

# Middle English Syntax

Page No. 1.

Date:

YOUVA

Degree - I (English Honors)

Paper - I

The Middle English period (1150-1500) witnessed remarkable changes in the English language. It is the period in which far reaching changes in the English language began which ultimately led to the emergence of Modern English. Though the changes took place in a wide and extensive area including those in spelling and pronunciation, the syntax of the Middle English underwent momentous changes. Some of the features which characterize Middle English syntax are listed below.

The first great feature of Middle English syntax is the reduction of inflexions. Most of the Old English inflexional endings either disappeared or were marginalised. While Old English had varied endings for the nominative and accusative plural (-as, a, an, e, u) Middle English reduced them all to 'as'. Similarly the Old English genitive endings like 'es' - a, an, e were reduced to 'es'. But when the pronunciation of the vowels in all unstressed positions became blurred, the 'es' and 'as' were pronounced alike. This resulted in the use of '-es' for both genitives and plurals in Middle English.

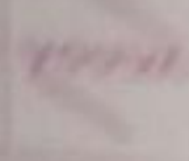
The second feature of Middle English syntax relates to the declinable state of adjectives. Unlike the adjectives in modern English, there used to be two forms of adjectives in the Middle English indicating the difference in numbers. Even during Chaucer's time, we find expressions like



## Middle English Syntax

Page no. 2

Date



'He wodes is fair' and fair wyves indicating plural forms.

The third feature of the Middle English syntax is related to 'articles'. In Old English, the definite article had three gender forms (se masculine, seo feminine, soet neuter) and *zif* was declined through all four cases in singular and plural. But in the Middle English period, the other forms of the definite article disappeared and "the" became used for all of them.

The change in the pronominal system is the fourth feature of the Middle English syntax. The leveling or decay of pronominal inflexions led to the ambiguity in the use of the Old English pronouns. This led to their replacement by the Scandinavian pronouns which are represented in the modern show, they, them, their. These Scandinavian forms and became generally accepted by the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The Old English pronoun for the first person singular (ie) had also become changed into the modern form 'I' by the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

A fifth feature of the Middle English syntax is called 'discernable' in the field of Gender. In the Old English, there was no relation between the gender of a noun and the sex (or the absence of sex) of the thing it represented. But by the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the grammatical gender of the Middle English came in place of the natural gender of the Old English.

The emergence of a complicated



## Middle English Syntax

Page No. 3

syntax of the tense is the sixth features of Middle English syntax. The old English had only two tenses, a present and a past the future tense with 'shall' and 'will' was established in Middle English.

Besides this, various types of perfect tenses of the verb (forms like we have eaten, he had broken) became established. Even the variously rest of continuous tenses also developed in Middle English period.

Word-order's becoming more important and more rigid is the seventh feature of Middle English syntax. The word-order of old English can be illustrated from a sentence of King Alfred's which begins thus:-

Pe e Pa pis call gemundo, Pa gemundo ie, eae, to le ge seah....

This sentence has three clauses:-

- (i) When I then this all remembered,
- (ii) Then remembered I also
- (iii) How I saw....

Only the third of these as word order in conformity with the modern usage. The adoption of the third type as normal and the disappearance of the other two types, took place in the Middle English period.

Contact with the French resulted in the introduction of certain French usages into English which may be last but not the least feature of Middle English syntax. One of the French usages assimilated into ME syntax was the use of the preposition 'of' as a sign of the genitive case. In old English, there were rare instances of the use



## Middle English Syntax

Page No.: 4

Date:

youva

of their preposition to express possession. This has been a very useful addition to the resources of the language.

By:-

Dr. Mitlesh Kumar Manjhi

Dept. of English

J. N. College, Madhubani.