

A Parametric Shift in the D-system during the Middle English Period: Indeterminates, Relativization, Articles, and Adjectival Inflection

This paper proposes that a single parametric shift in the D system lies behind a series of changes related to the morpho-syntax of nominals that took place during the Middle English period. The changes in question are (i) the loss of the indeterminate system, (ii) the demise of demonstrative pronouns as relative pronouns, (iii) the birth of articles, and (iv) the loss of the weak-strong distinction in the adjectival inflection. The parameter which I claim is responsible for all these four changes has to do with the choice of whether the D head can act as the probe for agreement in terms of features involved in reference and quantification.

Theoretical characterization of the OE system: Let us start with the indeterminate system. Existential and universal quantifiers can be formed out of wh-phrases in Old English (Mitchell 85), as shown in (1), together with some examples in (2).

- (1) wh some/any some every every/any
hwa (a)hwa nathwa æghwa gehwa
hwæt (a)hwæt nathwæt æghwæt gehwæt

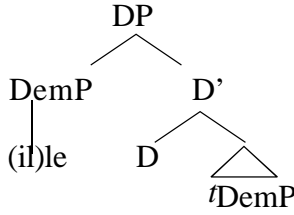
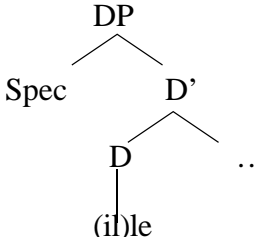
- (2) Hi eodon þa secende ealle endemes to þam wuda,
they went then seeking all together to the forest
secende **gehwær** geond þyfelas and bremelas
seeking everywhere through bushes and brambles
gif hi **a-hwær** mihton gemeton þæt heafod.

if they anywhere might find the head (Ælfric, Lives of Saints XXXII.142-144)
Adopting Watanabe's 04 proposal concerning the similar indeterminate system in Japanese for Old English as well, we can say that quantificational particles such as **ge-** and **a-**, located under D, undergo agreement with the indeterminate (**hwær** in (2)). The feature in question is quantificational in nature. That of the particles is interpretable, whereas that of the indeterminate is uninterpretable, given that it is the individual particles that determine the quantificational force.

This analysis of the indeterminate system also provides a straightforward account for the well-known fact that wh-pronouns cannot be used as relative pronouns in Old English (Allen 80, Mitchell & Robinson 02), on the assumption that wh-phrases are headed by D as in the case of other elements in the indeterminate system. If this D, which happens to be null, has an interpretable feature that yields existential quantification, the relative clause cannot act as a predicate that modifies the NP when a wh-phrase is used as the relative pronoun, since the open proposition represented by the relative clause will be used up for the purposes of quantification.

If the agreeing nature of the Old English D system involves not only quantification but also reference tracking, the weak-strong distinction in the adjectival inflection falls into place as well, since this distinction is sensitive to the definiteness (among others).

Changes during the ME period: It becomes possible to give a theoretical account of the use of demonstratives as relative pronouns during the Old English period, once the emergence of the definite article (Philippi 97) is taken into account. Giusti 01 proposes that the emergence of the definite article in Romance is the result of reanalysis of the sort depicted in (3), where the demonstrative in Spec of DP comes to be treated as the head of DP.

- (3) a.  b. 

Since Giusti assumes that the demonstrative in stage (3a) is raised to Spec of DP from below, this “reanalysis” implies that D ceases to trigger the agreement operation that lies behind the movement of the demonstrative.

Adopting Giusti’s analysis for the history of English, we can say that D ceased to agree in terms of features having to do with quantification and reference tracking in the transition from OE to ME. Hence the establishment of the definite article during the Middle English period. It also follows that the indeterminate system and the weak-strong distinction in the adjectival inflection must disappear. Indeed, the indeterminate system disappeared quite early on (Kahlas-Tarkka 94, Rissanen 97). The disappearance of the weak-strong distinction took somewhat longer (Minkova 91), but it was eventually wiped out.

The demise of demonstrative pronouns as relative pronouns now receives an account as well. Assuming that ordinary demonstratives must possess an uninterpretable feature to undergo raising to Spec of DP as in (3a) during the Old English period, we can say that the relative pronoun use of demonstratives also requires agreement with D (though the latter are not raised to Spec of DP). Once D ceases to agree, the uninterpretable feature of the demonstrative will lead to a crashing derivation. Unlike the ordinary deictic/anaphoric use of demonstratives, the relative pronoun use of demonstratives does not allow reanalysis of the sort given in (3). They simply have to disappear. And they did (Allen 80). (Or alternatively, they were reanalyzed as C.)

Thus, we can conclude that all the four changes listed above are due to the loss of D’s ability to agree in terms of the features having to do with quantification and reference tracking at the level of narrow syntax computation.

Theoretical implications: At this point, one might ask what it means to say that D ceases to agree with respect to the features of quantification and reference tracking. After all, these features are interpretable at D. Here, Chomsky’s 95 distinction between semantic and formal features becomes significant. Semantic interpretability cannot draw a proper line between the two, since there are interpretable formal features. Rather, the distinction rests on the ability to participate in agreement. Only formal features do. Then, the parametric change in the transition from OE to ME eventually involves reclassifying the features of quantification and reference tracking from formal to semantic.

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