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Factors Affecting Changes in English from a Synthetic Language to an Analytic One

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The purpose of this paper is to survey the major elements that have changed English from a synthetic language to an analytic one. Therefore, this paper has looked at the differences between synthetic languages and analytic ones. In synthetic languages, the relation of words in a sentence is synthetically determined by means of inflections, while in analytic languages, the functions of words in a sentence are analytically determined by means of word order and function words. Thus, Old English with full inflectional systems shows the synthetic nature. However, in the course of time, Old English inflections came to be lost by phonetic changes and operation, which made English dependent on word order and function words to signal the relation of words in a sentence. The major phonetic changes that have shifted English are the change of final /m/ to /n/, the leveling of unstressed vowels, the loss of final /n/, and the decay of schwa in final syllables. These changes led to reduction of inflections of English as well as the loss of grammatical gender. The operation of analogy, the tendency of language to follow certain patterns and to adapt a less common form to a more familiar one, has also played an important role in changing English.

[Synthetic language/Analytic language/Analogy]

I. INTRODUCTION

English has emerged as the language of global communication (Jung, 2006, p.2), but all living languages change with time, including English. It is fortunate that they do so rather slowly compared to the human life span. It would be inconvenient to have to relearn our native language every twenty years (Fromkin *et al*., 2003, p. 499).

No one knows exactly how and why languages change. A basic cause of change is the way children acquire the language. No one teaches a child the rules of the grammar. Each child constructs a personal grammar alone, generalizing rules from the linguistic input received. --- The child's grammar is never exactly like that of the adult community, because children receive diverse linguistic input. Certain rules may be simplified or overgeneralized, and vocabularies may show differences that accumulate over several generations (Fromkin *et al*., 2003, p. 534).

Anyway, language is constantly changing without our being conscious of it, which has made English undergo such change in the course of time that we cannot read Old English without special study, and a page of Old English is likely at first to present a look of greater strangeness than a page of French or Italian, because of the employment of certain letters that no longer remain in our modern alphabet.

Thus Old English has come to differ from Modern English in spelling, pronunciation, word order, vocabulary, inflections, and many other aspects of English. As mentioned above, language changes are gradual, particularly changes in syntax (Fromkin *et al.,* 2003, p. 534).

Therefore we are apt to think that Old English is similar to Modern English in sentence structures, and that they are greatly different from each other only in words, inflectional system, pronunciation, and so on. I am not sure, but perhaps for this reason, Campbell (1977), Clark (1964), Wright (1952), Moore & Knott (1965), Diamond (1970), March (1888), Wyld (1920), Sievers (1921), Brook (1955), Moore (1969), Fries (1940) and others were never concerned about the Old English syntax, but only about the Old English spelling, pronunciation, morphology, word formation, and so on.

Among the three differences mentioned above, the second change is the most significant one in that it has changed Old English with full inflections as a synthetic language into Modern English with lost inflections as an analytic language.

The purpose of this study is to have a look at the major factors that have changed English from a synthetic language into an analytic one.

II. OLD ENGLISH AND ITS INFLECTIONS

Since Old English, following its inheritance of Indo-European structure, was an inflectional language and largely synthetic, it depended heavily on the variations in the forms of words to show relationships of words in a sentence. That is, the functions of

words in a sentence was determined by inflections.

Consider the following six Old English sentences.

Se man sloh Þone kyning.
Þone kyning sloh se man.
Se man Þone kyning sloh.
Þone kyning se man sloh.
Sloh se man Þone kyning.
Sloh Þone kyning se man.
(Fromkin & Rodman, 1988, p. 306)

As seen above, in Old English, word order was freer because the forms of words alone disclosed the thematic or meaning relations in a sentence. That is, all of the above six sentences are made up of three components, namely, 'se man (the man)', 'sloh (killed)', and 'Þone keening (the king)'. In these sentences, 'se man' functions as the subject regardless of its position, because 'se man' consist of 'se' which is the masculine-nominative case form of the Old English definite article and 'man' which is also the masculine-nominative form of 'mam (=mam)'.

Like wise, 'Þone kyning' always functions as the object, independent of its position, since 'Þone kyning' consist of 'Þone' which is the masculine-accusative case form of the Old English definite article and 'kyning' that is also the masculine-accusative form of 'kyning(=king)'. As a result. the six sentences are all grammatical and have the same conceptual meaning, that is, the same proposition that denotes "the man killed the king".

Like the above sentences, Old English relies heavily on inflections to indicate the functions of words in a sentence. Languages like Old English are synthetic languages. Baugh & Cable (2002) defines a synthetic language as follows.

> Inflectional languages fall into two classes : synthetic and analytic. A synthetic language is one that indicates the relation of words in a sentence largely by means of inflections (p. 56).

That is, in synthetic languages, the functions of words in a sentence are determined by inflections. In this respect, we need to investigate what inflections really mean to understand the characteristics of Old English better. Inflections can be classified into two types. Lass (1994) defines declensions as the set of forms of a noun, pronoun, or

adjective (p. 258). In other words, declensions are changes in the forms of nouns, pronouns, or adjectives depending on their number, gender, and case. Old English is full of declensions, and we can take the Old English definite article, which is now classified as a particle with no changes in its forms in Modern English, as an example of Old English declensions (Diamond, 1970, p. 22).

Singular

	masculine	feminine	neuter
nominative	se	seo	þæt
genitive	Þæs	þære	þæs
dative	Þæm	Þære	þæm
accusative	Þone	Þa	þæt
instrumental	Þý		

Plural (all three genders)

nominative	Þa
genitive	Þara
dative	Þæm
accusative	Þa

Thus, 'Þæt wif' in the sentence "Þæt wif seah Þone man" (=the wife saw the man) always acts as the subject, since 'Þæt' is the neuter, nominative form, and 'wif' also indicates that it is the neuter, nominative form. In other words, Þæt comes before the noun 'wif,' because 'wif' is a neuter noun and it indicates that it is a nominative case form.

Lass (1994) also defines conjugations as the set of forms belonging to a verb (p. 257). This definition is a little abstract and comprehensive, but it means that English verbs change their forms according to four grammatical categories, that is, number (singular or plural), person (first, second, or third), tense (present or past), and mood (indicative, imperative, or subjunctive).

Conjugations are much more complex in Old English than in Modern English and we can take Old English verbs bidan (=await), and beodan (=command) as examples of Old English conjugations (Moore & Knott, 1965, pp. 50-51).

Indicative

Present Singular	1	bide	beode
	2	bidest	beodest
	3	bideÞ	beodeÞ
Plural	1, 2, 3	bidaÞ	beodaÞ
Preterit singular	1	bid	bead
	2	bide	bude
	3	bid	bead
Plural	1, 2, 3	bidon	budon

Subjunctive

Present Singular	1, 2, 3	bide	beode
Present Plural	1, 2, 3	biden	beoden
Preterit Singular	1, 2, 3	bide	bude
Preterit Plural	1, 2, 3	biden	buden

Imperative

Present Singular	2	bid	beod
Plural	2	bidaÞ	beodaÞ
Infinitive		bidan	beodan
Gerund		to bidenne	to beodenne
Present Participle		bidende	beodende
Past Participle		biden	boden

According to the above paradigms of the two verbs, if we want to mean "I await", "you await", "he awaits" in Old English, we must say "Ic bide", "Þu bidest", and "he bideÞ" respectively. That is, the forms of verbs change depending upon the person. "He awaits" is a remnant of the Old English conjugation, namely, "he bideÞ".

Anyway, the Old English inflectional system consists of declensions and conjugations, which are much fuller and more complex than those of Modern English, which makes Old English a synthetic language.

III. MODERN ENGLISH AND LOST INFLECTIONS

Fromkin & Rodman's (1988) Old English sentences in Chapter 2 can be literally translated in the same word order into Modern English as follows (p. 306).

> The man killed the king.
> The king killed the man.
> The man the king killed.
> The king the man killed.
> Killed the man the king.
> Killed the king the man.

The Old English counterparts of the above six sentences were all grammatical and had the same proposition, that is, "the man killed the king". This was possible because the forms of the words in the sentences indicated the words' grammatical functions, so word order was much freer in Old English than in Modern English.

However, in the course of time, the full and complex inflectional systems of Old English were leveled and in the long run lost. In this respect, the periods of Old English, Middle English, and Modern English were often described as the period of full inflections, leveled inflections, and lost inflections, respectively (Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 52).

On the other hand, among the six Modern English sentences above, only two sentences are grammatical and the two sentences differ from each other in meaning. The reason is that in Modern English the forms of words in sentences that determine the words' relation in a sentence were lost. As a result, word order and function words came to be very important in Modern English.

In connection with this, Algeo & Pyles (2005) say as follows.

> The major difference between the grammars of Old English and Modern English is that the language has become less inflective and more isolating. that is, Old English used more grammatical endings on words and so was less dependent on word order and function words than Modern English (p.101).

In other words, Modern English came to be more isolating, and assumed the analytic character of languages like Chinese. Baugh & Cable(2002) define analytic

languages as follows.

> Languages that make extensive use of prepositions and auxiliary verbs and depend upon word order to show other relations are known as analytic languages (p. 56).

That is, analytic languages like Modern English depend on word order and function words, such as prepositions and auxiliary verbs, to determine the relation of words in a sentence.

IV. MAJOR FACTORS THAT HAVE CHANGED ENGLISH

In the previous chapters, we have looked at the characteristics of Old English and Modern English as a synthetic language and an analytic language, respectively. As stated above, the relation of words in a sentence is synthetically determined by means of inflections, that is, the forms of words in synthetic languages like Old English. On the other hand, the relation of words in a sentence is analytically determined by means of word order and function words in analytic languages like Modern English.

Now I turn to the factors that have changed English from a synthetic language into an analytic one. Concerning the changes in English grammar, Baugh & Cable (2002) say as follows.

> The changes in English grammar may be described as a general reduction of inflections. 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. To some extent the same thing is true of the verb. This leveling of inflectional endings was due partly to phonetic changes, partly to the operation of analogy (pp.158-59).

I will take an Old English expression 'godum menn' and Modern English expression 'to the good man' as examples to show the differences between Old English and Modern English and the shifting procedures between the two languages.

In 'godum menn', the form of 'godum', an inflection of 'god' (=good), shows that this

form is singular and dative, and the form of 'menn', an inflection of 'mann' (=man), indicates that this form is also singular and dative. As a result, 'godum menn' always means 'to the good man' wherever it is placed in a sentence. However Modern English cannot mean the same thing without the help of preposition. Now I will have a look at the first factor that has changed English.

1. Phonetic Changes

In the history of English, the phonetic changes that have changed English are simple, but very far-reaching. The earliest seems to have been the changes of final -m to -n wherever it occurred, i.e., in the dative plural of nouns and adjectives and in the dative singular (masculine and neuter) of adjectives when inflected according to the strong declension (Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 159). The results of this change can be illustrated as follows.

stanum	→	stanun (= to the stones)
mannum	→	mannun (= to the man)
godum	→	godun (= good)
godum menn	→	godun menn (= to the good man)

The second phonetic change is the leveling of unstressed vowels. As far as the grammar of English is concerned, the most significant of all phonological developments in the language occurred with the falling together of a, o, and u with e in unstressed syllables, all ultimately becoming [ə] (Algeo & Pyles, 2005, p. 139). This change has come to be called the leveling or merging of unstressed vowels. The results of the change are as follows.

Old English	**Middle English**
lama ‘ lame’	lame
faran ‘ to fare’	faren
stanas ‘stones’	stanes
feallaÞ ‘fall’	falleÞ
nacod ‘naked’	naked
macodon ‘made’	makeden
sicor ‘sure’	seker

lengÞu 'length'	lengthe
medu 'liquor'	mede

(Algeo & Pyles, 2005, p. 139).

As a result of the merging of unstressed vowels into a single sound, the number of distinct inflectional endings in English was drastically reduced. Middle English became a language with few inflectional distinctions, whereas Old English, as we have seen, was relatively highly inflected, although less so than Germanic. This reduction of inflections was responsible for a structural change of the greatest importance (Algeo & Pyles, 2005, p. 141).

For instance, the older endings –an (infinitives and most of the oblique, or non-nominative, forms of n-stem nouns), -on (indicative preterit plural), and –en (subjunctive preterit plurals and past participles of strong verbs) all fell together as -en. With the later loss of final inflectional -n in some of these forms, only -e[?] was left, and in time this was also to go. This loss accounts for endingless infinitives, preterit plurals, and some past participles of strong verbs in Modern English. The results are as follows (Algeo & Pyles, 2002, p. 142).

Old English	**Middle English**	**Modern English**
findan (inf.)	finde(n)	find
fundon (pret. pl.)	founde(n)	found
funden (past part.)	founde(n)	found

One of the important results of the leveling of unstressed vowels was the loss of grammatical gender. The gender of Old English nouns was not often determined by meaning. Sometimes it was in direct contradiction with the meaning. Thus woman (Old English wifmann) was masculine, because the second element in the compound was masculine; wife and child, like German Weib and Kind, were neuter. However, in Old English, gender was readily distinguishable in most nouns: masculine nominative-accusative plurals typically ended in -as, feminine in -a, and short-stemmed neuters in -u. In Middle English, on the other hand, all but a handful of nouns acquired the same plural ending, -es (from Old English -as). This important change, coupled with the invariable 'the' that supplanted the Old English masculine 'se', neuter 'Þæt', and feminine 'seo' along with their oblique forms, effectively eliminated grammatical gender as a feature of English.

As a result of the leveling of unstressed vowels, 'godun menn' which had been

derived from ‘godun menn’ changed into ‘g?den menn’.

The third phonetic change was the loss of -n derived from -m, along with the -n of the other inflectional endings (Algeo & Pyles, 2005, p. 141). Thus the above ‘goden menn’ became ‘gode menn’. This change also made the -n in ‘an’ (= a), ‘min’ (= my), ‘Þin’ (= your) dropped before words beginning with consonants during the early part of the Middle English period. The following comparison makes the change clear.

Old English	**Middle English**
an fæder (= a father)	a fader
an eage (= an eye)	an eye
min fæder (= my father)	my fader
min eage (= my eye)	myn eye
Þin fæder (= your father)	Þy fader
Þin eage (= your eye)	Þyn eye

The difference between ‘a’ and ‘an’ is well preserved in Modern English, and the usage of ‘myn’ and ‘my’ has been changed as in Modern English in the eighteenth century.

The change also led to metanalysis. Metanalysis is detaching a segment in a two-word group from its original position and attaching it to the other constituent (Lass, 1994, p. 263). Metanalyses can be illustrated as follows (Algeo & Pyles, 2005, p. 135).

Middle English		**Modern English**
an awte	→	a newt
an ekename	→	a nickname

In the above examples, the /n/ of the indefinite article has attached itself to the following word. Just the opposite has also happened. That is, the /n/ of the noun was misunderstood as the element of the indefinite article, and attached itself to it as in the following examples.

Middle English		**Modern English**
a nadder	→	an adder
a noumpere	→	an umpire
a nauger	→	an auger

a napron → an apron

The final phonetic change was the loss of schwa in final syllables. The leveled final /e/ [ə] was gradually lost in the North in the course of the thirteenth century and in the Midlands and the South somewhat later (Algeo & Pyles, 2005, p. 140).

In the inflectional ending -es, the unstressed /e/ was ultimately lost except after the sibilants such as [s], [z], [ʃ], and [ʒ].

The vowel sound was retained in -ed until the fifteenth century. It has not yet disappeared in the forms /aged/, /blessed/, and /learned/ when they are used as adjectives. Compare the following (Algeo & Pyles, 2005, p. 140).

Forms pronounced	**Forms not pronounced**
learned woman	The woman learned her lesson.
the blessed Lord	The Lord blessed the multitute.
aged man	The man aged rapidly.

And the vowel /e/ in -ed is still retained after /t/, or /d/, as in heated or heeded.

2. Operation of Analogy

Analogy is the formation according to some given pattern, hence a general term for irregular or sporadic processes of change that lead to regularities of one kind or another, by altering forms in the direction of more regular or typical targets (Lass, 1994, p. 254). Thus many Modern English plural forms were created by analogical extension of -as, the ending of the plural masculine a-declension, as in the following examples.

Old English		**Modern English**	
singular	plural	singular	plural
cu	cy	cow	cows
boc	bec	book	books
word	word	word	words
ban	ban	bone	bones
eage	eagan	eye	eyes
eare	earan	ear	ears

However, there were few nouns that did not conform to the pattern of forming the plural by suffixing -es and followed the pattern of using the nominative-accusative plural as a general plural form. They include those that lack -s plurals today ---for example, oxen, deer, and feet. A few long-syllabled words that had been neuters in Old English occurred with unchanged plural forms, especially animal names like sheep, deer, and horse. However, the most enduring of these alternative plurals are those with mutation like men, feet, geese, teeth, lice, and mice. To sum up, the nouns that maintain their Old English plural forms are those with high frequency in use, and they had no chance to conform to the more general pattern of forming plurals.

The operation of analogy also applied to English verbs. The tendency of language to follow certain patterns and adapt a less common form to a more familiar one is well exemplified in the history of the strong verbs. Thus verbs such as bow, brew, burn, climb, flee, flow, help, mourn, row, step, walk, weep, which were strong in Old English, changed to weak verbs in the Middle English period (Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 163). In the case of 'god menn' mentioned above and derived from 'godum menn', another type of analogy has been applied. The paradigm of Old English 'menn' is as follows.

	Singular	**Plural**
nominative	mann	menn
genitive	mannes	manna
dative	menn	mannum
accusative	mann	menn

As is seen in the above paradigm, the noun appears as 'mann' three times, and as 'menn' once in the singular forms. As a result, the form 'menn' changed to 'mann', the more common form of the noun. Thus 'god menn' became 'god mann' in the long run, which makes Modern English employ a preposition to mean the same thing as the Old English counterpart.

The changes mentioned above may be summed up as follows.

1) 'godum menn' (= to the good man) → 'godun menn' (by the change of final -m to -n)
2) 'godun menn' → 'goden menn' (by the leveling of unstressed vowels)
3) 'goden menn' → 'gode menn' (by the loss of final -n)
4) 'gode menn' → 'god menn' (by the loss of schwa in final syllables)

5) ‘god menn’ → ‘god mann’ (by analogy)

As a result of the leveling of inflections, syntactic and semantic relationships that had been signaled by the endings on words now became ambiguous. Whereas in Old English the grammatical functions of two consecutive nouns were clear from their endings in, say, the nominative and dative cases, in Middle English their functions might have been uncertain. The most direct way to avoid this kind of ambiguity is through limiting the possible patterns of word order and using prepositions.

This is the process of development from the highly synthetic stage of Old English to the highly analytic stages of Late Middle English and Modern English.

Now it is important to emphasize that these changes which affected the grammatical structure of English after the Norman Conquest were not the result of contact with the French language. Certain idioms and syntactic usages that appear in Middle English are clearly the result of such contact.

But the loss of inflections and the merging of forms that constitute the truly significant development in Middle English grammar are the result of the Norman Conquest only insofar as that event brought about conditions favorable to such changes. By removing the authority that a standard variety of English would have, the Norman conquest made it easier for grammatical changes to go forward unchecked (Baugh & Cable, 2005, p. 167).

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

With the recent acceleration of the globalization process and massive inflow of western cultures into the Asian countries (Hahn, 2004, p. 2), English has become the world language. However, Old English differs from Modern English in spelling, pronunciation, word order, vocabulary, inflections and many other aspects of English. Among these differences, the most significant one is that the highly complex and intricate inflectional systems of Old English have been leveled in Middle English and almost lost in Modern English. Thus, English that was once a synthetic language came to be an analytic one that must rely upon word order and function words to determine the relation of words in a sentence.

The purpose of this paper is to survey the major elements that have changed English from a synthetic language to an analytic one. Therefore, this paper has looked at the differences between synthetic languages and analytic ones. In synthetic

languages, the relation of words in a sentence are synthetically determined by means of inflections, while in analytic languages, the functions of words in a sentence are analytically determined by means of word order and function words. Thus, Old English with full inflectional systems shows the synthetic nature. However, in the course of time, Old English inflections came to be lost by phonetic changes and operation, which made English dependent on word order and function words to signal the relation of words in a sentence. The major phonetic changes that have shifted English are the change of final /m/ to /n/, the leveling of unstressed vowels, the loss of final /n/, and the decay of schwa in final syllables.

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Examples in : English
Applicable Languages : English
Applicable levels : Secondary, Adult

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