THE NOUN

The OE noun had two grammatical or morphological categories: number and case. In addition, nouns distinguished three genders, but this distinction was not a grammatical category; it was merely a classifying feature accounting, alongside other features, for the division of nouns into morphological classes.

The category of number consisted of two members, singular and plural. As will be seen below, they were well distinguished formally in all the declensions, there being very few homonymous forms.

The noun had four cases: Nominative, Genitive, Dative and Accusative. In most declensions two, or even three, forms were homonymous, so that the formal distinction of cases was less consistent than that of numbers.

Morphological Classification of Nouns.

Declensions

The most remarkable feature of OE nouns was their elaborate system of declensions, which was a sort of morphological classification. The total number of declensions, including both the major and minor types, exceeded twenty-five. All in all there were only ten distinct endings (plus some phonetic variants of these endings) and a few relevant root-vowel interchanges used in the noun paradigms; yet every morphological class had either its own specific endings or a specific succession of markers. Historically, the OE system of declensions was based on a number of distinctions: the stem-suffix, the gender of nouns, the phonetic structure of the word, phonetic changes in the final syllables.

Nouns in Old English distinguished three types of declension: **STRONG**, **WEAK** and **MINOR** types.

Strong Declension includes declension of nouns with vocalic stems, namely: **-a-, -ō-, -i-, -u-** stem nouns. Consequently, **strong declension** dinstinguishes the following types of declension in Old Germanic languages:

a- stems (with **ja-** and **wa-** subtypes);

ō- stems (with **jō-** and **wō-** subtypes);

i- stems

u- stems

Weak Declension comprises only declension of **-n-** stem nouns.

Minor types of declension include small groups of nouns with consonantal stems, namely: **r- stems, s- stems**, **nt- stems**, as well as a group of so-called **root-stem nouns**. The classification of Old English nouns into **a- stems, ō- stems,** *etc*, rested upon the ancient Indo-European grouping of nouns according to stem-forming suffixes. Stem-forming suffixes consisted of vowels (a, o, i, *etc*), or consonants (n, r, *etc*), or sound sequences (ja, nd). Some nouns had no stem-forming suffixes and therefore were termed root-stem nouns.

Word in Indo-European languages consisted of three morphemes, e.i. it had a three-morpheme structure: **root + stem-forming suffix + ending**. This word-structure is

Table 2

preserved in two cases of the Gothic language, Dative plural and Accusative plural. Above-mentioned can be illustrated by some examples from the Gothic language.

dags - day	**gibo** - gift	**gasts** – guest	**sunus** – son
Dat. pl	dag-a-m	gib-ō-m	gast-i-m	sun-u-m
Accus. pl	dag-a-ns	gib-ō-ns	gast-i-ns	sun-u-ns

dag, gib, gast, sun – are roots;

-a-, -ō-, -i-, -u- are stem-forming suffixes;

m and **ns** are case endings respectively.

In Old English Indo-European three-morpheme structure was reduced to two: root + ending. The former stem-forming suffix merged either with the root, or the ending, or in some cases it acquired a new grammatical function and developed into a grammatical ending itself (as is the case with the weak declension of nouns).

Former Indo-European stem-forming suffix has left many traces in modern Indo-European languages. Some examples from Russian:

пламя – пламе-**н**-и (n- stem)
племя – племе-**н**-и (n- stem)
чудо – чуде-**с**-а (s- stem)
мать – мате-**р**-и (r- stem)
дочь – доче-**р**-и (r- stem)
etc.

Another reason which accounts for the division of nouns into numerous declensions is their grouping according to gender. OE nouns distinguished three genders: Masc., Fem, and Neut. Though originally a semantic division, gender in OE was not always associated with the meaning of nouns. Sometimes a derivational suffix referred a noun to a certain gender and placed it into a certain semantic group.

The division into genders was in a certain way connected with the division into stems, though there was no direct correspondence between them: some stems were represented by nouns of one particular gender, e. g. o-stems were always Fem, others embraced nouns of two or three genders.

Other reasons accounting for the division into declensions were structural and phonetic: monosyllabic nouns had certain peculiarities as compared to polysyllabic; monosyllables with a long root-syllable (that is, containing a long vowel plus a consonant or a short vowel plus two consonants – also called "long-stemmed" nouns) differed in some forms from nouns with a short syllable (short-stemmed nouns).

Table 1 shows the morphological classification of OE nouns and the hierarchial application of the main features which account for this division (division of nouns into mono- and polysyllables is not included; see the descriptions of the declensions below).

The majority of OE nouns belonged to the *a*-stems, *o*-stems and *n*- stems. Special attention should also be paid to the root-stems which displayed specific peculiarities in their forms and have left noticeable traces in Mod E.

Morphological Classification of Nouns in Old English

Division according to stem

Vocalic stems						
Strong declension				n-stems (weak de-clension)	Root-stems	Other minor stems: *r-, s-, nt-*
a- stems ja- stems wa- stems	o- stems jo- stems wo- stems	i-stems	u-stems			
Division according to gender						
MN	F	M N F	MF	M N F	MF	M N F
Division according to length of the root-syllable						
Short long	short long	short long	short long			

a-**stems** included Masc. and Neut. nouns. About one third of OE nouns were Masc. a-stems, e. g. *cniht* (NE *knight*), *ham* (NE *home)*; examples of Neut. nouns are: *lim* (NE *limb), hus* (NE house).

a- **stem** nouns in **Old English**

		a- stem	**wa- stem**
sing	Nom	stān	bearu
	Gen	stān-es	bear-wes
	Dat	stān-e	bear-we
	Acc	stān	bearu
pl	Nom	stān-as	bear-was
	Gen	stān-a	bear-wa
	Dat	stān-um	bear-wum
	Acc	stān-as	bear-was

Note should be taken of the inflections *-es* of the Gen. sg. and *-as* of the Nom. pl. Towards the end of the OE period they began to be added to an increasing number of nouns, which originally belonged to other stems. These inflections are the prototypes and sources of the Mod E 's of the Possessive case and *-(e)s* and *-s* markers of the plural.

Neut. *a*-stems differed from Masc. in the plural of the Nom. and Acc. cases. Instead of *-as* they took *-u* for short stems (that is nouns with a short root-syllable) and did not add any inflection in the long-stemmed variant. This peculiarity of Neut. *a*-stems goes back to some phonetic changes in final unaccented syllables which have given rise to an important grammatical feature: an instance of regular homonymy or neutralisation of number distinctions in the noun paradigm.

o-stems were all Fem., so there was no further subdivision according to gender. The variants with *-jo-* and *-wo-* decline like pure *o*-stems except that *-w-* appears before some endings. The difference between short- and long-stemmed *o*-stems is similar to that between respective *a*-stems: after a short syllable the ending *-u* is retained, after a long syllable it is dropped.

o-stems

sing	Nom	wund	(NE wound)
	Gen	wunde	
	Dat	wunde	
	Acc	wunde	
pl	Nom	wunda	
	Gen	wunda	
	Dat	wundum	
	Acc	wunda	

The other vocalic stems, *i*-stems and *u*-stems, include nouns of different genders. Division into genders breaks up *i*-stems into three declensions. Comparison of the i-stems with a-stems reveals many similarities. It appears that Masc. *i*-stems adopted some forms from Masc. *a*-stems, while Neut. *i*-stems were more likely to follow the pattern of Neut. *a*-stems; as for Fem. *i*-stems, they resembled *o*-stems.

i-stems

M

sing	Nom	mete	(NE meat)
	Gen	metes	
	Dat	mete	
	Acc	mete	
pl	Nom	mete, -as	
	Gen	meta	
	Dat	metum	
	Acc	mete, -as	

u-stems

sing	Nom	sunu	(NE sun)
	Gen	suna	
	Dat	suna	
	Acc	sunu	
pl	Nom	suna	
	Gen	suna	
	Dat	sunum	
	Acc	suna	

The most numerous group of the consonantal stems were **n-stems** or the **weak declension**. The element -*n*- in the inflections of the weak declension was a direct descendant of the old stem-suffix -*n,* which had acquired a new, grammatical function.

sing	Nom	nama	(NE name)
	Gen	naman	
	Dat	naman	
	Acc	naman	
pl	Nom	naman	
	Gen	namena	
	Dat	namum	
	Acc	naman	

The other consonantal declensions are called minor consonantal stems as they included small groups of nouns. The most important type are the root-stems, which had never had any stem-forming suffix. In Early OE the root-vowel in some forms was subjected to phonetic changes: if the grammatical ending contained the sound [i], the vowel was narrowed and/or fronted by palatal mutation. After the ending was dropped the mutated vowel turned out to be the only marker of the plural form. OE *fot* (NE *foot) - fet.* The interchange of root-vowels had turned into a regular means of form-building used similarly with inflections. This peculiarity of the root- stems is of considerable consequence for later history and has left traces in Mod E. (Irregular pl forms - *men, women, teeth* and the like come from the OE root-stem declension).

root stems

sing	Nom	fōt	(NE foot)
	Gen	fōtes	
	Dat	fēt	
	Acc	fōt	
pl	Nom	fēt	
	Gen	fōta	
	Dat	fōtum	
	Acc	fēt	

Among the other consonantal stems we should mention a small group of nouns denoting family relationship with the stem-suffix **-r.** Another small group of nouns is known as *s*-stems. Only a few Neut. nouns remained in that group in OE, e. g. *lamb, cealf, cild* (NE *lamb, calf, child).*

It may be concluded that for all its complicated arrangement the system of noun declensions lacked consistency and precision. There were many polyfunctional and homonymous markers in the paradigms. The distinction between morphological classes was not strict. Some forms were alike in all the declensions, many forms acquired new analogical variants under the influence of the more numerous classes or variants with phonetically weakened endings, which eliminated the differences between the declensions and between the forms within the paradigm. Towards the end of the OE period formal variation grew and the system tended to be re-arranged according to gender on the basis of the most influential types: **a-stems,** *o***-sterns and** *n***-stems**.