LANGUAGE CHANGE AND MODES OF THINKING THE LOSS OF INFLEXIONS IN OLD ENGLISH

Martinez del Castillo, Jesus, PhD
Almería University, Spain

Abstract

Language is the creation of meanings. A language is a technique for any kind of speech, functioning in a particular speech community. As a technique of speaking it is constituted by a set of forms, contents, rules, procedures, attitudes and a system of beliefs ruling in the so-called a state of the language, that is, the analogous language ruling in a period of time. Since human subjects, that is, speakers, have the peculiar condition of being-together-with-others, the manifestation of this condition of humans, a language, is nothing but a historical object. Because of this, languages, as the manifestation of human intelligence and freedom in a speech community, will change in history, because all speakers participate in the construction and reconstruction of it. The way every language changes is something to be explained internally in the speech community.

My thesis is that the changes known as *the loss of inflexions* were prompted with the introduction of a *new way of thinking*. The way of thinking, for the Anglo-Saxons in Old English, was *a dynamic way of conceiving of things*. Things were considered *events happening*. With the contacts of Anglo-Saxons with Celtic-Roman people, first, the introduction of Christianity, second, and finally with the Norman invasion, their dynamic way of thinking was confronted with the static conception of things coming from the Mediterranean. The history of English up to the 15th century meant *the confrontation of two mental conceptions, static vs. dynamic*.

Introduction

Language, for Coseriu, is the creation of meanings. A language is a technique for any kind of speech, functioning in a particular speech community. As a technique of speaking it is constituted by a set of forms, contents, rules, procedures, attitudes and a system of beliefs ruling in what Coseriu calls a state of the language, that is, the analogous language ruling in a period of time. Since human subjects, that is, speakers, have the peculiar condition of being-together-with-others, the manifestation of this condition of humans, a language, is nothing but a historical object. Because of this, languages, as the manifestation of human intelligence and freedom in a speech community, will change in history, because all speakers participate in the construction and reconstruction of it. The way every language changes is something to be explained internally in the speech community.

The so-called English language so as it manifests in the present state of the language is to be characterized, from a diachronical point of view, as an analytic language with some inflexions, prepositions, determiners, numerals, some conjunctions, adverbs, nouns, adjectives, different kinds of verbs, a very numerous vocabulary, a complex syntax, a rather simple morphology and a very peculiar sound system. The fact is that the English language can be traced back to times when it was a synthetic language, in times when it was rightly

connected with the so called Germanic languages, in the form of what we today know as *Old English*. It is peculiar of the language we call English the fact that the separation of it from other cognate Germanic languages and even the re-creation and separation of the different states of the language constituting it, was produced by series of changes very well defined and exhaustive. These series of changes meant a turning point in the evolution of the language. In this sense you can see three periods, every one of these involving several states of the language:

a) the language spoken in Britain since the 5th century up to mid 12th century. This language was a synthetic one with very complex paradigms of inflexions in nouns, verbs, adjectives and rules of word formation. This language was spoken during, roughly speaking, seven centuries. It was to be defined and characterized by a particular way of thinking, that is, a particular way of conceiving of things and tackling with them. This language is usually known as *Old English*.

b) The language started changing in the 11th century up to 15th century included. This period lasted 500 hundred years usually known as *Middle English*. In accordance with this, the language spoken in the 11th century and early 12th centuries was still Old English, thus constituting the starting point in the evolution of the language. The composition of the original text of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle[102] finished by 1030. When in 1080 the Chronicle started being copied in monasteries different from the original one, the changes operated during that short period of time were so radical that they let us consider this century and the next one as the turning point in the evolution of the language. The changes usually known as *the loss of inflexions* started appearing in the 11th and 12th centuries and occurred during the whole period of Middle English. So the so-called Middle English period, however, involved at least four states of the language: the 11th and mid 12th centuries, the Norman period (13th century, the time when the changes starting in the 11th and 12th manifested), the Age of Chaucer (14th century), and the language spoken in the 15th century.

c) The changes happened in the late 15th century up to the late 17th century, all occurred around the change called *the Great Vowel Shift* and the subsequent re-arrangement in all vowels and other elements of the language, thus constituting the *Early Modern English* period (1476-1700). This period was no longer under the influence of the loss of inflexions. Then a new process of evolution started still in force today, of different character.

My thesis in this paper is that the changes known as *the loss of inflexions* were prompted with the introduction of a *new way of thinking*. The way of thinking, for the Anglo-Saxons in Old English, was *a dynamic way of conceiving of things*. Things did not exist: they were considered *events happening*. With the contacts of Anglo-Saxons with Celtic-Roman

---

[102] I am going my to base my analysis on texts of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. *Old English Annals, Old English Chronicle* or the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is a set of annals (chronicles) based on the national history of the Old English people when established in Britain. These annals represent the first extended original composition in English. It was first composed in a monastery around the court of King Alfred the Great and later on were copied in other monasteries. There are seven surviving manuscripts. The last annal in the Chronicle relates to the year 1154 considered to be the last known document of Old English. As a matter if fact the so-called Peterborough Chronicle, copied after a fire in the Peterborough monastery in 1116, attests changes having been operated in the text.

The Chronicle started being written when the kings of Wessex had got political predominance over the other Anglo-Saxon kings in Britain in one of the dialects spoken at the time, West Saxon. On the other hand, King Alfred ordered to translate all manuscripts previously written in English to West Saxon. In this sense the manuscript still extant of Beowulf, for example, is a mixture of dialects. West Saxon dialect in this sense got cultural predominance over the others. This does not object to the fact that it is not the dialect Modern English is descended from. Henry Sweet (1845-1912) is the first scholar who studied Old English texts.

people, first, and later on with the introduction of Christianity in their lives, with one God, an eternal and immovable God, lasting for ever and with no beginning or end[103], the concepts explained by "Columba mæsse.prēost" (Anno 565) were difficult to understand. The introduction of Christian concepts in the lives of the Anglo-Saxons meant *the confrontation of two mental conceptions, static vs. dynamic*. Christianity was accepted because it came from Rome, the prestigious and learned center of knowledge coming of old. One of the central Christian concepts, "Trinitas", for example, at the beginning was rendered as *þrīnes,* "something becoming three" and later on as "trinity", something immobile existing for ever, moving anything else but not moving itself. The sense of both words was the opposite to each other. *Þrīnes* was dynamic, *trinity* static.

The influence of Christianity, with the mode of thinking proper of the Mediterranean tradition, first recorded by the Greek and broadcast by all Mediterranean Cultures, Christianity included, was later on strengthened by the presence of the Normans in the island in the late 11th century. Some of the new concepts having been introduced in the Anglo-Saxon language in the contact with the Christians were adapted, that is, rendered again. So the initial concepts adopted by the Anglo-Saxons in their contact with Celtic Romans and the concepts used by preachers, although they referred the same reality, were different. So technique of writing for the Anglo-Saxons was *bōccræft* (book-skill < *bōc+cræft*) keeping the sense of technique, something learnt after a process of effort, the same as with *rimcræft* (number-skill), the technique of dominating the numbers, or *tungolcræft* (tongue-skill), the technique of dominating speaking or speech, or *stærcræft* (star-skill = the technique of dominating stars) were later on abandoned and rendered again with the name brought by Christians and Normans as, *writing, language, grammar and astronomy*. These words, from the point of view of the conception of things, were different. They meant something supposed to be, but to conceive of them you had to know what they dealt with first. In this process of changing, the Norman period represents the continuation of series of problems posed in a tradition lasting nearly 600 or 700 years since the introduction of Christianity. The new words introduced (*writing, language, grammar and astronomy*) meant something "existing", something there, static and objective, very similar to natural objects[104], not the dynamic processes the primary words meant.

The *loss of inflexions* in the English language, a process of changes starting in the 11th century and lasting up to the 16th century, meant the adoption of a new way of conceiving of things, that is, a new mode of thinking. The Anglo-Saxons, who had conceived of things as processes, adopted the static way of thinking of substantive being functioning in Western Europe. The problem was to adapt both ways of thinking thus forming a new one. This adoption was radical enough to affect all the systems in the English language. It affected mostly the verbs, nouns, adjectives and all elements in a sentence or a phrase.

The so-called weak points in the language constituting the state of the language spoken when the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was written in the 10th century, sometimes described as irregularities, were the first indicators of the process started with the introduction of Christianity and the reinforced with the coming of the Anglo-Saxons to the island. The Anglo-Saxons soon realized that their concepts and the concepts of Christian preachers in the Norman period did not match entirely thus leading them to abandon the initial concepts adopted for new ones. This fact may make us conclude, following Coseriu, that language change is something produced internally in speaking and because of speaking. Because of

---

[103] Parmenides, 6th century B.C. defended this idea applied to being. Being is one, eternal, immobile, it has no beginning or end. Parmenides took this idea of his speech community. Later on Aristotle, 4th century B.C. added to it the idea of substance. The conception of things in this way is usually known after Aristotle, as substantive being. Substantive being as a mode of thinking, was adopted by Christian thinkers.

[104] Take for example language. As a matter of fact, some speakers today conceive of the reality of language, as something natural, innate and something objective existing in itself.

this, language change is to be analysed in terms of the attitude and beliefs of speakers thus constituting their conception of things or their *mode of thinking*.

I am just going to analyse the mode of thinking in the 10th century, a period of self-confidence for the Anglo-Saxons, the time of King Alfred and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, copied and updated all around the country. I am going to analyse the weak points in the language of 10th century, looking for the way of thinking it reveals. The main ideas to be found out now are: the conception of things; things conceived of as events or processes; things as classes; the idea of motion vs. rest; the significance of absence of the indefinite article, the continuous and perfective tenses; the passive voice; and the value of the adjuncts of place and time.

The Mode of Thinking as it is Reflected in the Verbs of Old English

From the point of view of the conception of things, Anglo-Saxon lexical verbs are to be divided into two classes, both affecting the same verb the great majority of times. Lexical verbs have two forms, one to be characterized as neutral or non-perfective and the second one as perfective. This distinction, not usually stated in this way, reflects the interests of the Anglo-Saxons in describing facts as processes, either finished or unfinished, that is, describing an action or the result of an action.

Nearly all lexical verbs had this possibility of expression, since the difference in them was marked with a prefix. Prefix *ġe.* gives the sense of attainment of the action denoted in the stem of the verb, that is, it has a perfective sense, an action which was successfully achieved after a process. The absence of prefix *ġe-* meant an action, the result of which is not mentioned. For example,

457: *Hēr Hengest and Æsc fuhton wiþ Brettas*[105]

Then Hengest and Asc fought against the British.

In this example the action is merely descriptive. It describes something that happened. Without a context, we cannot know what the result of the battle was. The result on the contrary is clear in the following example,

473: *Hēr Hengest and Æsc ġe.fuhton wiþ Wēalas*

Then Hengest and Ash successfully fought against the Celts (who were defeated).

That is, the same verb has a double sense, a non-perfective descriptive sense, and a perfective sense which stresses the result of the action performed. In the second example the idea of motion is stressed, something going beyond the facts stated.

867. *And hīe late on ġeare tō þǽm ġe.ċierdon þæt hīe wiþ þone here winnende wǽron*

And they late in the year submitted to them because they [these ones] were winning with the army [they had].

The action of submitting someone is an action needing both the action in itself and then finishing that action. Verb *ċierran* is usually used with the prefix, *ġe.ċierran*, something known traditionally but said in the use of the verb. With the pass of time, the expression with *ġe.* became redundant.

Because of this grammatical device, some verbs in Old English can have two meanings. So you have *feohtan* and *ġe.feohtan,* just illustrated in the examples above, *gān* and *ġe.gān* meaning respectively 'go' and 'conquer'; *winnan* and *ġe.winnan*, 'win' and 'succeed in winning'; *bindan* and *ġe.bindan*, 'bind' and 'succeed in binding'; etc.

The use of the prefix soon became redundant as in *bindan / ġe.bindan*, and particularly in *seōn / ġe.seōn,* see, and *hīeran / ġe.hīeran*, hear. The prefix was particularly

---

[105] Some examples here will be commented several times depending on the aspect discussed.

used in past participle thus stressing the function of this verb form, *ġe.cweden,* from *cweþan,* 'say', *ġe.cweþan*, 'name'.

Prefix *ġe. appears* as well with nouns denoting a complex action, *ġe.work*, 'military work', *ġe.writ*, letter, *ġe.fēra,* companion*, ġe.lēafa,* belief*, ġe.rēfa,* reeve, *ġe.wuna,* habit. That is and said paraphrasing the words in the examples, *ġe.work* is the work previously planned and then executed; *ġe.writ* writing in as much as it has already been written; a *ġe.fēra* is someone who seizes something together with someone else; a *ġe.rēfa* is someone taking control of something in the name of the king; *ġe.wuna* is in connection with *wunian*, dwell; a *ġe.wuna* is something you live with, a habit or a custom. In some way or another the idea of motion and its contrary, rest, are present in these words, that is, they mean processes already finished.

The presence of prefix *ġe.* in Old English has to do with the conception of things. As we shall see in the next paragraph the function of verbs is not to describe but to denote something happening, that is, expressing the idea of motion thus denying the contrary, the idea of rest. The contacts of Anglo-Saxons with the Celtic-Roman people, the mental confrontation and acceptance of Christianity, and the coexistence with the Normans meant changing their conception of things. Anglo-Saxons verbs denoted finished or unfinished processes, that is, they described events in their performance. With the new mode of thinking they had to re-state the meaning of their verbs, which in principle did not disappear, but gradually omitted their use as something finished thus annulling the distinction based on prefix *ġe.*

Prefix *ġe.-* disappeared by the end of the Middle English period. However the function performed by it still prevails as a syntactic use in examples such as *the tyres are worn flat.*

The idea of motion in verbs did not disappear in the language. In Modern English it appeared in a new sense in the so-called prepositional verbs and phrasal verbs. Take for example verb *do. Do* primarily means "to perform and finish an activity". This action can be orientated in terms of the preposition or particle it is followed with. The following uses illustrate this: *to do away with* (for example, *he did away with the deal successfully*), *do down* (for example, *he'll do you down*, *if he can*), *do for* (for example, *he can't do anything else: he's done for*), *do in* (= kill: for example, *they might do you in while sleeping*), *do out, do out of, do over, etc.* That is, the activity meant by the verb is determined in terms of the content of the preposition in a particular way thus involving the idea of motion.

Things existing as processes

For an Anglo-Saxon, to conceive of something meant describing the process in which it was given. Things then were not entities but classes of things and thus events or processes. Words did not mean individual things but classes of things. Because of this, the *indefinite article* was not necessary. Individualization of things started appearing in the early 13th century. The following example is very illustrative

> *sē his hūs ofer stān ġe.timbrode.*
> who built his house on rock[106].

The author of this sentence did not speak of a particular rock but of the class of rocks. Because of this the example is in the singular. The translation of this example by Sweet uses the indefinite determiner *a*, because in the way of thinking of English today it is necessary to specify that it was in the singular, a particular rock, not the class, in which all rocks were included.

In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle however appears what may be considered one the first appearances of the indefinite article, the numeral *ān*:

> *501. and of.slōgon ānne ġeongne Brettiscne mannan, swīþe æþelne.*

---

[106] Cf. Sweet, Henry, *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Primer,* Norman Davis, ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, [9]1970, p. 56-57.

And they killed a young British man who was very important.

Ānne in the example is not a determiner because on the contrary the adjectives following the numeral would be in the weak declension. It is a numeral. Anyway this type of construction in the text, represents a necessity of expression in the language at the time.

No towns or countries but people

For the Anglo-Saxons, nuclei of population were not places, that is, towns, regions or even kingdoms, but groups of people living together. The places occupied by them were not mentioned:

> *449. Se cyning hēt hīe feohtan on. ġean Peohtas; and hīe swā dydon and siġe hæfdon swā hwær swā hīe cōmon. Hīe þā sendon tō Angle*
>
> The King ordered them to fight against the Picts; and they did so and had victory wherever they went. They then sent messages to the Angles.

However they were dealt with these as if they were places: "*swā hwær swā hīe cōmon*". This has to do with the expression of time (cf. §§ 4.3-4.5). The famous kingdom of Northumbria was referred to in the same way:

> *449. Of Angle cōmon -sē ā siþþan stōd wēste betwix Īotum and Seaxum-Ēast.engle, Middel.engle, Mierċe and ealle Norþ.hymbre*
>
> From the land of Angles (on the continent) —which has ever stood desolate between the Jutes and the Saxons—, East Angles, Midlanders, Mercians and all people of Northumberland came.

As we saw in § 2, words did not mean individual concepts but classes. In order to refer to individual things they are usually determined with determiners. For the Anglo-Saxons, this procedure was not necessary: it is not '*betwix þǽm Īotum*' or '*þā Mierċe*', but simply '*betwix Īotum*' or '*Mierċe*'. The class had predominance over the individual thing.

Verb *bēon* / wessan and verb weorþan and the passive

The passive voice as such had previously existed in the language, the only extant form in Old English was *hātte* from *hātan*, 'call', 'name'. In the language spoken in Britain from the 5th to the 12th centuries, the passive voice was not necessary. According to Sweet there existed the possibility of forming the passive periphrastically with verbs *wessan* and *weorþan* but he adds: "These forms are very vague in meaning"[107]. The reason for this is that the passive voice in the conception of things by the Anglo-Saxons was unnecessary. As we saw in § 1 and shall confirm in § 5, the mode of thinking by the Anglo-Saxons was expressing things in the process they were conceived of. For them, there were no things existing in themselves standing in front of us (§ 2), but processes that should be developed in order to understand them. In this sense the passive voice, the transformation of the perspective in accordance with the way things are considered, stressed or emphasized, was meaningless to them. The idea of motion in contraposition to the idea of rest was much more significant.

For Westerners, the most representative idea is conceiving of things existing in themselves and consequently the most representative verb of their thought is verb *be*. This constitutes the so-called substantive-being or substantive mode of thinking. For the Anglo-Saxons, the most representative idea was *motion* as opposed to *rest*, and the most representative verb, *weorþan* (become, happen), that is, their mode of thinking constituted conceiving of things as becoming, as events in a process[108].

---

[107] *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Primer, op. cit.* p. 53.

[108] Cf. to this respect Ortega y Gasset, ("¿Qué es filosofía?" *Obras Completas, VII* Madrid: Taurus, p. 339), who says*:* "The most characteristic expression of the Hellenic concept of being is being as a substance, immobile and invariable. Even in the ultimate substance, the beginning of all change and movement, in the Aristotelian God, you can find an Entity moving anything but not moving Itself' (my translation)". For the role of verb be in

The passive voice re-appeared in the language at the end of the period called Middle English, that is, when the process described here was over and the expression with prefix *ġe.* had disappeared. That is, a process disappeared and was superseded by another one to a certain extent similar. Passive voice emphasizes the object (direct or indirect) rather than the subject of an action as it is finished, something to a certain extent expressed in Old English with prefix *ġe.* and the idea of motion (cf. § 1).

The Idea of Motion Reflected in a Sentence: Prepositional Phrases

For an Anglo-Saxon, it was fundamental to conceive of things in connection with the development of an action. This action must indicate *motion* or its opposite, *rest*. Verbs constitute the main element in a sentence. Because of this, there were no battles in the fields but warriors who fought against one another. There were no states but processes; no kings who reined but kings who took power (*fēngon tō rice, on.fēngon rice*), etc. The main idea always born in the mind in the conception of things is the idea of *motion*, the development of it, and the contrary, the negation of it. This fact can be seen in sentences, particularly in prepositional phrases. Prepositional phrases constitute elements clearly manifesting the idea of *motion*, expressed with the verb along with its meaning.

The function of prepositions.

Old English was a synthetic language in which all words were defined in terms of the syntactic function they performed in a sentence or phrase. Prepositions could govern different cases. Some could govern the accusative, some the dative, some the instrumental case. The most frequent use is that they should govern the accusative when the idea of motion is involved or the dative case when rest is implied. That is, the idea of the opposition motion-rest is decisive in Old English prepositions, so that all other aspects they can convey are subordinated to it. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 10th century, you can see the following uses.

1.1.Preposition wiþ *with the dative or the accusative*.

Preposition *wiþ* governed the general rule thus involving *motion* or the contrary *rest*.

457: *Hēr Hengest and Æsc fuhton wiþ Brettas* (motion involved thus the accustive)

Then Hengest and Asc fought against the British [=the Roman Celts].

473: *Hēr Hengest and Æsc ġe.fuhton wiþ Wēalas* (motion involved the the accusative)

Then Hengest and Ash fought against the Celts.

The idea of motion makes interpret the preposition in a particular way. The sense of the prepositional phrase is to be rendered as 'against', an idea stressed with the presence of prefix -*ge*.

867. *And hīe late on ġēare tō þǽm ġe.ċierdon þæt hīe wiþ þone here winnende wǽron* (motion involved as well but the dative).

And they late in the year submitted to them because they [these ones] were winning with the army [they had].

Verb *ċierran,* involving a process because of prefix *ġe-,* conveys the idea of something finished. The expression of motion is expressed with the verb, but it governs the dative because the result of the battle stresses a new state of affairs in which rest is involved.

Greek and other languages, cf. Emile Benveniste, *Problemas de lingüística general*, [1971], Siglo XXI Ediciones, [24]2007, vol. I, p. 71-72). And finally for a discussion about language and the mode of thinking, cf. Martínez del Castillo, *Modes of Thingking, Language and Linguistics,* en *Analecta Malacitana, Anexos/94.*

495. *Hēr cōmon twēġen ealdor.menn on Bretene, Cerdic and Cynrīċ his sunu, mid fīf scipum, in þone stede þe is ġe.cweden Cerdices.ōra; and þý ilcan dæġe ġe.fuhton wiþ Wēalum* (motion is involved but the dative).

Then two chiefmen came to Britain Cerdic and Cynrīċ with five ships in the place which is called Cerdices.ōra; *and that very day, they succeeded in their fight against the Celts (who were defeated).*

In this example, preposition *wiþ* governs the dative in spite of the active character of verb f*eohtan, 'fight'*. The reason is that *feohtan* is used in the finished function with prefix *ġe-*. So both clues of meaning are to be stressed: they fought against the Celts and won. The fight was over and the victory certain. So there was instability in their use.

Comparison with these examples reveals that the rule concerning all prepositions functioning at the time, had a stylistic value going beyond the meaning of the verb and the grammar of the words involved thus constituting a weak point the system of the language at the time.

On the other hand, preposition *mid* appears but governing the dative. The adjunct expressed with preposition *mid* is not affected with the action expressed by the verb *cuman*, especially when the adjunct is introduced in the instrumental case. The instrumental case was a remnant of previous states of the language in Old English.

Once the Germanic were established in the island the fight against the Danes was expressed stressing the ideas of motion and collaboration with prepositions *wiþ* and *mid* respectively:

851. *Hēr Ċeorl ealdormann ġefeaht wiþ hǽþne menn mid Defena.scīre æt Wicganbeorge* (both involving motion thus the accusative).

Then the chief-man Ċeorl fought against the heathen (the Danes) together with the Devon army at Wicganbeorg.

In this example both the idea of motion with the accusative and the idea of collaboration with the accusative as well are introduced. Preposition *mid* was associated with a case no longer existing, the instrumental case, thus introducing an instrumental value in the sentence. The central idea is the idea of motion.

Both prepositions *mid* and *wiþ* would later on coalesce in preposition *wiþ*.

Preposition on and ofer and the idea of place as part of a process.

These prepositions were used in accordance with the rule stressing the idea of motion as opposed to rest. With the accusative, *on* means 'into', but with the dative it means 'in'. That is, the idea of motion prevails. Due to the meaning of the verb the idea of rest may be interpreted as meaning place. It is the case of verbs such as *standan* or *eardian* or nouns such as *stede*.

853. *and þǽr wearþ maniġ mann of.slæġen and ā.druncen on ġe.hwæþere hand=* the accusative case.

And there happened that many men became killed and drowned on both sides.

In the expression *on ġe.hwæþere hand* there is no idea of motion. The sentence is governed by verb *wearþan* or *weorþan*, a verb which in Old English plays a function very similar to *bēon (cf. § 3)*. Both *weorþan* and *bēon* denote the existence of something but with a difference: *bēon* is stative, but *wearþan* is dynamic. With this we can see *bēon* denotes a state but *wearþan* a process. So if the author used the accusative it is because he was thinking of the process in the verb.

On the other hand, the object of *wearþ* is in the singular, that is, it gives the idea of a class of objects, the class *mann,* thus meaning *many a man*, as it would be said today. As we said above (cf. § 2), in the Anglo-Saxon way of thinking the class was predominant over the particular thing referred.

855. *And ymb twā ġēar þæs þe hē on Francum cōm, hē ġe.fōr.*

And it was about one year that he had come from the land of the Francs that he died.

The idea that *bēon* and *wearþan or weorþan* are different can be seen here. The preposition *on* governs its object, *Francum,* thus expressing rest instead of motion. Literally: "and about two years after he had been in the land of the Francs, he died". The author says *cōm* instead of *wæs,* but his intention was to state the moment when he had been away. That is, if he had stayed a bit longer in the land of the Francs he could have died there.

So in the time of the Anglo-Saxons the mode of thinking was that things happened but did not exist. That is, their mode of thinking was not the static conception transmitted from the times of the Greek in the so-called the substantive being, but a dynamic way of thinking. Things were conceived of as events happening, not as states. In this sense the ideas of place and time were not directly expressed with these prepositions. The idea of place would later on be introduced in the language with preposition *in*. The idea of place was not the most adequate to the mode of thinking of Anglo-Saxons. Things in the new mode of thinking will be states and because of this, they must be specified in the circumstances they are affected with, one of them is the place where they are; and the other one, is the time when they, do not happen, but are, that is, when things are fixed in being.

In present day English the following examples have to do with the expression of place but in Old English they had to do with motion:

853. *and mid fierde fōr ofer Mierċe on Norþ.wēalas and hīe him ealle ġe.hiersume dydon* (motion thus the accusative in both cases)

And with an army he went into Mercia against the Northern Celts and they succeeded in making them subjects.

But preposition *ofer* is governed by a verb of motion, *faran,* thus introducing a dynamic context. This context is very adequate to preposition *on* thus governing the accusative (to be translated as against).

The following example is explained by Henry Sweet himself as expressing place:

sē his hūs ofer stān ġe.timbrode.

who built his house on a rock.

Henry Sweet (1845-1912), who explains the use of Old English prepositions in the way stated above, merely explains the use: the accusative when it is governed by the idea of motion and the dative when the idea of rest is involved. In many examples Sweet cannot find an explanation and accepts them merely as exceptions. However, when he comments this example gives the right explanation of it. He says: "the acc. *stān* may be accounted for by considering the process of building rather than the completed state"[109]. That is, the problem was the opposition between motion and rest. For the minds of Old English speakers, it was impossible to conceive of things statically. The expression of place has to do with the idea of rest. But most Old English verbs and thus the contexts of innumerable sentences, stressed the idea of dynamism. The right translation of the sentence then would something like, "he who built his house on rock" meaning with it that the house was firmly based on rock, the contrary to a house built on sand.

The following example seems to express place, since one of the uses of *on* is in the dative.

449. *And on hiera dagum Hengest and Horsa, fram Wyrtġeorne ġe.laþode, Bretta cyninge, ġe.sōhton Bretene on þǽm stede þe is ġe.nemned Ypwines.flēot, ǽrest Brettum tō fultume, ac hīe eft on hīe fuhton.*

---

[109] *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Primer, op. cit.* pp 56-57.

> An on their days Hengest and Horsa, invited by Wyrtġeorn, the king of the British, reached Britain in the place which is called Ebbsfleet, just before some one should help the British, and they immediately fought with each other.

In this example *on* appears three times, first, to express time (with the dative); second, governing the dative thus meaning rest, place in this case; and the third, to express the idea of motion, in the accusative. The expression of time and place, with the dative, appears as something apart, that is, the expression of time and place are just adjuncts, elements not directly governed by the verb, not under the direct influence of the verb[110]. In the third use, preposition *on*, under the influence of the verb, governs the accusative and thus the expression of the idea of motion.

> 449. *Of Īotum cōmon Cant.ware and Wiht.ware -þæt is sēo mǽġþ þe nū eardaþ on Wiht- and þæt cynn on West.seaxum þe man nū ġiēt hǽtt 'Īotena cynn'.*
> Of the [the land of the] Jutes [on the continent] the inhabitants of Kent and Whit came —because that is the family which now lives in Whit— and the nation living in Wessex which now are still called the 'the tribe of the Juts'.

Here preposition *on* appears twice, both in connection with the idea of rest (with the dative). The idea of rest appears as well in the verb *eardian governing both prepositions*, a verb in connection with *standan*, both meaning not an action but a static state of affairs. So the cause of the presence of the dative in both cases is the character of the verb. There is then no expression of place.

> Examples with *ofer*.

> 855. *And þý ilcan ġēare ġe.bōcode Æþelwulf cyning tēoþan dǽl his landes ofer eall his rīċe Gode tō lofe.*
> And that year king Æþelwulf published a grant giving the tenth part of his land all over his kingdom to the glory of God.

Ġe.bocian is an active verb. It describes the action of giving something by chart, that is, making it public and notorious. So the underlying conception is that something is to be executed in something else. *Ġe.bocian,* on the other hand, denotes an action already performed in something else. At the same time it is a transitive verb, that is, the action denoted by it, has to be executed in the noun phrase governed by the verb, thus in the accusative case, *tēoþan dǽl his landes ofer eall his rīċe. The only interpretation possible is based on the dynamic character of the action.*

> 867. *Hēr fōr se here of Ēast.englum ofer Hymbre.mūþan tō Eoforwic.ċeastre on Norþ.hymbre.*
> Then the army went from the land of Essex to the estuary to the estuary of river Humber to York against the Northumbrians.

Ofer in the example clearly stresses the idea of motion in the verb *faran*. In this sense the function of preposition *ofer* is very similar to the one of the following preposition *tō.*

Preposition *on* appears as well in its original function of expressing motion*, on Norþ.hymbre,* a proper name, masculine plural, in the accusative, 'against the Northumbrians'. Verb *faran* governs the whole sentence.

The idea of place with preposition in

The idea of motion/rest in some way or another was always present in the use of *on* and *ofer.* Because of this the ideas of place and time, so important after the 12th century, were neglected in favor of the idea of motion/rest. In other words: the ideas of place and time were of very little interest in the period. The idea of place appeared with preposition *in*, which was very seldom used in contraposition with *on* and *ofer*:

---

[110] This topic will be discussed later on, cf. § 5.5.

455. *Hēr Hengest and Horsa fuhton wiþ Wyrtġeorne þǽm cyninge in þǽre stōwe þe is ġe.cweden Ǽglēs.þrep.*

The Hengest and Horsa fought with King Wyrtgeorne in the place which is called Ebbsfleet.

In this example the idea of place is clearly expressed, first with preposition *in*, and second, with the expression of the word *stōwe*. But the idea of motion is expressed as well in the verb the influence of which does not affect the expression of time.

The same procedure is expressed in

457. *Hēr Hengest and Æsc fuhton wiþ Brettas in þǽre stōwe þe is ġe.cweden Crecgan.ford.*

Then Hengest and Ash fought against the British in the place which is called Crayford.

495. *Hēr cōmon twēġen ealdor.menn on Bretene, Cerdic and Cynrīċ his sunu, mid fīf scipum, in þone stede þe is ġe.cweden Cerdices.ōra;*

Then two chiefmen came in Britain, Cerdic and *Cynrīċ his son, with five ships, in the place which is called the Banks of Cerdic.*

501. *Hēr cōm Port on Bretene and his twēġen suna Bieda and Mægla, mid twǽm scipum, in þā stōwe þe is ġe.cweden Portes mūþa.*

Then Port came to Britain along with his two sons Bieda a Magla, with five ships, in the place that is called Portsmouth.

The first example with preposition *in* governs the dative, and second and third ones, the accusative. That is, the first on has to do with the idea of rest, something that can be connected with the idea of place, but the second and third ones strengthen the idea of motion, something contrary to the idea of place. That is and said in other words, the expression of motion was something with no connection with the expression of place.

At the same time it is interesting to realize that in all examples with *in*, apart from governing the dative or the accusative, they are accompanied with the specification of the head of the prepositional phrase (*stōw* and *stede*, both meaning place with small differences: *stōw* can be said of place in general, a passage in a book for example; and *stede* just meaning place). This fact, for me, means that the use with preposition *in* was not firmly established in the language at the time, because it was an exception in the concept it denoted, being motion the real thing to be expressed with nearly all verbs. The use of both the dative and the specification of the object of the preposition *in*, means repeating the same idea: it was not enough to use preposition *in*.

The following example may show instability of the general rule said above:

514. *Hēr cōmon West.seaxe in Bretene, mid þrim scipum in þā stōwe þe is ġe.cweden Cerdices.ōra. and Stuf and Wihtgār fuhton wiþ Brettas and hīe ġe.flīemdon.*

Then the West Saxons [on the continent] came to Britain, with three ships in the place that is called Cerdic.shore; and Stuff and Whitgār fought against the British and they [the British, that is, the Celts] were put to flight.

This example can make us conclude about the problems posed so far. The idea of motion is present in verb *cuman* or *ġe.cuman*; the expression of place with *in,* needs specification but that specification governs the accusative, because of the influence of the idea of motion in the verb.

The expression of place in Old English may be considered to have started with the dative. Since the presence of the idea of motion was very strong as clues of meaning added in nearly all verbs, the expression of the contrary, the idea of rest, in connection with the idea of place, was neglected especially when the verb governed the accusative. In order to introduce the idea of place within the sphere of verbs of motion it was necessary to specify the sense of

it. On the other hand, words meaning place such as *stede*, in connection with verb *standan*, 'stand', and *stow*, 'place', were very appropriate since both introduced the idea of rest. The idea of motion constituted the usual way of thinking, the underlying mode of thinking in Old English, but the idea of place was in direct opposition to the expressive interests of the Anglo-Saxons.

Prepositions *on* and *ofer* and the idea of time

As I said, the idea of time is possible with prepositions *on* and *ofer* because the adjunct of time is not affected with the idea of motion and viceversa. In this sense the expression of time appears as something apart with respect to the action denoted by the verb.

> *449. Hēr Martiānus and Valentīnus on.fēngon rīċe and rīcsodon seofon winter. And on hiera dagum Hengest and Horsa, fram Wyrtġeorne ġe.laþode, Bretta cyninge, ġe.sōhton Bretene on þǽm stede þe is ġe.nemned Ypwines.flēot.*
> Then Martianus and Valentinus took power and reigned for seven years. And on their days Hengest and Horsa, invited by Wyrtġeorn, the king of the British, reached Britain in the place that is called Ebbsfleet.

Here we have the idea of time expressed with preposition *on* and the dative.

> *865. se here hine on niht ūp bestæl and ofer.hergode ealle Cent ēastevearde.*
> The army went up against him furtively during the night and ravaged all over the eastern end of Kent.

Preposition *on* stresses the idea of motion denoted by the verb *be.stellan,* but that idea does not affect the adjunct of time with *on*.

Evolution in the loss of inflexions

I said earlier that the period known as Middle English, the period when the changes affecting the loss of inflexions occurred, you could distinguish four states of the language: the initial language spoken in the 11th and 12th centuries, the language spoken in the 13th century, 14th century and 15th century. Now we are going to comment texts of the different states of the language referred to.

The language in the 13th century.

The Fox and the Wolf[111]

A vox gon out of þe wode go
Afingret so þat him wes wo
He nes neuere in none wise
afingret erour half so swiþe.
He ne hoeld nouþer wey ne strete
For him wes loþ men to mete.
Him were leuere meten one hen
þen half an oundred wimmen.
He strok swiþe oueral
So þat he ofsei ane wal.
Wiþinne þe walle wes on hous.
The wox wes þider swiþe wous
For he þohute his hounger aquenche
Oþer mid mete oþer mid drunche.

A fox gone out of the woods would go

---

[111] Written in the early 13th century in a Southern dialect.

So hungry that he was miserable
He had never been in such a way
As hungry before, half as he was
He did not go through any way or street
Since for him it was loathsome to meet people.
For him it was more bearable to meet one hen
Than half a hundred women.
He would go anywhere and everywhere
So that he saw a wall in the distance
Within the wall was a house
The wolf-fox was there very miserable
For he thought to quench his hunger
Either with meat or with drink.

Relevant facts in the evolution of the language in connection with thought

The indefinite article. As we saw the indefinite article determines nouns in such a way that makes them to denote, not the class of objects, but a particular individual object. The indefinite object was introduced in the language at this time. In the poem there appears only an indefinite individual object, *A vox*. There appear as well nouns denoting classes of objects, *wimmin, loþ, men, mete, drunche*.

The indefinite article was formed with the Old English numeral *ān*, thus appearing in different forms, the reduced form *a* (*a vox), ane* (*ane wal*); *ān* (*an oundred wimmen*) and even in the Northern variety *one* (*one hen*) and *on* (*on hous*). The means to determine the noun was the numeral. The numeral had a very effective individualizing and determining effect on the noun. But the effect of this use was that the noun did not denote the class of *foxes, walls, hens and houses*, but an individual item of the class of foxes, walls, hens or houses. It is interesting to remark that in the text the numeral *ān* (*an oundred wimmen*) is used with the same form as the newly introduced determiner. At the same time the old procedure of nouns referring the class appears several times, *loþ, men, wimmen, mete, drunche, wo*.

Since this individualizing and determining effect was new, the function of the now called definite determiner, *þe* (reduced from *sē, sēo, þæt* + the ending of *sē < þ+ē*), was redefined in its function together with nouns denoting classes. Nouns with the indefinite article denote individual objects; nouns with the definite article are determined to reduce their potentiality of designation, and nouns with no determiner denote mass nouns. In the poem there appears only one noun with the determiner, *þe wode*, nouns denoting the class, *loþ, men* and *wimmen*, and nouns denoting mass nouns, *mete* and *drunche*. This distinction which would be the rule later on, was the effect of introducing the numeral as the instrument to individualize and particularize the noun thus forming the new determiner.

In the text the subjunctive appears in *go* (*A vox gon out of þe wode go* (from *gān*); *gon* comes from the past participle *gangiende*), to indicate that it was about an object of thought not a real object, something very frequent in Old English.

Since particular individualizing and determining objects have been created with the indefinite article, *multiple negation* appears (*He nes neuere in none wise*). In Old English, since you spoke of classes of objects, multiple negation was unnecessary. In the paragraph, the same as with Old English, negation contracted with the most usual forms of the verb and indefinite pronouns.

Apart from this it is worth mentioning the influence of French in *oundred*, in pronunciation. This means that the Anglo-Saxons, since they had accepted the mode of thinking singularizing and particularizing things, accepted some features having to do the

pronunciation of words. However so far, at this period, they had not accepted anything having to do with vocabulary, something to come after this moment on.

The language in the 14th century

The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales[112]
Whan that April with his showres soote
The droughte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veine in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendered is the flowr;
Whan Zephyrus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale fowles maken melodye
That sleepen al the night with open yë-
So priketh hem Nature in hir corages-
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seeken straunge strondes
To ferne halwes, couthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Canterbury they wende,
The holy blisful martyr for to seeke
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seke.
Bifel that in that seson on a day,
In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay,
Redy to wenden on my pilgrimage
To Canterbury with ful devout corage,
At night was come into that hostelrye
Well nine and twenty in a compaignye
Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle
In fellaweshipe and pilgrimes were they alle
That toward Canterbury wolden ride.
The chambres and the stables were wide,
And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,
So hadde I spoken with hem everchoon
That I was of hir felaweshipe anoon,
And made forward erly for to rise,
To take oure way ther as I you devise.
But nathelees, whil I have time and space,
Er that I ferther in this tale pace,
Me thinketh it accordant to resoun
To telle you al the condicioun
Of eech of hem, so as it seemed me,
And whiche they were and of what degree,
And eek in what array that they were inne:
And at a knight thanne wol I first biginne.

---

[112] Written in the so-called London English dialect.

Relevant facts in the poem in connection with thought.

In connection with thought, the most relevant fact in the poem is still the use of prefix -*ge* with verbs, *yronne, yfalle*, but in the past participle, now existing as a stylistic means of expression coexisting with the use of the past participle without prefix ge-*, inspired hath* […] *the tendre croppes*, *The droughte of March hath perced to the roote*. That is, in the new conception of things, things in as much as they stand in front of us, existing by themselves, can have finished and unfinished processes both coexisting side by side. As a matter of fact, later on, at the end of the Middle English period, there appeared perfect tenses, the means of expression to express finished and unfinished uses of verbs. Even more: actions could be developed as well as in progress, that is, in progressive forms and considered from different points of view, the passive voice, which were introduced as well.

The acceptance of the new conception of things as something objective and existing in themselves made easier to accept French words than earlier. That is, three hundred years after the coming of the French invaders, the presence of French words was accepted without any discussion, something not having occurred just at the beginning. This involved a fact new to the language: the adoption of French words did not mean rejecting or superseding Anglo-Saxon words. It is the case of *chambres* instead of *rooms*, in the text.

The language of the Scotts in the 14th century

The Praise of Freedom[113]

A fredome is a noble thing
Fredome mays man to haiff liking
Fredome all solace to man giffis
He levys at es yat frely levys
A noble hart may haiff nane es
Na ellys nocht yat may him ples
Gyff fredome failghe, for fre liking
Is gharnyt our all over thing.
Ne he yat ay has levyt fre
May nacht knaw weill the propyrte
Ye angyr na ye wrechyt dome
Yat is cowplyt to foule thyrldome
Bot gyff he had assayit it.

The Praise of Freedom: Word-for-word Translation.

Ah! Freedom is a noble thing
Freedom may make men to have election
Freedom gives men all rest
He who lives at ease, freely lives
A noble heart may have no tranquility, peace
Or anything else that may please him
If freedom fail, for free election
Is yearned over all other things.
He who certainly has lived free
May not know the property at all
The anger or the misery
That is, together with the base slavery
Unless he had assayed it.

---

[113] This poem, belonging to a Northern variety of Middle English, spoken in the Lowlands, called Inglis at the time, was written in about 1375 by John Barbour, the Archdeacon of Aberdeen, who had studied and taught in Oxford and Paris.

Relevant facts in the poem.

I am introducing this poem to stress the significance it has in the way of thinking. The poem is in a variety of English in the 14th century, Scott English, called Inglis at the time. It was written by a Scottish priest and directed to Scottish people. That is, it is written by and aimed to people who had had the direct influence of the Romans and Christianity thus preserving their primitive way of thinking, although they had accepted the language coming form the South. My purpose in introducing this poem is comparing the different degree of abstraction manifested in both texts.

The poem speaks of something considered to exist objectively and existing in itself. In this sense it constitutes an object of saying, something worth considering in itself, freedom. For a westerner, someone who conceives of things as if they existed in themselves objectively and constituted something there in front of you, freedom exists and is there challenging us to attain it. *Fredome* is an abstract word occupying the highest degree of abstraction, just the contrary of concrete things such as *vo*x, *house*, *hen*, etc. Other abstract concepts in the poem, *solace, fre liking, es, angyr, wretchyd dome*, and *thryldome*, have a very high degree of abstraction as well. That is, these are the concepts the Scottish of the time could manipulate mentally, not yet the Anglo-Saxons. The Scottish had accepted the language coming of South but kept their original way of thinking.

Conclusion

Language change is nothing but the behavior of speakers who speak because they have something to say, who say because they are able to know, and who know because they conceive of things in a particular way. The conception of things, something learnt by speakers from their speech community, is such a radical attitude in speakers that constitutes and determines anything having to do with humans, thus constituting their historical way of thinking.

Language change has causes, but those causes, as Coseriu would say, are internal to the activity of speaking. Nothing is more internal to the activity of speaking in speakers that the way they conceive of things.

The series of changes known as the loss of inflexions, meant nothing but a change in the mode of thinking of the Anglo-Saxons who, conceiving of things as events, started considering them as something existing there, something in front of them, existing in itself objectively, confronting them either to achieve or reject. This fact can help us understand the depth of the changes operated in the language.

References:

Barber, Charles. 1995 (1993), *The English Language: A Historical Introduction*, Cambridge University Press.

Baugh, Albert C, 1971 (1951), *A History of the English Language*, London: Rutledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

Blake, N, 1996, *A History of the English Language*, Macmillan.

Bosworht, J, 1995 (1898), *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Based on the Manuscript Collections of Joseph Bosworth,* T, Northcote Toller, ed. Oxford University Press.

Burchfield, Robert, 1985, *The English Language,* Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.

Cambridge University Press. *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, 6 volumes, Cambridge University Press.

Coseriu, Eugenio, 1985 [1977], *El hombre y su lenguaje*, Madrid: Gredos.

Coseriu, Eugenio, 1987 (1978), *Gramática, semántica, universales*, Madrid: Gredos.

Coseriu, Eugenio, 1988 (1957), *Sincronía, diacronía e historia: el problema del cambio lingüístico*, Madrid: Gredos.

Coseriu, Eugenio, 1992 (1988), *La competencia lingüística*, Madrid: Gredos.

Freeborn, Denis, 1992, *From Old English to Standard English: A Course Book in Language Variation across Time*, Macmillan: Studies in English Language.

Freeborn, Denis, 1996, *Style: Text Analysis and Linguistic Criticism*, Macmillan: Studies in English Language.

Martínez del Castillo, Jesús, 2006, *Facts of Speech and Facts of Evolution: An Interpretation to the History of the English Language*, Abecedario.

Martínez del Castillo, 2012, *Psicología, lenguaje y libertad*, in *Analecta Malacitana*, Universidad de Málaga, Anejos/89.

Martínez del Castillo, Jesús, 2013, *Modes of Thinking, Language and Linguistics*, in Analecta Malacitana, Universidad de Málaga, Anejos/95.

McArthur, Tom, ed. 1992, *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, Oxford University Press.

Onions, C T; W Friedrichsen & R Burchfield, ed, 1966, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, Oxford University Press.

Oxford University Press, 1989, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second edition, Prepared by J, A, Simpson and E, S, C, Weiner, 19 volúmenes, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Partridge, Eric, 1966, *Origins, An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*, Londres: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Sweet. Henry, *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Prime*r, 1970 (1882), Oxford: At the Clarendon Press.