

Causes of Grammatical Changes in the History of the English Language

The drastic transformation of the grammatical system in the history of English has attracted the interest of many historical linguists and has been the subject of much speculation and comment. The problem of transition from a synthetic to a more analytical grammatical type has given rise to many theories.

In the 19th c. the simplification of English morphology was attributed to the effect of phonetic changes, namely the weakening and loss of unaccented final syllables caused by the heavy Germanic word stress. As the stress was fixed on the root-syllable or the first syllable of the word, the final syllables, i. e. inflectional endings, were reduced and dropped. As a result of phonetic changes many forms fell together and it became difficult to distinguish between cases, genders, numbers and persons. To make up for the losses, new means of showing grammatical relations and of connecting words in a sentence began to develop: prepositions and a fixed word order.

This theory, often called "phonetic", regards sound changes as the primary cause of grammatical changes. It disregards the specifically grammatical trends of evolution and the relative chronology of developments at different levels. And yet it is well known that prepositional phrases were used a long time before the inflections had been dropped and that the position of words in a sentence in relation to other words was not altogether free: thus the attribute was normally placed next to the noun, though their grammatical ties were shown by means of concord. It is true that the changes at different linguistic levels were interconnected, but this does not mean that there could be only one direction of influence – from the lower, phonetic level to the grammatical levels. The interaction of changes at different levels must have operated in different ways in various historical periods, and the changes were determined not only by internal linguistic factors but also by external conditions.

The second popular theory, often referred to as "functional", attributed the loss of inflectional endings and the growth of analytical means to functional causes: the endings lost their grammatical role or their functional load and were dropped as unnecessary and redundant for other means began to fulfil their functions. As compared to the phonetic theory, the changes started at the opposite end: the grammatical inflections of nouns became unnecessary after their functions were taken over by prepositions; the endings of adjectives showing gender became meaningless when the Category of Gender in nouns had been lost and the markers of number in adjectives were redundant, since number was shown by the forms of nouns. Likewise the distinction between the weak and strong forms of adjectives could easily be dispensed with when the newly developed system of articles could express the same meanings with greater regularity and precision; and even certain verb endings could be dropped as useless when person and number were indicated analytically – with the help of an obligatory subject.

A similar approach to the grammatical changes is found in the theory of the “least effort” which claims that the structure of language is an unstable balance between the needs of more numerous expressive means and man's inertia, or his strive for the least effort in achieving the same aims. It is believed that the speakers are always in need of more expressive linguistic means, as the existing means gradually lose their expressive force; these needs, inherent in every living language, account for the use of prepositional phrases alongside case-forms and the growth of verb phrases and analytical forms in addition to simple verb forms.

Although these hypotheses take into account some important general properties of language, they ignore the specific conditions of the development of English at different historical periods and are therefore in some respects as one-sided as the phonetic theory.

Many scholars ascribe the simplification of the English morphology and the general transformation of the grammatical type to certain facts of external history, namely to contacts with other tongues. The age of great grammatical changes – between the 10th and 13th c. – was the time of heavy Scandinavian settlement in the North-East and of the Norman Conquest.

In the areas of Scandinavian settlement OE and O Scand intermixed. The two OG languages were not too far apart to allow of a good deal of mutual understanding; they had a large common vocabulary, with certain differences in pronunciation and inflectional endings. Probably distinct pronunciation of the roots was therefore more essential than the pronunciation of endings; consequently grammatical inflections could be missed out and dropped. (Cf. OE *sunu*, O Scand *sunr*; OE *swan*, O Scand *svanr*; OE *fæder*; O Scand *faðir* - NE *son*, *swan*, *father*). The direction of the diffusion of the changes – from the North to the South – seems to support this hypothesis; the Northern dialects showed a high degree of levelling and simplification as early as the 10th c., when the other dialects still retained the OE inflectional system. Nevertheless, it should be recalled that some of the simplifying changes started in the South and spread north – those were, e. g. the grammatical changes in personal pronouns. It may be added that this theory leaves out of consideration the interdependence of changes at different linguistic levels and especially the phonetic and syntactic developments, which began a long time before the Scandinavian invasions.

Another theory ascribes the simplification of the noun and adjective morphology to the mixture of English with Old French, though this tongue was not closely related to English. According to this view the French language of the Norman rulers of Britain could have played a more decisive role in the grammatical changes than Old Scandinavian for the simple reason that it had a far greater effect on the development of English as a whole (and particularly on its vocabulary). It is thought that any mixture with a foreign tongue leads to an unsettling of the inflectional system; mixture with Old French could favour the tendency to greater analyticism because at that time French had a more analytical grammatical structure than English. This theory, however, is not confirmed by the chronology of the changes: at the time of strongest French influence – the 13th and 14th c. - English had already lost most of its inflections and had acquired many of its analytical features.

We should also mention one more popular theory which attempted to explain the grammatical changes in English – the so-called “theory of progress” advanced by O. Jespersen. O. Jespersen protested against the interpretation of the history of all IE languages as grammatical degeneration and decay. He tried to show the advantages of the analytical type of language over the synthetic type and presented the history of English as the only way to progress and a superior kind of language. He believed that the general tendency of all languages was towards shorter grammatical forms, though languages differ much in the velocity with which they had been moving in this direction; on this way to an ideal grammatical structure English had reached a more advanced stage than other languages, which testifies, according to O. Jespersen, to a superior level of thinking of English-speaking nations.

All the other views outlined above are partly correct, since each factor played a certain role in grammatical changes, though it was only one of their causes, and not the only cause. Like other changes, grammatical changes were brought about by numerous intra- and extralinguistic factors, such as the internal tendencies operating at different linguistic levels, the interaction of these tendencies and the specific external conditions which determined the linguistic situation at different historical periods. Without going into details we can ascribe the main events in the history of English grammar to a number of major causes and conditions.

The simplification of the nominal paradigms and the replacement of synthetic means by analytical means of word connection – took place mainly in the Early ME period. We should recall that even in OE the nominal system was in some respects inconsistent and contradictory: there was little regularity in form-building and the meaning of many cases was vague; these conditions pre-determined possible changes. The main factors which brought about the changes can be described as tendencies of different levels.

The phonetic reduction of final unaccented syllables, originally caused by the Germanic word stress, made the grammatical endings less distinct; in Early ME many inflections were weakened and some of them were lost. The main trend in the morphological system was to preserve and to work out reliable formal markers for the most essential grammatical distinctions in the first place, the distinction of number in nouns; this was achieved by means of analogical levelling – grammatical analogy led to the regular use of the same markers for similar forms. The lexical and syntactic levels furnished diverse means, which could make the meaning and the use of forms more precise and differentiated, – such as prepositions which accompanied the forms of cases and different types of word order; the use of these reliable means favoured the indistinct pronunciation of the endings and their confusion in writing.

Those were the internal, or intralinguistic conditions of grammatical changes in Early ME.

There is no doubt that the extralinguistic conditions contributed to the changes. The linguistic situation in Early ME speeded up the grammatical changes. The increased dialectal divergence of the feudal age, the two foreign influences, Scandinavian and French, and the break in the written tradition made for a wider range of variation, greater grammatical instability and more intensive realization of internal tendencies.

The transformation was on the whole completed in the 14th-15th c., when some of the co-existing forms and syntactic patterns used in free variation were selected and adopted by the language system and by the prevailing literary dialect – the dialect of London. The selection of forms was determined by the same internal tendencies and by the changed linguistic situation: the dialects had intermixed and their relations and inter-influence reflected the economic, social and demographic events of the time.

The growth of analytical forms in the verb system and the formation of new grammatical categories were also to a certain extent pre-determined by the state of the verb system in OE: the paradigm of the verb was relatively poor and, in addition to categorial forms of the verb system, the language made wide use of verb phrases and verb prefixes to express a variety of meanings connected with the main meanings of the verb forms – temporal, modal and aspective. The main changes of the ensuing period consisted in the enrichment of the verb system which came to include new forms in the paradigm and to develop new oppositions and categories. The verb system has expanded and has become more symmetrical. These alterations were primarily conditioned by internal factors of language evolution, such as the shift of some abstract meanings from the lexical to the grammatical level (e. g. the modal and temporal meanings), and the strife for a balanced regular arrangement of grammatical oppositions. The developments in the verb system, unlike those in the nominal system, were not confined to Early ME; they extended over many hundred years and were associated with different kind of external conditions and new stimuli of development: the growth of culture and the written forms of the language, the formation of the national literary language – with its functional and stylistic differentiation – and the need for more precise and subtle means of expression.

The changes at the syntactic level can, on the whole, be attributed to the same factors which operated in the evolution of English morphology. The predominance of syntactic ways of word connection, the strict word order, the wide use of prepositional phrases were a part of the general transition of English from the synthetic to the analytical type. Syntactic changes were linked up with simplifying changes in morphology and made a part of a single historical process.