions. 4 case system turned into 2 case system: N. Fissh fisshes (goes back to the -a-stem declension) G. Fisshes fisshes (goes back to the -a-stem declension) The plural and the genitive of the unified paradigm goes back to the old «-as reduction» of the -a-stem declension. As to the irregular nouns, they have always been irregular (non-standard).

Together with the loss of endings the E noun lost its category of grammatical gender. The weak -n-stems declension resisted analogy longer than all the other stems. The development of the noun declension lasted for about 3 centuries and the -n-stems resisted unification longer than other stems. Now: ox - oxen (настоящее только это), brother - brethren, child - children and in some dialects: horse - horsen.

Literature reflected social and linguistic changes:

Geoffrey Chaucer (Canterbury Tales) is a key example of Middle English literary achievement. Religious texts, romances, chronicles, and allegories were written in Middle English.

3. Social and Cultural Influence

Middle English became increasingly the language of the people, replacing French in many official and literary contexts by the late 14th century.

Education and literacy expanded slowly through monasteries, churches, and emerging universities.

Trade, urbanization, and mobility led to the spread of regional dialects, some of which influenced Modern English.

The adjective began to lose its markers even earlier than the noun. The process began at the end of The OLD ENGLISH PERIOD. The development went along the same lines: that is - the reduction of the endings led to dropping and simplification. The adjective lost the distinction between the strong and the weak declension. The adjective markers of agreement with the noun. Towards the end of the Middle English Period we find only some relics of the old system of declension: in Chaucer's works - -e goode - the plural of the strong declension, but it was already occasional. As to the degrees of comparison alongside the old system with the suffixes er, est there developed a new way - the analytical way with «more, most». The development was to some extent influenced by the French language. So towards the end of the Middle English Period we had two parallel ways of the formation of degrees of comparison. However even at the beginning of the NEP there wasn't a fixed rule as to which of the two forms to use. (Shakespeare - most beautifullest).

4. Key Points of the Middle English Period

1. Transition stage between Old English and Early Modern English.
2. Norman French influence reshaped vocabulary, administration, and culture.
3. Simplification of grammar and more regular word order.
4. Literature flourished in both religious and secular domains, reflecting linguistic change.

5. Regional dialects played an important role in the evolution of standard English.

In OE there were 9 declensions which depended on the type of stem. The Middle English Period. The Adjective.

In OE the groups of pronouns were fewer in number. The system of the personal pronouns had changed greatly. In the place of the old 4-case system we find a 2-case system in ME. The old nominative case has remained up to now except for «you» («зев») in which the old N. R. Form was replaced by the objective case form. (старая форма «це» - is used in dialects and in spoken language) as to u>thou (библия + возвышенный стиль) The modern objective case developed from the oblique cases (the D. And the A.); with some of them (I) the D. Case became the unified form, with some (it) the unified form was the A. Case. As to the G. Case it left the case system and gave rise to a new group of possessive pronouns. As to the Dem. 67

Pronouns like all the other declinable parts of speech they lost their case forms, their forms of the gender: they have preserved only the pl./sg. Forms: this - these / that-those. There was the group of interrogative pronouns. They only changed their pronunciation. Generally they have always been the same. The other groups developed during the Middle English Period. Some of them developed as compound words.

The Middle English Period. The Verb.

NON - FINITE FORMS. The development of the non-finite forms: the infinitive and the participles may well be described as gradual verbalization. The OE Infinitive was a verbal noun. During the Middle English Period the Infinitive lost all its noun features except for some of its syntactic functions. Its suffix -an was reduced and dropped -an>-en>-e>zero.

The same is true of the participle. The EP lost its nominal morphological characteristic (and the category of agreement with the noun). Alongside this loss the Infinitive and the P. Began to develop verbal features and categories. The Gerund is a much later development. FINITE FORMS. The classes (4 classes in OE) of verbs were in the main preserved. The speakers still distinguished the classes. But there were certain very important developments. The number of strong verbs was reduced from 300 in OE to 200 in ME. At the same time some strong verbs became weak, they lost their vowel gradation and took on the dental suffix: to help, to climb, to walk and some others. At the same time there was a mixture of classes: strong verbs remained strong, but they changed their class, their gradation (4th <> 5th - more often): to speak (5 B 4). As to the weak verbs the 3rd class stopped existing: two classes.

The suffixes were -du and -ed. The most regular was the second weak class - it later gave us the standard suffix - ed for standard or regular verbs. The Middle English Period witnessed the development of weak verbs which then turned into regular verbs. A great number of verbs joined the class of regular verbs. The new formations which joined the group of regular verbs were French (and some other languages). As to the preterit-present verbs they preserved their modal meaning, but their paradigm had changed greatly. Towards the end of the Middle English Period they lost their infinitive and participles and turned into defective verbs. Some of their old forms were dropped or gave rise to other words: cunning < can (cunnan); own (owe) < ought (azan). As to the suppletives they have always been the same: to be, to go.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ANALYTICAL FORMS.

In OE there were only 4 grammatical categories. They are the Tense (Present & Preterit), the Mood, Person and Number. All of them were synthetic. But during the Middle English Period some other categories which were mainly analytical appeared. One of the first to develop was the category of time correlation. In OE there were many constructions with the verb «to have» in its main meaning +an object +an attribute, which referred to the object (to have something done). Later this construction developed into the Perfect Form. We see it when Participle II lost its agreement with the object and when later the object took the position after the Participle.

This process was going in the middle of the Middle English Period => «to have done something». The Continuous forms developed in the same way. From a free form combination to a morphological form. In the beginning it was a compound nominal predicate with the verb «to be» as a link-verb and Participle I as a predicative. And originally it didn't express a process, it meant only permanent characteristic as a Present indefinite now.

The Continuous form acquired its modern meaning much later in the 16th century, even after Shakespeare. The process which took place was the same as with the Perfect form: originally the Participle agreed with the subject, but then it lost its category of agreement and became a part of the Continuous form. The same process took place with the Passive which developed from a free word combination to a fixed morphological form. Originally it was a compound nominal predicate with the verb «to be» + Participle II as a predicative. Gradually the Participle lost its agreement with the subject of the sentence. As we know the Future Tense Form was not represented in the OE and developed only during the Middle English Period.

It developed from a combination which was a compound verbal modal predicate with the verb «shall» and «will». But even in the time of Shakespeare this combination could be still to either as a modal predicate or as a Future form. The Perfect Continuous Form was one of last to appear. It appeared at the beginning of the NEP. And the last to appear was the Continuous form of the Passive which began developing only in the 19th century. In OE we may find passive infinitive, though no passive forms far finite forms may be found.

Other analytical non-finite forms developed during the Middle English Period, but only after corresponding analytical forms of finite forms had developed. The gerund was also one of the last to appear. There are several theories concerning the development of the Gerund and the most current of them is that it developed as a mixture of Participle I and the verbal noun with the preposition «on» in the function of the predicative (He was on hunting. OE).

The Middle English period was a time of profound transformation for the English language, shaped by historical events, social changes, and cultural influences. The Norman Conquest of 1066 was a pivotal event that introduced Norman French as the language of the aristocracy, the court, and administration. As a result, English absorbed a vast number of French loanwords, especially in areas such as law, governance, art, literature, and cuisine. Latin also remained an important influence in religion, education, and scholarly writing, creating a multilingual environment that enriched English vocabulary.

Grammar underwent significant simplification compared to Old English. Noun declensions and case endings declined, the use of prepositions increased, and word order became more fixed (SVO). These changes made English more regular and adaptable, paving the way for Early Modern English.

Pronunciation began to shift, especially with the early stages of the Great Vowel Shift, while strong regional dialects coexisted, reflecting the geographic and social

diversity of England. Despite this variation, the late Middle English period saw the emergence of a more standardized written form, particularly in literary works and official documents.

The literary output of the period, including Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, religious texts, romances, chronicles, and allegories, demonstrates both the richness and the evolving nature of Middle English. Literature became a key vehicle for social commentary, moral instruction, and entertainment, reflecting the experiences and values of both elite and common populations.

Social and cultural shifts, such as the rise of towns, trade, and guilds, the effects of the Black Death, and the Hundred Years' War, also influenced language use. English gradually regained prestige, replacing French in many official and literary contexts by the late 14th century. The period thus represents a bridge between Old English and Early Modern English, illustrating how historical, social, and cultural forces shaped linguistic evolution.

Overall, the Middle English period demonstrates the dynamic interplay between conquest, culture, literature, and social change, resulting in a language that was more flexible, expressive, and ready to evolve into the Early Modern English of the 16th century.

Questions to Lecture 9

1. What are the major differences of MidEng parts of speech?
2. What are the main peculiarities of the Lowland Scottish Dialect?
3. What are the chief features of the Welsh and the Irish accents?
4. How many dialects exist in the USA?
5. What are their major peculiarities?
6. Are there any significant characteristic features of Canadian English? 3. What are the most common modern variations of American English?