

5 Middle English

5.1 Historical background of Middle English

The development of the English language was strongly influenced by political changes following the Norman Conquest. In 1066, the Norman army led by William the Conqueror (Duke of Normandy) defeated the Anglo-Saxons at the Battle of Hastings and killed the last Anglo-Saxon king, Harold II. This event foreshadowed the end of the Old English and the beginning of the Middle English period. The linguistic effects of the arrival of the Normans became apparent with considerable delay, therefore the beginning of the Middle English period has been set by scholars to the end of the 11th century or even a later date. The traditional periodization distinguishes three subperiods of Middle English: Early Middle English (1100–1250), Ordinary Middle English (1250–1400), and Late Middle English (1400–1500). However, recent research suggests that Old English was not only spoken but also written for almost one hundred years after the Norman Conquest. Da Rold et al. (2010) suggest the following modification of the traditional periodization:

Updated Old English (1066–1150)

Early Middle English (1150–1325)

Late Middle English (1325–1500)

When William the Conqueror became King William I of England, the Normans (Norsemen who had previously conquered Northern France) seized political, economic, military, and religious power. They became the lords of the Anglo-Saxon population, which, however, continued to speak English. The Normans spoke Norman French and at the beginning of their rule, most of them did not learn English and could not communicate with the Anglo-Saxon population. Due to various social and political factors, the situation changed gradually. At the beginning of the 13th century, the descendant of William the Conqueror, King John, lost the province of Normandy and by the end of the 14th century, the Anglo-Normans lost all their properties in France. The loss of ties with France resulted in the adoption of English as an official language by Anglo-Normans. The influence of the French language on English became noticeable only at the end of the 13th

century. Most loanwords adopted by the middle of the 13th century are of Norman French origin, while most words adopted later come from Central French (see Chapter 8).

In the Old English period, there was a rich tradition of literature written in English, especially in the West-Saxon dialect. In the Early Middle English period, written English became scarce. Most documents were written in Latin and French. Latin was the language of religious and learned texts; French became the language of law, administration, and literature. The authors of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Peterborough Chronicle), who continued to write in English after the Norman Conquest, had to abandon their work in 1154.

Due to the political changes after 1066, the West Saxon dialect lost its dominant position and the literary tradition of the first standardized form of written English (Winchester Standard) was interrupted. The political and cultural centre moved from Winchester to London, where a new standard (Chancery Standard) started taking shape after 1400. The London and the East Midland dialects became the basis for the development of Standard English; important figures in this process were, among others, Geoffrey Chaucer, the author of *The Canterbury Tales* and William Caxton, the first English printer, who published Chaucer's works.

Midland dialects were a continuation of Mercian dialects, which developed in close contact with Scandinavian dialects during the Old English period. Scandinavian influence continued to play an important role also during the Middle English period. Most scholars distinguish the following Middle English dialects: East Midland, West Midland, Southern, Northern, and Kentish. Their geographical distribution is presented on the map below.



Geographical distribution of Middle English dialects after Mossé (1945, 1949)

5.2 Middle English grammar

During the Middle English period, the English language underwent a number of phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic changes. Due to the reduction of unstressed syllables, the rich inflectional system of Old English was strongly simplified and word order became less flexible. English gradually moved from a synthetic language to an analytical language using prepositions and relatively fixed word order patterns to indicate the meaning of the lost inflectional endings. Middle English is closer to Modern English than Old English and resembles modern West Frisian, one of the closest relatives of English.

Subchapters 5.2.1–5.2.3 below outlining the Middle English inflectional system of nouns, verbs and selected pronouns represent a modified version of passages selected from Hladký's *Guide to Pre-Modern English* (2003, pp. 176–181).

5.2.1 Middle English nouns

The complex system of Old English inflection of nouns was reduced during the Middle English period to only two distinct ending patterns, the vocalic declension and the consonantal N-declension. These two patterns represent a merger of a number of different nominal paradigms. Since non-productive nouns adopted the endings of productive paradigms, the number of different endings was reduced. Differences in inflection between nouns of different gender disappeared. The category of gender underwent a radical transformation during the Middle English period: grammatical gender was gradually replaced by natural gender. The simplification of nominal inflection from Old English to Middle English is presented below.

Vocalic declension

	<i>Masculine</i> 'stone'		<i>Neuter</i> 'word'		<i>Feminine</i> 'tale'	
	<i>OE</i>	<i>ME</i>	<i>OE</i>	<i>ME</i>	<i>OE</i>	<i>ME</i>
<i>Singular</i>						
<i>Nom.</i>	stān	stōn	word	word	talū,-o	tāle
<i>Gen.</i>	stānes	stōnes	wordes	wordes	tale	tāle(s)
<i>Dat.</i>	stāne	stōn(e)	worde	word(e)	tale	tāle
<i>Acc.</i>	stān	stōn	word	word	tale	tāle
<i>Plural</i>						
<i>Nom.</i>	stānas	stōnes	word	wordes	tala,-e	tāles
<i>Gen.</i>	stāna	stōnes	worda	wordes	tala,-ena	tāles
<i>Dat.</i>	stānum	stōnes	wordum	wordes	talum	tāles
<i>Acc.</i>	stānas	stōnes	word	wordes	tala,-e	tāles

N – declension

	<i>OE</i>	<i>ME</i>
	'name'	
<i>Singular</i>		
<i>Nom.</i>	nama	nāme
<i>Gen.</i>	naman	nāmes
<i>Dat.</i>	naman	nāme
<i>Acc.</i>	naman	nāme

Plural

<i>Nom.</i>	naman	nāmen
<i>Gen.</i>	namena	nāmene
<i>Dat.</i>	namum	nāmen
<i>Acc.</i>	naman	nāmen

The *-(e)s* ending was gradually adopted as a general plural ending by the majority of Middle English nouns. However, in the Southern and Kentish dialects the plural *-en* remained much longer than in the Midland and Northern dialects. It was even extended to nouns which were strong in Old English and to Anglo-Norman words (*children* – OE *cildru*; *eyren* ‘eggs’ – OE *ǣgru*; *housen* – OE *husas*; *sunen* ‘sons’ – OE *suna*; *worden* – OE *word*). The *-en* plural was replaced by the *-(e)s* plural in the Northern and the North Midland dialects.

Some Middle English nouns had no ending in the plural, e.g. *folk*, *hors*, *pound*, *sheepe*, *swyn*, *yeer*. These were monosyllabic neutral nouns with a long vowel or with a short vowel before a consonant cluster, which did not have a zero plural ending already in Old English. Another type of the zero plural is the umlaut plural in nouns originally belonging to the athematic declension, e.g. *foot* – *feet*, *man* – *men*, *goose* – *geese*.

The change from synthesis to analysis is well demonstrated on the percentages of the inflectional genitive and the periphrasis with *of*: at the end of the 10th century, the ratio was 99 to 1 per cent, in the 12th century it was 93.7 to 6.3, and in the 14th century 15.6 to 84.4 per cent. In the final stage, however, the inflectional genitive recovered some of its lost ground and acquired some new functions.

5.2.2 Middle English verbs

The conjugation of verbs underwent simplifying changes similar to those within the inflection of nouns. The simplification of the synthetic forms of verbs was accompanied by the development of new analytical forms and new grammatical categories; the ultimate result of these changes is the present system of tenses and aspects. The simplification of the synthetic forms and the grammaticalization of new analytical forms was a long process, which ended only in the Early Modern English period. One of the results of the simplification of verbal endings was the loss of the distinction between the indicative and the subjunctive forms.

Although Middle English conjugation was simplified, verbal forms had numerous variants in various Middle English dialects. For example, the plural ending of the present tense was *-eth* (*we telleth*) in the Kentish, Southern and West Midland dialects, *-en* (*than longen folk to goon* – Chaucer, Prologue to the Canterbury tales in East Midland dialects, and *-es* in Northern dialects.

The present tense singular endings were *-e* in the first person (*ich here* – ‘I hear’), *-(e)st* in the second person (*thou speakest*), and *-eth/es* in the third person (he *cometh/comes*; spelled also as *comeþ*).

Dialectal differences existed also in the form of the present participle. The OE ending *-ende* changed into *-inde/-ende* in the Southern and Midland dialects, and into *-ande* in Northern and in North Midland dialects (very likely under the influence of the ON ending *-andi*). In the 13th century, the ending was replaced by *-ing(e)* in the southern and central parts of the country. Occasionally the two forms appeared side by side (*ne goinde ne rīdinge*).

The system of strong and weak verbs was completely rearranged and broken up in the Middle English period. Old English possessed a total of about 300 strong verbs. About one hundred of these verbs were lost in the transition period between Old English and Middle English, and about eighty became weak and ‘regular’ (e.g. *bow* (II), *help* (III), *climb* (III), and *wash* (VI)). The reverse process, a weak verb becoming strong and ‘irregular’, was much less frequent (e.g. *wear*, *hide*, *ring*, or *dig*). Borrowed and newly-formed verbs were weak (i.e. ‘regular’).

5.2.3 Middle English pronouns

Personal pronouns

Singular	1st Person	2nd Person	Masculine	3rd Person	Neuter (Impersonal)
				Feminine	
<i>Nom.</i>	ich, i, ī ik (northern)	þou, þu ye (from the 14th century)	he	schē, sche	hit, it
<i>Pos.</i>	my, myne, myn	þy, þyne, þyn	his	hire, hir	his
<i>Obl.</i>	mē, me	þē, þe	him	hire, hir	hit, it
<i>Plural</i>					
<i>Nom.</i>	wē, we	ye		thei, they	
<i>Pos.</i>	our, ours	your, yours		their, her	
<i>Obl.</i>	ūs, us	you		hem, them,	

In Chaucer's time, gender was already a lexical category because the weakened and levelled endings of nouns and adjectives ceased to indicate gender. Therefore *he* and *sche* referred to human beings and *hit/it* to inanimate objects and animals. The OE pronoun of the 3rd person plural *hīē, hī, hēō* was replaced by the Scandinavian loan *they*. For some time the two forms occurred side by side: *That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke* (Chaucer, Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*). *Them/theim* began to appear in the 15th century and *them* was fully established in the 16th century. Modern English *'em* is the weak form of OE *hem* but now it is felt as a clipped form of *them*. The convergence of cases began in Old English when the West Saxon datives of *ic* (*me*) and *þu* (*þe*) replaced the accusatives (*mec, þec*). This convergence of cases within the system of pronouns continued in Middle English. The original OE functions of the genitive forms of personal pronouns were taken over by possessive pronouns and the analytical forms with *of*.

Possessive pronouns

The ME system of possessive pronouns was very similar to the modern English system: *my/myn(e); þy/thy/þyn(e)/thyn(e); your/your; his, her, his; our/ours; your/yours; her(e)/their(e)*. A new possessive pronoun *its* was first recorded in 1598 but was still rare in Shakespeare's time. The form *her(e)* and *their(e)* co-existed till the 15th century. The former comes from the OE pronominal forms *hira, hiora, heora*, while the form *their(e)* is (like *they* and *them*) a Scandinavian loan.

Demonstrative pronouns and articles

In Middle English, demonstrative pronouns ceased to express gender and to distinguish cases. A new pattern based on the OE neuter forms *þæt* and *þis* developed. The plural form *those* is a descendant of the OE *þās* (plural of *þēs, þēōs, þis*) and *these* developed from the OE singular forms *þis/þes* to which the plural *-e* was added. In this way a pronoun of weaker deixis *þæt* (a specifying pronoun) changed its function to stronger deixis, while *þis* developed in the opposite direction, from stronger to weaker deixis, or from a real deictic pronoun to a specifying pronoun. The late OE masculine form *þe* developed into the definite article; the indefinite article developed from the OE numeral *ān*. The pronoun *sum*, whose meaning was similar to that of *ān* in Old English, lost its article function during the Middle English period.

Relative pronouns

The OE relative particle *þe* disappeared completely by 1250 and the OE demonstrative *þæt* began to be used in its place. Other relative pronouns developed from the OE interrogatives *whā* and *whilc*.

Reflexive pronouns

In Old English, *self* was used mainly to emphasize personal pronouns. In the Middle English period, *self* became to be regarded as a noun and had to be preceded by a possessive pronoun, especially in 1st and 2nd person. Its main function was emphasis up to the end of the 15th century, while the reflexive function was still performed by the personal pronouns, e.g. *I shal strengþen me þerto*.

Indefinite pronouns

The most important change within the indefinite pronouns during the ME period was the disappearance of the pronoun *man*.

5.3 Middle English texts

Below is a sample of an Early Middle English text from about 1200, which still preserves features of Old English. The spelling indicates pronunciation: short vowels are followed by double consonant letters. The text is supplemented by a Modern English translation illustrating the syntactic structure of the original text. The Early Middle English text is followed by a sample of a Late Middle English text.

Ormulum – Dedication

(Original text with a Modern English translation by Chamonikolasová)

Nu, broþerr Wallterr, broþerr min,
Now, Brother Walter, brother mine,

Affter þe flæshess kinde;
My flesh and blood;

Annd broþerr min i Crisstenndom
And brother mine in Christendom

þurh fulluhht and þurh trowwþe
Through baptism and through faith

Annd broþerr min i Godess hus,
And brother mine in God's house,

zet o þe þridde wise,
Yet in the third way,

þurh þatt witt hafenn takenn ba
Through that we have both taken

An rezhellboc to follzhenn,
To obey one book of canons,

Unnderr kanunnkess had annd lif,
Under canon conditions and life,

Swa summ Sannt Awwsten sette;
Just as St Augustine established it;

Icc hafe don swa summ þu badd
I have done just as you bade (demanded)

Annd forþedd te þin wille,
And acted according to your will,

Icc haf wennd inntill Ennglissh
I have translated into English

Goddspellless hallze lare,
The Gospel's holy lore,

Affterr þatt little witt þatt me
With the small wit that to me

Min Drihhtin hafepþ lenedd.
my Lord has lent.

Source:
Ormulum. Bodleian Library MS, Junius 1.

Below is the text of the initial part of the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer. The Middle English text is supplemented by a Modern English translation, a phonetic transcription, and a translation into Czech. The *Canterbury Tales* were first published in 1476 by William Caxton.

Geoffrey Chaucer – The Canterbury Tales

General Prologue

(Original text with a Modern English translation after Hieatt et al. 1976)

- 1 Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
 When April with his sweet showers
- 2 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
 has pierced the drought of March to the root,
- 3 And bathed every veyne in swich licour
 and bathed every vein in such moisture
- 4 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
 as has power to bring forth the flower;
- 5 Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth
 when, also, Zephyrus with his sweet breath
- 6 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 has breathed spirit [(7) into the tender new shoots]

- 7 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
[(6) in every wood and meadow], and the young sun
- 8 Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne,
has run half his course in the sign of the Ram,
- 9 And smale foweles maken melodye,
and small birds sing melodies
- 10 That slepen al the nyght with open ye
and sleep with their eyes open all the night
- 11 (So priketh hem nature in hir corages),
(so Nature pricks them in their hearts):
- 12 Thanne longen folk to gon on pilgrimages,
then people long to go on pilgrimages,
- 13 And palmeres for to seeken straunge strondes,
and palmers long to seek strange shores
- 14 To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
and far-off shrines known in various lands,
- 15 And specially from every shires ende
and, especially, from the ends of every shire
- 16 Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
in England they come to Canterbury,
- 17 The holy blisful martir for to seeke,
to seek the holy, blissful martyr
- 18 That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.
who helped them when they were sick.

Source:

Hieatt, A. Kent and Hieatt, Constance (eds.) (1976). *Chaucer. Canterbury Tales / Tales of Caunterbury*. Bantam Books.

General Prologue

(Phonetic transcription by Rolf Berndt)

- 1 Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
'wan ðat 'a:pril wið (h)is 'ʃu:rəs 'sɔ:tə
- 2 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
ðə 'druxt ɔv 'mɑrtʃ haθ 'pɛ:rsəd 'to: ðə 'rɔ:tə
- 3 And bathed every veyne in swich licour
and 'bɑ:ðed 'ɛvri 'vain in 'switʃ li'ku:r
- 4 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
ɔv 'witʃ ver'tiu en'dʒendrəd 'iz ðə 'flu:r
- 5 Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth
wan 'zefi'rus ɛ:k 'wið (h)is 'swɛ:te 'brɛ:θ
- 6 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
in'spi:rəd 'hɑð in 'ɛvri 'hɔlt and 'hɛ:θ
- 7 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
ðe 'tendrə 'krɔppɛz 'and ðə 'juŋgə 'sunnə
- 8 Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne,
hɑð 'in ðə 'rɑm (h)iz 'hɑlvə 'ku:rs i'runnə
- 9 And smale foweles maken melodye,
and 'sma:lə 'fu:lɛz 'ma:kən 'melɔ'di:ə
- 10 That slepen al the nyght with open ye
ðat 'slɛ:pən 'al ðə 'niçt wið 'ɔ:pən 'i:ə
- 11 (So priketh hem nature in hir corages),
sɔ: 'pri:kəð '(h)em na'tiur in 'hir ku'ra:dʒɛz
- 12 Thanne longen folk to gon on pilgrimages,
ðan 'lɔŋgən 'fɔlk to 'gɔ:n on 'pilgri'mɑ:dʒɛz

- 13 And palmeres for to seeken straunge strondes,
and 'palmərz 'fɔr tə 'sɛ:kən 'straundʒə 'strɔndəz
- 14 To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
to 'fɛrnə 'halwəs 'ku:θ in 'sundri 'lɔndəz
- 15 And specially from every shires ende
and 'spɛʃiəl'li frɔm 'ɛvri 'ʃi:rɛz 'endə
- 16 Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
ɔv 'ɛŋɡə'lɔnd to 'kauntər'bri ðai 'wendə
- 17 The holy blisful martir for to seeke,
ðə 'hɔ':li 'blisful 'martir 'fɔr to 'sɛ:kə
- 18 That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.
ðat '(h)em hað 'hɔlpən 'wan ðat 'ðai wɛ:r 'sɛ:kə

Sources:

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General Prologue

(Czech translation by František Vrba)

- 1 Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
Když duben vníká v šumných přeprškách
- 2 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
až do kořání pod březnový prach
- 3 And bathed every veyne in swich licour
a vlahou lázní v každém vláknu vznítí
- 4 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
plodivou sílu, z které pučí kvítí,

- 5 Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth
a když i Zefyr [(6) v lesíku a v stráni]
- 6 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
[(5) líbezným dechem] k růstu popohání
- 7 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
výhonky něžné a když jaré slunce
- 8 Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne,
na dráze Skopcem dorazilo k půlce,
- 9 And smale foweles maken melodye,
když drobné ptáčky [(11) příroda tak vzbouří],
- 10 That slepen al the nyght with open ye
že ani v spánku oka nezamhouří
- 11 (So priketh hem nature in hir corages),
[(9) a na své šalmaje si vyhrávají],
- 12 Thanne longen folk to gon on pilgrimages,
zatouží lidé po dalekém kraji
- 13 And palmeres for to seeken straunge strondes,
a dálném břehu; každý světa kout
- 14 To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
má svého, svatého a má svou pout.
- 15 And specially from every shires ende
A [(16) v Anglii se táhnou] všemi směry
- 16 Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
[(15) z každého hrabství] k městu Canterbury,

- 17 The holy blisful martir for to seeke,
za mučedníkem blahoslaveným,
- 18 That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.
jenž v nemoci a strážni pomoh jim.

Sources:

Hieatt, A. Kent and Hieatt, Constance (eds.) (1976). *Chaucer. Canterbury Tales / Tales of Caunterbury*. Bantam Books.
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The first page of the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Hengwrt manuscript)

Source: *Opening folio of the Hengwrt manuscript*. Wikimedia Commons [online] 15. 2. 2007. [accessed 2014-07-11].
Available at: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HengwrtChaucerOpening.jpg>

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