

OLD ENGLISH WORD - FORMATION AND SYNTAX

Выполнили:

Студентки группы

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Нигматуллина Карина

Хисамеева Лилия



WORD-FORMATION IN OLD ENGLISH

Word Structure

According to the morphological structure Old English words fell into three

Main types:

- 1) Simple words (“root-words”) or words with a simple stem, containing a root-morpheme and no derivational affixes, e. g. land, singan, god (Mod. E land, sing, good);
- 2) Derived words consisting of one root-morpheme and one or more affixes, e. g. be-ginnan, weorþ-ung, un-scyld-ig, ge-met-ing (Mod. E begin, “worthiness”, “innocent”, meeting).
- 3) Compound words, whose stems were made up of more than one rootmorpheme, e. g. mann-cynn, fēower-tīene, weall-geat (Mod. E mankind, fourteen, wall gate).



WAYS OF WORD-FORMATION

Old English employed two ways of word-formation: derivation and word composition.

Derived words in Old English were built with the help of affixes: prefixes and suffixes; sound interchanges and word stress.

Prefixation was a productive way of building new words in Old English.

Prefixes were widely used with verbs but were far less productive with other parts of speech. The most frequent, and probably the most productive, Old English 15 prefixes were: ā-, be-, for-, fore-, ge-, ofer-, un-. Of these only un- was common with nouns and adjectives, the rest were mainly verb prefixes, e.g.

gān—“go” faran—“travel”
a-gān—“go away” ā-faran—“travel”
be-gān—“go round” tō-faran—“disperse”
fore-gān—“precede” for-faran—“intercept”
ofer-gān—“traverse” forþ-faran—“die”
ge-gān—“go”, „go away“ ge-faran—
„attack“, etc



Old English Word - formation and syntax

Suffixation was by far the most productive means of word derivation in Old English. Suffixes were mostly applied in forming nouns and adjectives, seldom—in forming verbs. In Old English there were two large groups of suffixes: suffixes of nouns and suffixes of adjectives. Noun suffixes are divided into suffixes of “agent nouns” (“nomina agentis”) and those of abstract nouns.

Among the suffixes of “agent nouns” there were some dead, unproductive suffixes: -a, as in the Masc. a-stem *hunta* (NE hunter), -end, originally the suffix of the Present Participle, e.g. OE *frēond*, *fiend* (NE friend, fiend); -end in wordbuilding was later replaced by -ere, a suffix of IE descent, whose productivity grew after the adoption of Latin words with the same suffix, e.g. *scōlere*, *sutere* (NE scholar, “shoemaker”).



Old English Word - formation and syntax

Productive suffixes which formed abstract nouns were as follows: -nes/-nis, -ung/-ing, -op, -ap, -up, -pu, e.g. huntop, fiscap, geogup (NE “hunting”, “fishing”, “youth”).

In the derivation of adjectives the most productive suffixes were: -ig, and -isc: e.g. hālig (NE holy), Englisc, Denisc (NE English, Danish).

Sound Interchanges distinguish between words built from the same root.

The sources of sound interchanges:

ablaut or vowel gradation;

e.g. rīdan v—rād n [ī~ā] (NE ride, raid);

singan v—song n [i~a] (NE sing—song);

palatal mutation;

e.g. dōm—dēman (NE doom—deem);

full—fyllan (NE full—fill);

long—lengpu (NE long—length);

OE breaking;

e.g. beran—bearn (NE bear).



Old English Word - formation and syntax

The syntactic structure of a language is usually closely connected with its morphology.

In a highly inflected language a word mostly carries with it indications of its class, of its function in the sentence, of its relations with other words. With the loss of inflections the dependence of the word grows. Much of the difference between the OE and the MnE syntax is of that nature.

1) The order of words in a sentence was comparatively free in OE as contrasted with the rigid WO of MnE.

2) In OE the inflections played a much greater role in the indication of syntactical relations between words in a sentence or group than in MnE. Thus, in the OE sentence *Ohthere saede his ... the ending –e of hlaforde showed that the noun was in the dative case and that it fulfilled the function of the indirect object. In the MnE translation “Ohthere said to his lord” the relations formerly expressed by the dative case ending are indicated with the help of the preposition to.*



Old English Word - formation and syntax

3) The subject of a sentence or clause was frequently unexpressed in OE. E.g. Bugon to bence = (They) bent to the bench.

4) In OE there were some types of 'impersonal' sentences not found in MnE, but close to the Russian мне хочется, меня знобит.

E.g. Nu rincp me (Cf. E. methinks, R. мне думается)

5) In OE multiple negation was perfectly normal. E.g. He ne mihte nan ping geseon ~ He could see nothing.



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