

Middle English Exercise 4: Grammar

While the lexicon tends to be the focus of our encounters with Middle English, in that we look to the gloss to indicate the meaning of a word that is unfamiliar, grammar differences also account for challenges to our understanding of Middle English texts.

Take a look at a sample passage from Chaucer, as a way of highlighting some common features of ME that differ from Modern English. The italicized words to the right gloss words or phrases in that given line.

Whilom ther was dwellynge at Oxenford	<i>once; Oxford</i>
A riche gnof, that gestes heeld to bord,	<i>churl; took in paying guests</i>
And of his craft he was a carpenter.	
With hym ther was dwelling a poure scoler,	
Hadde lerned art, but al his fantasye	<i>was a Master of Arts; desire</i>
Was turned for ot lerne astrologye,	
And koude a certeyn of conclusions,	<i>knew a number of formulas</i>
To demen by interrogaciouns,	<i>answer questions</i>
If that men asked hym in certain houres	<i>concerning predictions</i>
Whan that men sholde haue droghte or elles shoures	<i>showers</i>
Or if men asked hym what sholde bifalle	
Of every thing; I may nat rekene hem all.	<i>I cannot count them all</i>
This clerk awas cleped hende Nicholas.	<i>noble</i>
Of deerne loue he koude and of solas;	<i>secret love; sexual pleasure</i>
And therto he was sleigh and ful priuee,	<i>concerning that; clever; very discreet</i>
And lyk a mayden meke for to see.	
A chamber hadde he in that hostelrye	
Allone, wihtouten any compaignye,	
Ful fetisly ydight with herbes swoote;	<i>very elegantly furnished; sweet herbs</i>
And he himself as sweete as is the roote	
Of lycorys, or any cetewale.	<i>licorice; zedoary (a spice)</i>
His Almageste, and bookes grete and smale,	<i>(astronomy treatise)</i>
His astrelabie, longynge for his art,	<i>astrolabe; belonging to</i>
His augrym stones layen faire apart,	<i>(cubes for making calculations)</i>

On shelves couched at his beddes heed;	<i>arranged</i>
His presse ycouered with a faldyng reed;	<i>cupboard; red coarse cloth</i>
And al aboute ther lay a gay sautrie,	<i>on top of everything; psaltery (harp)</i>
On which he made a-nyghtes melodie	
So sweetly that all the chamber rong;	
And angelus ad virginem he song;	<i>(hymn on the Annunciation)</i>
And after that he song the Kynges Noote.	
Ful often blessed was his myrie throte.	
And thus this sweete clerk his tyme spente,	
After his freendes fyndyng and his rente.	

These last two lines can be glossed as “And thus this sweet scholar spent his time, in accord with his friends’ financial support of him, and his own income.”

First, go through and match each gloss with the word(s) in the line that the gloss explains. Make sure you understand *how* the gloss actually explains it.

Notice that in almost every case the gloss helps you by defining a ME word that is not clear in ModE. Some of the glosses help explain, in basic terms, specific allusions (cultural references). However, there are some spots of possible confusion that are unrelated to lexical concerns.

Grammar issues:

Grammar includes both syntax and morphology. Syntax refers to the ways in which words combine to form phrases, clauses, and sentences. Morphology is the form of a word, such as the inclusion of a particular inflection.

In OE, because of the heavily inflected nature of the language, rules of syntax were much less rigid than they are for ModE, which relies very little on inflection to convey the purpose of a word in a sentence. In OE, one could arrange the words in a sentence in a variety of ways, because a word’s placement indicated much less than its inflection did:

Se hlaford bint þone cnapan.	The lord binds the servant.
þone cnapan bint se hlaford.	The lord binds the servant.
Se hlaford þone cnapan bint.	The lord binds the servant.

As the Modern English translation indicates, all of these OE sentences are saying the same thing. However, if we were to change the Modern English version around the same way, meaning would be completely altered, or lost:

The lord binds the servant

The servant binds the lord

The lord the servant binds.

In the OE, because *se hlaford* is the nominative (subject) form of that noun, it will be in the nominative no matter where it is placed in the sentence. In the ModE, the word *lord* does not change form depending on whether it is in the nominative or accusative (object) case within the sentence; instead, its meaning changes depending on *where* it appears in the sentence (before or after the verb). Similarly, *þone cnapan* is in the accusative regardless of where it appears in the sentence. In both cases, inflection alone determines the role of the word and thus, in the end, the meaning of the sentence.

Middle English, as you observed in Exercise 2, retains some of the inflectional nature of Old English (a feature known as “synthetic”), though word order had increasing significance within a sentence throughout the Middle English period (a feature we call “analytic”)

Additional differences (which could be explained here, but that is best suited to a linguistically-focused course on Middle English):

The possessive (a.k.a. genitive) in ME:

kynges = king’s and kings’ (no distinction obvious between singular and plural)

Sometimes: *The knight his tale*, with “his” serving the purpose of ‘s in ModE (characteristic called the his-genitive, or the his-possessive).

Another distinctive possessive feature is the group possessive, wherein a different word is modified than would be the case in ModE:

The duke’s wife of Gloucester, which equals *The Duke of Gloucester’s wife*.

The negative:

As in OE, ME indicated negation through using *ne*. It often did this through elision, by connecting *ne* to the following word: *nas* = *ne was* (“not was,” literally: in ModE, “was not”)

It also relied upon the double negative for emphasis (only in the 18th century was that usage deemed incorrect): *he nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde*: He never yet spoke any coarseness.

In the ME passage above:

Postmodifying adjectives: the adjective follows the noun, when in ModE it would precede it:

herbes swoote

faldyng reed

Subordinate clauses are marked differently, with what strikes us as redundant uses of a subordinating conjunction “that”

If that men asked

Other times, the subordinating element is absent

Hadde lerned art implied a “who” before it

Helping or auxiliary verbs such as *should* and *may* had a significance that they don’t have today; now, we would have to use “must” or “can” in order to convey that emphasis.

Koude does not mean “could,” as anticipated, but instead “knew”

The pronoun system differs in some key ways:

<i>nom.</i>	I	we	thou/thow	ye
<i>acc.</i>	me	us	the(e)	you/yow
<i>dat.</i>	my(n)(e)	our(e)(s)	thy(n)(e)	your(e)(s)
<i>gen.</i>	me	us	the(e)	you/yow

<i>nom.</i>	he	s(c)he	it/hit	they
<i>acc.</i>	hym/him	hire(e)	it/hit	hem
<i>dat.</i>	his	hir(e)(s)	his	hir(e)(s)
<i>gen.</i>	hym/him	hir(e)	it/hit	hem

Verb inflections are somewhat different, such as –en in *layen apart*

Punctuation, though not specifically a grammar issue, does convey meaning in ways similar to syntax, and the differences between the punctuation systems of ME and ModE can cause confusion.

ModE: grammatical (intended to help reader understand the grammatical structure of the sentence)

ME: rhetorical (when present at all): it indicates pauses for breath, for those reading aloud, and gives cues for emphasis.

The differences in the uses of punctuation thus highlight the shift from the heavily oral culture of the Middle Ages to the highly literate culture of today.

[Much of this exercise was inspired by Simon Horobin and Jeremy Smith's *An Introduction to Middle English* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2002).]