

adjectives

Old English

- There are two types of adjectives in Old English:
 Strong Adjectives, which can stand on their own; they do not need a demonstrative to assist them
 Weak Adjectives, which do not stand on their own; they come paired with a demonstrative or a possessive.
- Strong Declension Adjectives Paradigms

| | SINGULAR | | | PLURAL | | |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | Masculine | Neuter | Feminine | Masculine | Neuter | Feminine |
| Nominative | - | - | u | e | u | a |
| Genitive | es | es | re | ra | ra | ra |
| Accusative | ne | - | e | e | u | a |
| Dative | um | um | re | um | um | um |
| Instrumental | e | e | re | | | |

- Weak Declension Adjectives Paradigms

| | SINGULAR | | | PLURAL |
|-------------------------|-----------|--------|----------|-------------|
| | Masculine | Neuter | Feminine | All genders |
| Nominative | a | e | e | an |
| Genitive | an | an | an | ra or ena |
| Accusative | an | e | an | an |
| Dative and Instrumental | an | an | an | um |

Middle English

- This system underwent a two-stage restructuring in Middle English. In early texts there are recognisable relics of at least the most salient endings of the strong declension; e.g. Lazamon's *æt ... are chirechen* 'at a church' (*are* < OE *ān-re*, strong fem. dat. sg. of *ān* 'one'). But even some of these survivals show erosion of the original principles: from the same text: *þes hezes kinges* 'of the high king', which in Old English would have had the weak adjective following the inflected article, *þæs hēan cyninges*.
- As Middle English proceeded, the strong/weak opposition decayed, and with the loss of case and gender marking on the article, that on the adjective disappeared as well. The end result, typical of most of Middle English at least through the fourteenth century, was a simple opposition between forms with and without *-e*. As early as Orm we find variation in the same syntactic contexts (as with dative singular on the noun - normally for metrical reasons): *annd habbenn a33* ['always'] *god wille*, *þat hafepþ a33 god wille* vs *þat hafepþ god-e wille* (Bennett & Smithers 1966: xxvi).
- By Chaucer's time the zero/-ə distinction was sensitive to two parameters: 'definiteness' and number. The definite form in *-e* usually occurred after determiners (*the cold-e steele*, *this good-e wyf*), in vocatives (O fals-e *mordrou*) and in attributive plurals, whether prenominal (*the long-e nyghtes*) or postnominal (*shoures sot-e* 'sweet showers'). Endingless forms occurred in singular predicate adjectives (*it was old*), after indefinite determiners (*a good wyf*, *many a fals flatour*), and in other positions without determiner (*as hoot he was as...*).
- In Late Middle English this pattern was mostly restricted to monosyllabic adjectives; longer ones were normally endingless everywhere (cf. schwa-deletion in polysyllables),

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and the general Germanic tendency towards vowel loss in longer items). The adjectival -e, like others, was variable, and deletable in verse where metrically appropriate — suggesting once again that any distinction carried solely by a final schwa would have vanished by the end of the fourteenth century.

- In fairly high-style literary texts, a rather short-lived new plural type appears in Late Middle English: an *-(e)s* which is found most often on postposed adjectives of Romance origin - since both the ending and the construction reflect a French pattern. Thus Chaucer has *places delitable-s*, *thynges espirituel-s* (cf. *espiritueel freendes* with preposed adjective and no ending: Sandved 1985: 52f.). The N-(e)s + *Adj-(e)s* type was especially common in scientific and legal texts (*bestes crepandes*, *heirs males*), and persists into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In a few instances the same *-(e)s* plural appears in preposed or predicate adjectives as well: Chaucer's *romances that been roiales*.

Early Modern English

Throughout the history of English, adjectives have been used as **heads in noun phrases**.

➤ In OLD AND MIDDLE ENGLISH, the adjective head had a more extensive sphere of reference than today; it could refer to:

- to a person
- to a specific group of persons or things.

It could not, however, express the distinction between human and non-human referents, or, after the loss of inflectional endings, the singular and the plural. It was probably for this reason that (pro)nominal heads came to be preferred with adjectives, except in certain well-defined cases. This development resulted, among other things, in the establishment of the prop-word *one*; the rise of the compound forms of indefinite pronouns (*-one*, *-body*) is closely related.

➤ In EARLY MODERN ENGLISH adjective heads can still be used with reference to:

- a single individual
The younger [sing.] rises when the old [sing.] doth fall (Shakespeare *King Lear* III.iii)
- non-generically
I cannot but be serious in a cause ... wherein my fame and the reputations of diverse honest, and learned are the question; (Johnson *Volpone* Epistle)
It has to be added, though that these rules are becoming infrequent in the period.

➤ In PRESENT-DAY ENGLISH adjective heads mainly refer to:

- abstract concepts (*the mystical*)
- generic groups
- classes of people (*the rich*).

Modern English

Despite the triumph of English in all domains of use, Latin grammar continued to cast a long shadow over the grammatical analysis of the vernacular. In part the influence of grammar followed from its being perceived as an exemplar of universal grammar par excellence; it was only natural, then that grammarians were inclined to impose the Procrustean bed of Latin structure on their analyses of English. As an illustration: in **the second quarter of the eighteenth century (!!!)** John Stirling had laid out the English adjective *wise* in a paradigm with no fewer than thirty-six cells, representing six cases in three genders, both singular and plural. In that paradigm all thirty-six occurrences of *wise* were, of course, **identical**. The thirty-six cells represented possible inflectional variants of the Latin paradigm. They had no relation to English and could as well have been 136. To represent English facts only **one** cell would be needed.

