

The Loss of Plural Concord in Quantifiers and Adjectives in Middle English

(this paper could take the form of a talk or a poster)

The Middle English period was characterised by a general loss of inflectional morphology. This process, which was possibly accelerated due to the contact with Scandinavian speakers, is generally assumed to be the result of phonological erosion and analogy (Pyles and Algeo, 1993); syntax playing a very small role if any. This study presents a detailed quantitative analysis of the loss of plural morphology in 47 prose texts taken from the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English* (Kroch and Taylor, 2000). We compare the behaviour of plural concord in quantifiers and strong adjectives. Given that these two categories followed the same inflectional paradigm, if the loss was merely a phonological process, they should follow the same diachronic path; whereas if syntax plays a role we would expect to see differences between these two categories.

There is, however, a possible confound in the data: by 1250, the plural -e ending was present only in strong adjectives and quantifiers which were monosyllabic and ended in a consonant in OE, polysyllabic ones were uninflected (Baugh and Cable, 2002: 146). We tested this empirically, and found that although not as categorical as depicted in the grammars, the difference between monosyllabic and polysyllabic is indeed significant for both categories. If the frequencies of monosyllabic and polysyllabic are not evenly distributed across categories (e.g. quantifiers tend to be more monosyllabic), we would report an effect of category when in fact it is merely an effect of the number of syllables. To avoid this, we only compared elements with the same number of syllables (monosyllabic adjectives and quantifiers on the one hand, and polysyllabic adjectives and quantifiers on the other).

Taking these precautions, our results show that neither prediction is completely borne out. There are some texts in which there is a significant difference between quantifiers and strong adjectives, and another set of texts in which there is no difference between the two categories. We take this as evidence of two factors influencing the loss of plural concord: one syntactic and another phonological. Importantly, this difference does not depend on the date of composition of the manuscript, but rather on the dialectal region. The majority of texts which show a difference between quantifiers and adjectives come from areas where Scandinavian contact was intense, whereas those texts in which adjectives and quantifiers behave the same come mainly from London and some other southern regions. This geographical distribution suggests contact with Scandinavian speakers played a relevant role in the loss of inflectional morphology.

Bibliography:

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