

July 11 [June 27], 2003

CLASS 6: Breakdown of the Inflectional System

Middle English Inflections and Sound Changes

- nouns and adjectives: OE endings (-a, -e, -an, -u, -o, -um, -ra, -ena, -ne) **reduced to schwa /ə/**
- verbal paradigm extremely **reduced** (see below)
- the example of **rhyme words** in “Alysoun”

<i>ymake</i>	<	<i>macian</i>	<i>forsake</i>	<	<i>forsacan</i>
<i>take</i>	<	<i>tacan</i>	<i>wake</i>	<	<i>wacian</i>
<i>make</i>	<	<i>gemaca</i>	<i>sake</i>	<	<i>sacu</i>

- even in **unstressed syllables**, there was a **levelling to schwa**, spelled <e>: *hevene* 2, *levedi* 23

Two sound changes

Two conditions for lengthening

1. in **open syllables**, only with the OE short vowels *a, e, o*
 - open syllable defined by sequence of V+C+V
 - example of ME *take* from OE *tacan*
 - other examples: *stele* ‘to steal’ and *throthe* ‘throat’
 - NE *staff, staves*
- larger picture of *take/tacan*
 - levelling by 1200: -*an* becomes -*e*, pronounced as schwa
 - lengthening by 1350: -*a*- in open syllable
 - final *e*: in 14c final -*e* dropped from pronunciation
- problems with final -*e*: not always a sign of lengthening
 - words like *wife, rode, fate* all had long vowels to begin with
 - scansion? See “Alysoun” line 14: *hire browe broune, hire eye blake*

2. before certain consonant clusters: *mb, nd, ld, rd*

- examples: *climb, kind, child*

Three conditions for shortening

1. OE long vowel before a **consonant cluster**
 - e.g. OE *wifmann* > *wymmen* in “Alysoun” (line 3)
 - also the preterites of certain verbs: cf. OE *hidde*
2. in **unstressed syllables**
 - in “Alysoun” *semlokest* 10 once had a long vowel in the middle syllable
 - unstressed words like *the* and *a*
 - compounds like *wisdom* show two conditions
3. the **first syllable** of three-syllable words
 - *holiday, wilderness, brekefast* etc.

Some sound changes

- simplification of initial consonants: *lud* 8, *levedi* 23 from OE *hlud*, *hlæfdige*
- the *ge-* prefix from OE has become *y-*: *y-hent* 1, *y-lent* 24
- phonemic distinction of /f, v/ now indicated in spelling
- *hevene* 2, *loue* 3 / *love* 9, *lyven* 19, *levedi* 23 from OE *heofon*, *lufu*, *lyfe*, *hlæfdige*

Orthography

- *u/v* determined by position, not sound: *bytuene*, *vnder*
- *ou* for OE long *u*: *foul* 7, *broune* 14
- *i/y* interchangeable
- *ch* in words like *ich*: *ichabbe* 1, *ichot* (= *ich wot*) 2, *ich* 9, *icham* 12
- *th* versus thorn: also *sh* in *Mersh* instead of OE *sc*
- *wh* for OE *hw*: *when* 6
- yogh *ȝ*: a 3-shaped letter from the form of <g> used in OE
- *qu* for *cw*; also *gh* for medial *h* are not represented in “Alysoun”

Morphology

- the definite article (which didn’t exist in OE!)
- levelling of endings: *wonges waxeth* (“Alysoun” line 22)
- other verb endings: OE *-on*, *-an*, *-en* all become either *-en* or *-e* (“Alysoun” lines 19-20)
- nouns: most endings “leveled” to *-e*; survivors: plural *-s* *wonges* 22 and genitive *-s* *nihtes* 21

Some consequences of the loss of inflected endings

- loss of grammatical distinctions (case endings, verb endings)
- increased use of function words
- increased reliance on a fixed word order

Contributing influences to the loss of endings

- strong accent on the root syllable, typical of Germanic languages
- competing forms
- absence of a standard dialect

A Closer Look at the Inflectional Breakdown

Sample noun declensions in Old English (by no means an exhaustive list)

A. The *a*-stem declension: *stan* ‘stone’

	SG	PL
NOM	<i>stan</i>	<i>stanas</i>
ACC	<i>stan</i>	<i>stanas</i>
GEN	<i>stanes</i>	<i>stana</i>
DAT	<i>stane</i>	<i>stanum</i>

B. The *u*-stem declension: *sunu* ‘son’

	SG	PL
NOM	<i>sunu</i>	<i>sunas</i>
ACC	<i>sunu</i>	<i>sunas</i>
GEN	<i>sunas</i>	<i>sunas</i>
DAT	<i>sunas</i>	<i>sunum</i>

C. The consonant-stem declension: *foot* ‘foot’

	SG	PL
NOM	<i>foot</i>	<i>feet</i>
ACC	<i>foot</i>	<i>feet</i>
GEN	<i>feet</i>	<i>feota</i>
DAT	<i>feet</i>	<i>feotum</i>

D. The *n*-stem declension: *guman* ‘man’

	SG	PL
NOM	<i>guman</i>	<i>guman</i>
ACC	<i>guman</i>	<i>guman</i>
GEN	<i>guman</i>	<i>gumena</i>
DAT	<i>guman</i>	<i>gumum</i>

4 cases (NOM, ACC, GEN, DAT) x 2 numbers (SG, PL) x 3 genders (MASC, FEM, NEUT) = **24 slots** but only **nine formal marks** (due to earlier changes): Ø, umlaut, *-u*, *-a*, *-e*, *-an*, *-um*, *-as*, *-es*

• some general rules:

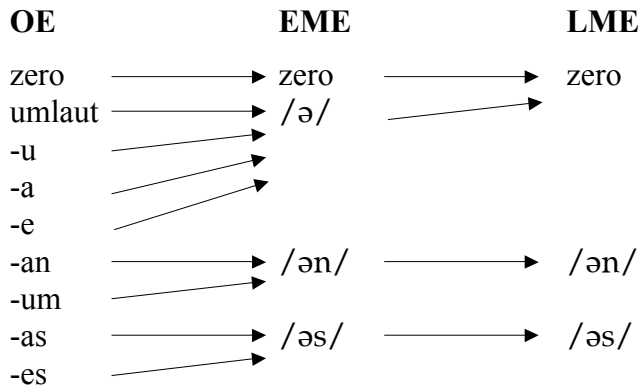
-um is always dative plural

-es is always genitive

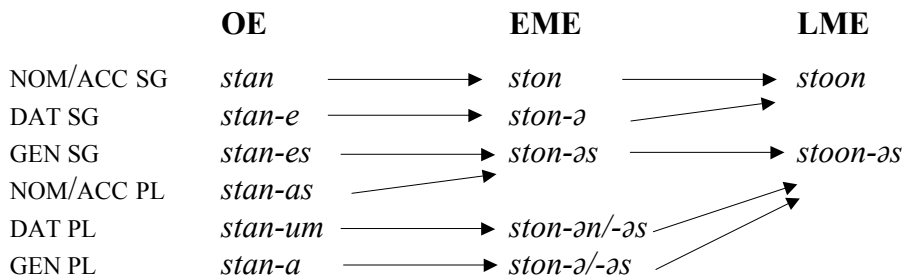
-as is always plural

-e typically marks dative singular

In **late OE/early ME**, unstressed vowels become *-e* (schwa /ə/) and **final -m & -n** merge. This gives just **four formal marks** in ME. By later ME, **final /ə/** isn't pronounced anymore:



Witness the fate of the ***a*-stem declension** (to which all other declensions eventually collapsed):



The ME ending /ən/ (**written -en**) was **more widespread in plurals** than now (e.g. *eyen* ‘eyes’, *shoon* ‘shoes’ etc.). Formally, though, **the LME system is parallel to the NE one** because it distinguishes only **singular vs. plural** and **genitive from non-genitive forms**.

The same operations reduced both the **article and adjectival endings to zero** (adjectives went through a phase of systematic **-e vs. zero** ending, as in Chaucer, but this was lost around 1400).

Strong verb classes in OE:

CLASS		PRESENT	PAST SG	PAST PL	PAST PART
I	‘to ride’	<i>ridan</i>	<i>rad</i>	<i>ridon</i>	<i>ridden</i>
II	‘to creep’	<i>creopan</i>	<i>creap</i>	<i>crupon</i>	<i>cropen</i>
IIIa	‘to find’	<i>findan</i>	<i>fand</i>	<i>fundon</i>	<i>funden</i>
IIIb	‘to help’	<i>helpan</i>	<i>healp</i>	<i>hulpon</i>	<i>holpen</i>
IV	‘to bear’	<i>beran</i>	<i>baer</i>	<i>baeron</i>	<i>boren</i>
V	‘to tread’	<i>tredan</i>	<i>traed</i>	<i>traedon</i>	<i>treden</i>
VI	‘to bake’	<i>bacan</i>	<i>boc</i>	<i>bocon</i>	<i>bacen</i>
VII	‘to blow’	<i>blowan</i>	<i>bleow</i>	<i>bleowon</i>	<i>blowen</i>

OE verb endings:

PRESENT	INDICATIVE	SUBJUNCTIVE
1SG	<i>-e</i>	<i>-e</i>
2SG	<i>-(e)st</i>	<i>-e</i>
3SG	<i>-eþ</i>	<i>-e</i>
PL	<i>-aþ</i>	<i>-en</i>
PAST		
1SG	∅	<i>-en</i>
2SG	<i>-e</i>	<i>-en</i>
3SG	∅	<i>-en</i>
PL	<i>-on</i>	<i>-en</i>

ME vowel reduction and borrowing into indicative and subjunctive *-en*:

PRESENT	NORTH	MIDLANDS	SOUTH
1SG	<i>-e</i>	<i>-e</i>	<i>-e</i>
2SG	<i>-es</i>	<i>-est</i>	<i>-est</i>
3SG	<i>-es</i>	<i>-eþ/-es</i>	<i>-eþ</i>
PL	<i>-es</i>	<i>-en/-es</i>	<i>-eþ</i>
PAST			
SG	∅	∅ (<i>-est</i> in 2SG)	∅ (<i>-est</i> in 2SG)
PL	∅	<i>-en</i>	<i>-en</i>

Subsequent **loss of *-e(n)* and 2SG** gives the **NE paradigm**: ∅ throughout, *-s* 3SG PRES.

Reading

📖 Blake 1992: ch. 4 — 📖 Fischer at al. 2000: ch. 3