
A study on the Nominal Plural forms in early middle English

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Abstract

Nominal plural forms were not common in old English. Old English noun usually inflected as a strong neuter, the plural form being win. The s – form in the text is perhaps one of the earliest instances of transfer to –s and comes straight down to later periods, seeing that the s – form is the only accepted plural. The second point is s – ending extends to historically unexpected classes of nouns. Examples are burgas, degles, feondas, Rondas, hoses etc. The number of nouns that transferred to – s may not be very large, but the examples show that this is a preliminary stage to the further development in early Middle English. The present nominal plural forms describe how the old English changed into early Middle English.

Keywords: *English literature, plural, early Middle English etc.*

1. Introduction and Literature

The period from 1050 to 1300 is an important landmark in the history of English literature as well as in the history of the English nation. On the other hand, the period was characterized by very extensive morphological changes that transformed English from a rather highly inflected language to one having the relatively few and simple inflections of late Middle English. All distinctions of grammatical gender were lost altogether. And even the grammatical categories that remained were more simply expressed, for in late Middle English. The single ending – es had replaced the variety of endings that had expressed the genitive singular and plural of nouns in lid English. Thus the history of nominal plurals has been regarded as an aspect of the arguably most dynamic changes in the history of the English language; however, there has been little detailed study made on the subject. One of the few studies ever made is Roedler’s two – volume work on the development of the s – plural. The study covers various periods and dialects and reveals the distribution of each plural formation based on a large collection of actual examples.

Despite Roedler’s dedicated study, there is still much left to be done to clarify the process of the systemic change. New research must aim not only to show individual facts but also to reveal diachronic and diatopic continuums out of them so that we will understand the chronological development and geographical distribution of nominal plurals. But my goal is therefore to describe closely how the plural system developed in the periods centering around early middle English with special emphasis on linguistic continuity both in terms of time and space. Once the temporal and spatial continuums are recognized, the next question to ask is why different configurations of the plural system are found in different dialects. To seek motives for the development in each dialect is another aim of the present study, since surprisingly few attempts have so far been made at proposing motives for the development of the plural system.

Recent developments in the area of geographical linguistics and contact linguistics provide a new theoretical framework in which to interpret the development of plural formations in early Middle English. Among others, a contact linguistic point of view gives us an insight into the question why the northern and southern dialects differed so much in plural formation transfer. In the third place, the last few decades have seen development in general theories of language change. One of the today’s most powerful theories on language change is the lexical diffusion model, which theorizes implementation of language change within the system, within the vocabulary and within the population. It predicts a common pattern of language change as a characteristic s – curve along the time axis. I will introduce the theory to the present investigation.

The primary objectives of this investigation are to depict how ostensible plural arrangements were diatopically circulated and diachronically created in the periods focusing on early Middle English. To examine why the

improvement occurred at the time, in the place and in the way that it did, to take the benefit of the most recent accomplishments of English verifiable semantics to approach the inquiries "how" and "why" of the advancement between early Middle English and late Middle English. Although I have just enumerated reasons for the focus on early Middle English, I find it important not to ignore a diachronically wider perspective. My interest lies in the early Middle English period, but I try to extend the time range a little backward and forward, i.e., I also consider some part of late old English and late middle English. How far the time range is extended backward and forward from early Middle English is, as I admit, rather arbitrarily decided. This is because the period and rate of the plural system change varies considerable according to dialects.

In Northern and eastern, the spread of the plural started as early as the mid-tenth century and nearly finished perhaps before 1200, where as in southern and western it started later and went on more slowly into the beginning of Modern English considering this North/South difference, it will be sensible to set up an earlier and shorter time range for the more northern dialects and a later and longer time range for the southern. In view of this, a reasonable diachronic scope might be something like 1100 to 1300 for the North and East and 1150 to 1400 for the south and west. I repeat that I recognize the importance of taking a longer – range diachronic view than early Middle English. In view of this, I make an old English to present – day English diachronic investigation on the development of various plural forms for the particular item “eyes”. This additional case study is meant not only to complement the present study but also to introduce a “pan chronic” approach to it.

2. Conclusion

Thus one can conclude that nominal plural forms in early middle English has different dialects which shows different developments on an item – by – item basis, but globally seen, they show a striking similarity in plural formation transfer. In other words, each of the dialects is unique on a micro – level, but they are after all varieties of one language on a macro level or the different levels of motivation, i.e., phonetic, morphologica, syntactic and semantic.

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