

7 GRAMMAR I

Nouns

Over many centuries, English has undergone an important shift in the way it signals grammatical information. The legacy of the past is still apparent in irregular plurals (e.g. mice, sheep) and the apostrophe-s (e.g. Jonathan's book).

Mental grammar

Since the eighteenth century, grammar has been mystified or made into a kind of mental assault course, which, apparently, sorted out those who were sophisticated and cultivated from those who were not. In fact, we all have a highly developed, complex and sensitive knowledge of grammar – a MENTAL GRAMMAR. The hitch, of course, is that we are often not aware of the knowledge that we have, and also that we often don't have the words to express that knowledge. One aim of this unit is to help you solve this problem. However, it is true that grammatical change is more difficult to observe than, say, change in speech sounds. If you listen to older people or an old film, it's usually the pronunciation that is striking, not the grammar. We are less conscious of grammatical change (see also Exercise 2.2, p. 16).

Inflections

One of the most important differences between OE and today's English is that in OE grammatical information was typically signalled by the INFLECTIONS or endings of words. Today, there is one main inflection for nouns: a final *-s* (or *-es*) to signal number (e.g. *apple* vs. *apples*). Generally, if a noun has no *-s*, it is singular; if it has an *-s*, it is plural.



EXERCISE

7.1 Words borrowed from other languages can cause problems when it comes to deciding on how to make them plural or singular, because they do not take the regular English *-s* inflection. Are the following words plural or singular to you: *data*, *criteria*, *index*, *focus*, *formula*? How do you go about signalling a change from one to the other, or do you use the same form for both singular and plural? What about *octopus* – how would you make that plural?

Declension

If you look at Table 7.1, you'll see that there are six OE nouns listed in the top row: *hund* (= any dog, not just a hound), *deor* (= any animal, not just a deer), *cild* (= child), *oxa* (= ox), *fot* (= foot) and *lufu* (= love). Each noun carries a set of different inflections that

make up a DECLENSION for that noun. I am giving them to you here so that you can appreciate how complex the inflections of nouns used to be, and so that I can explain some of the features of English we use today.

Case

Nominative Accusative Genitive Dative

As you can see, these nouns vary according to number and according to CASE. What, you may wonder, are cases? In OE, nouns used to have inflections that indicated the function or relationship of words to other words in the sentence; that is to say, these nouns had case inflections. There were four main cases – NOMINATIVE, ACCUSATIVE, GENITIVE and DATIVE – each signalling different functions:

<i>Case</i>	<i>Typical grammatical functions</i>
Nominative	subject of the sentence (e.g. <i>Australia</i> beat <i>England</i>)
Accusative	direct object of a sentence (e.g. <i>Australia</i> beat <i>England</i>)
Genitive	possessor or part of a whole (e.g. <i>Jonathan's</i> book, <i>each of the students</i>)

Table 7.1 Six noun declensions

<i>Singular</i>	<i>hound</i>	<i>deer</i>	<i>child</i>	<i>ox</i>	<i>foot</i>	<i>love</i>
<i>Nominative</i>	hund	deor	cild	oxa	fot	lufu
<i>Accusative</i>	hund	deor	cild	oxan	fot	lufe
<i>Genitive</i>	hundes	deores	cildes	oxan	fotes	lufe
<i>Dative</i>	hunde	deore	cilde	oxan	fet	lufe
<i>Plural</i>						
<i>Nominative/ Accusative</i>	hundas	deor	cildru	oxan	fet	lufa
<i>Genitive</i>	hunda	deora	cildra	oxena	fota	lufa
<i>Dative</i>	hundum	deorum	cildrum	oxum	fotum	lufum

(Based on Pyles, T. and Algeo, J. (4th edn) *The Origins and Development of the English Language*, Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993:110).

Dative indirect object (often recipient) or instrument (e.g. *I gave the librarian a book, I wrote with a pen*)

An important point to note about today's English is that one can change grammatical functions simply by changing the word order. For example, by swapping the countries *England* and *Australia* I change what is the subject and what is the object. *Australia* beat *England* is not the same as *England* beat *Australia*. In OE, case inflections signal the grammatical roles of nouns in sentences, so in theory whatever I do to the word order there would still be one reading of the sentence. Consider the following made-up sentences:

1	Se guma syhð þone huntan The man sees the hunter	(nominative – verb – accusative) (subject – verb – object)
2	Se hunta syhð þone guman The hunter sees the man	(nominative – verb – accusative) (subject – verb – object)
3	Se guma þone huntan syhð The man the hunter sees	(nominative – accusative – verb) (?? – ?? – verb)

The nouns *guma* and *hunta* follow the same pattern as the noun *oxa* in Table 7.1 (*guma*, incidentally, is the second element in the compound *bridegroom* = ‘bride man’). The nominative form has a final *-a*, and the accusative has a final *-an*. Thus, in sentence (1), clearly the man is the subject (i.e. he is doing the seeing) and the hunter the object (i.e. he is being seen). In sentence (2), who is doing what changes, and so the inflections change too. (Note also that the word from which today’s ‘the’ has developed changes its form according to case: *se*, if it is nominative, and *þone*, if it is accusative.) The important sentence is sentence (3). Here, it is clear in the OE version that it is the man (*guma*) who sees the hunter (*huntan*), but today’s version – *the man the hunter sees* – could, in theory, be read both ways.

Today, we rely much more on word order to help us work out grammatical function. Usually, in statements the subject comes first, followed by the verb, and then the other parts of the sentence such as the object; thus, the ‘normal’ order is SVO. In practice it is likely that you would interpret sentence (3) as *the man seeing the hunter*, because the subject normally comes first. This pattern was also common in OE, but word order was generally more flexible. Let’s take an example from Text 1 (Appendix IV) (I make no attempt to render the original handwriting here):

Erest weron bugend þises landes brittes
(first were inhabitants of this land Britons)
The first inhabitants of this land were Britons

Note that the verb ‘were’ occurs much earlier in the OE sentence than in the present-day translation. Today we would generally put the whole of the subject – ‘the first inhabitants of this land’ – before the verb. (Those of you who know Modern German will see an interesting similarity with this structure.) Another OE word-order pattern, where the object comes before the verb, is well illustrated by the following fragment from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 895 (objects are underlined; main verbs are emboldened):

7 þa burgware hie gefliemdon 7 hira monig hund ofslogon 7 (& then the townspeople them **put** to flight & of them many hundreds **slew** &) & then the townspeople put them to flight & slew many hundreds of them &
hira scipu sumu genamon
(of their ships some **captured**)
captured some of their ships

This pattern hints at an important general change that has occurred in English grammar: it has shifted from an OV language (like today’s Japanese) to a VO language (like today’s English or French). The change has been in progress for thousands of years, and was well

under way *before* English arrived in Britain. Moreover, it has gone hand-in-hand with the loss of case inflections, as given in Table 7.1. SVO languages generally lack case inflections, whereas SOV languages generally have them. One possible reason for this is that the verb in the SVO order makes a clear separation between subject and object: there is less potential for indeterminacy, and thus less need for a case marking to signal what an element is doing.

EXERCISES



- 7.2 (a) In case you are feeling confused, bear in mind that personal pronouns are almost as complex now as they were in OE, yet we use them without trouble. Like OE nouns, they are marked for case. Underline the pronouns in the examples below according to whether they are nominative (the subject), accusative (the object) or genitive (the possessor).

- 1 He sees him
- 2 Him he sees
- 3 He sees his face

- (b) Second-person pronouns used to be more marked for case and number than they are now. If you compare Table 7.2 for ME and Table 7.3 for today’s English, you’ll see that *you* has become the predominant form.

Table 7.2 Second-person pronouns in Middle English

Grammatical function	Singular	Plural
Subjective (nominative)	Thou	Ye
Objective (accusative)	Thee	You
Possessive (genitive)	Thy/thine	Your/yours

Table 7.3 Second-person pronouns in today’s English

Grammatical function	Singular	Plural
Subjective (nominative)	You	You
Objective (accusative)	You	You
Possessive (genitive)	Your/yours	Your/yours

Sociolinguistic

Pragmatic

The EMod.E period was one of transition with a mixture of *you* forms and *thou* forms. Interestingly, the factors that determined the usage of second-person pronouns in this period were not simply grammatical. The situation was somewhat like that in today’s.

French (*tu* and *vous*) or German (*Sie* and *du*). *You* became a prestige form associated with the upper classes, whereas the opposite happened for *thou*. Thus, to an extent, the usage of the terms was SOCIOLINGUISTIC – language usage correlated with social groups. But speakers increasingly exploited these associations: for example, *you* could be used to express politeness, whereas *thou* could be used to express condescension. Thus, usage was also PRAGMATIC – language usage interacted with the context to create a range of meanings. Look carefully at the usage of second-person pronouns in Text 5 (Appendix IV). What is determining their usage? (*Hint*: Start by considering whether they follow the grammatical pattern given in Tables 7.2 and 7.3.) Can you explain why the second-person pronouns in Text 6 are governed by different principles?

What legacy did these noun inflections leave today's English? To begin with, I shall be referring closely to the noun declensions in Table 7.1 (p. 59). Today's plural marker – the final *-s* – survives from the *-as* nominative/accusative plural form, as exemplified by *hundas*. In OE there were other types of nouns with different plurals. Over time speakers and writers extended the *-s* plural marker across most nouns. However, some of the other types of plural marking have survived and this has led to some variability today. *Deor*, to the right of *hundas*, has zero marking for plurality. This has survived today. It would sound awkward, if you spoke about 'deers'. *Sheep* also belongs to this noun declension, as did a lot of other nouns that have now been taken over by the *-s* plural.

Cild, the next declension, has an interesting plural. In OE the plural was *cildru*. This form developed into *childer*. Have you heard the word *childer*? If you live in the north of England, it is possible that you have heard it. The *-n* of *children* was not present in OE. *Children* acquired a second plural ending, the *-n* that is used in the noun declension to the right exemplified by *oxan*. *Brethren* has a similar history. The use of *-n* as plural ending used to be popular. In the EMod.E period one often finds examples such as *eyen*, *shoen*, *housen*, *treen*, and the first two of these might still be heard in Scottish English. Now, in the majority of dialects, they all take the *-s* plural ending. The only pure survivor of this declension is *oxen*.

The following declension, exemplified by *foet*, is characterised by the fact that it not only had inflections but also changed the vowel of its basic form. Today, that vowel change *foet/feet* is a mark of the plural, but in OE note that it is also found in the dative singular and that not all plural forms had it. Only later did it become a distinctive marker of plurality. It survives in words such as *feet*, *geese*, *teeth*, *mice*, *lice* and *men*. As far as the final declension is concerned, it has no interesting survivals in terms of plurality, so let's move on to consider case.

I've already touched on the idea that other means, such as word order, are now being used to express some of the grammatical functions formerly achieved with case. The case that merits our particular attention is the genitive case, since it is from this that we get the apostrophe-*s*. If you look at Table 7.1, you will see that the most common genitive singular marker was the *-es* inflection. We saw an example of it quoted from Text 1 (in Appendix IV). Where today we would use the preposition *of* to indicate the relationship

between the 'inhabitants' (*bugend*) and 'this land', thus giving 'inhabitants of this land', in OE they would use the genitive inflection *-es*, thus giving *bugend þises landes*. Generally, prepositions such as *of* were used less in OE. This particular genitive inflection, the *-es*, gave rise to the apostrophe-*s* that we use today. It was extended to other nouns, just as the *-as* plural inflection was extended to nouns that originally marked the plural in other ways. In fact, these two inflections merged: by ME both were written *-es*. So, for example, OE *hundes* (genitive singular) and OE *hundas* (the plural) both became ME *houndes*. During ME virtually all nouns were reduced to two forms: one without *-es* to indicate a singular, and one with *-es* to indicate either a genitive singular or a plural. Most other inflections had died out.

Middle English	Grammatical function	Today's English	Grammatical function
<i>hound(e)</i>	singular	<i>hound</i>	singular
<i>hound(es)</i>	genitive singular	<i>hound's</i>	genitive singular
<i>hound(e)s</i>	plural	<i>hounds</i>	plural
<i>hound(e)s</i>	genitive plural	<i>hounds'</i>	genitive plural

This situation is in fact not so very different from that of today. In *speech*, there are also two forms: *hound* has one form without [z] at the end and one with. The idea of using a *written* apostrophe before the <s> to identify a genitive singular was not adopted until the seventeenth century, and the idea of using it after the <s> to identify a genitive plural was not adopted until the eighteenth century. Today, there is a lot of confusion in actual usage.



EXERCISES

- Look through the texts in the 'mini-corpus' (Appendix IV) and try to find examples of the genitive marked with an *-es* inflection (i.e. nouns to which we would today add an apostrophe-*s*). Be careful not to confuse it with something acting purely as a plural marker.
- Investigate the confusion today about the usage of the apostrophe-*s*. Collect examples of incorrect usage. You are more likely to find them in informal writing. As well as collecting various nouns with the apostrophe-*s*, watch out for that notorious problem: confusion between *its* (= the genitive) and *it's* (= a contraction of *it is*). Does your collection of examples provide evidence that the use of the apostrophe-*s* may be changing?

Inflectional language Isolating language

In this unit, you will have noticed that in terms of inflections English has become a lot less complex. When we look at verbs in the next unit, we will see a very similar situation, and, in that unit, I will also comment on why English has lost much of its inflectional complexity. You will also have noticed that over time English has come to rely more heavily on word

order (and prepositions) to do the job inflections once did. English has moved from being an INFLECTIONAL LANGUAGE like Latin or Arabic towards being what is known as an ISOLATING LANGUAGE like Chinese or Vietnamese, relying much more – though not completely – on word order to signal grammatical information.



EXERCISES

Group genitive

7.5 The *s*-genitive (the apostrophe-*s*) does not now behave in quite the same way as an inflection. In OE the *s*-genitive was an inflection used to indicate the function of the individual words to which it was fixed. In Mod.E it has become a grammatical particle that can be freely moved around, and can signal the function of a whole phrase. Thus, in the phrase *the head of department's office* the head of the phrase is *head* (the person who possesses the office), but the apostrophe-*s* is appended to the last word of the phrase *department*. When the *s*-genitive refers to a group of words it is called, sensibly enough, a GROUP GENITIVE. What is the longest group genitive you can devise?

DISCUSSION POINT

Although we cannot predict changes with certainty, how much further would you guess this process of inflectional simplification will go? Can we get rid of irregular plurals (e.g. *feet*, *children*) or non-native plurals (e.g. *criteria*, *indices*)? Can we get rid of the apostrophe-*s*? Are there varieties of English where this happens already? If English is made completely regular, what will be the advantages and for whom?

SUMMARY

- The most dramatic change in English grammar has been the loss of inflections. English has moved from being an inflectional language towards being an isolating language.
- The inflectional complexity of the past has its legacy in irregular plurals (e.g. *sheep*) and in the apostrophe-*s* of written English.
- Today, there is much confusion over the usage of the apostrophe-*s*.
- Today, personal pronouns are almost as complex as they were in OE. Second-person pronouns used to be more complex, and in the EMod.E period were used to signal social and pragmatic information.

FOLLOW-UP READING

Dick Leith's *A Social History of English* (London: Routledge, 1997) contains a readable general overview of the history of English grammar. However, you will need more detail. You could try David Crystal's *Encyclopedia of the English Language* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 20–1 (OE grammar), 44–5 (ME grammar), 70–1 (EMod.E grammar), and also 200–3 for some relevant pages on number and the *s*-genitive. Alternatively, you can look up the sections on nouns in a standard historical textbook. Much of this unit has focused on OE because grammar changes relatively slowly, and so we need to compare distant periods in order to see clear contrasts. The best introductory text-book on OE is Peter Baker's *Introduction to Old English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003). Tony Jebson's web pages at <http://lonestar.texas.net/~jebbo/learn-OE/contents.htm> offer a good overview of OE grammar. For other OE internet resources, see Cathy Ball's OE pages at http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/ballc/OE/old_english.html.

8 GRAMMAR II

Verbs

As with nouns, verbs have experienced a dramatic loss of inflectional complexity. This has been counterbalanced by a rise in the use of auxiliary verbs.

Why is it that to form the past tense of the verb *walk* we add *-ed*, whereas to form the past of the verb *drink* we change the vowel so that we get *drank*? This is one of a number of present-day irregularities in English that can be explained by looking at its development. As with nouns, we need to look at how verbs signal their grammatical function, and how this has changed over time.

EXERCISE

8.1 In inflectional terms, present-day English regular verbs are very simple. Take the base or root form of a regular verb (e.g. *walk*). How many different inflections can you put on the end of it? Now, try to work out the grammatical function of each of these inflections (it may help if you devise short sentences to test the verb form).

Table 8.1 gives an idea of how present-tense verb inflections have changed from OE to the present day (all inflections occur after the letter <r>). Where alternative forms exist, they are given in parentheses.

Table 8.1 OE present tense verb inflections

Number	Person	Today	EMod.E	ME (Midlands)	OE (West Saxon)
Singular	1st I	hear	hear	here	hiere
	2nd you	hear	hearest	her(e)st	hierst
	3rd he/she/it	hears	heareth (-s)	her(e)þ (-es)	hierþ
Plural	1st we	hear	hear	heren (-es)	hieraþ
	2nd you	hear	hear	heren (-es)	hieraþ
	3rd they	hear	hear	heren (-es)	hieraþ

Regularisation

An important point to note is that – as with nouns – the general process over time has been one of REGULARISATION, with the gradual erosion of inflectional complexity. The situation used to be even more complicated than Table 8.1 suggests, because there was also a set of inflections for the past tense. Let's start by focusing on the one remaining inflection

for person in today's English, the *-s* of the third person singular. In fact, in some varieties of today's English – some dialects of East Anglia, for example – even this inflection has been lost. If you look down the line to the far right, you'll see that in OE (the West Saxon dialect) there was no *-s*, but instead an (e)þ. (Remember that the character 'thorn' <þ> was later replaced by *th*.) In ME we get both forms. Note that here I am representing the Midlands dialect. (Chaucer wrote in what was essentially the East Midlands dialect.) Differences between dialects in earlier periods were much greater than now, as we shall see in the next unit, and, moreover, there was no 'standard' written form that I can choose to represent in the table. Why did the *-s* suddenly appear as an option in the ME Midlands dialect? The Scandinavians who settled in the north and east had provided English with the *-s* inflection. Over time this spread southwards through the rest of the country. By the EMod.E period, the *-eth* inflection was in serious decline, and came to be seen as rather archaic (in fact, there is some evidence to suggest that, even when *-eth* was written in EMod.E, it was pronounced like the *-s* inflection). It survived longest in the words *hath* and *doth*, which are still found in the eighteenth century.



EXERCISE

8.2 Note examples of *-eth* or *-s* in the 'mini-corpus' in Appendix IV. In particular, can you explain why Text 6, the Authorised Version of the Bible, is dominated by *-eth*?

Let's turn to tense. We noted earlier that the regular way of forming the past tense in English is simply to add the inflection *-ed*. However, there are a number of irregular verbs. English, in common with other Germanic languages, divides its verbs into two groups – so-called weak and strong – according to how they form their past tense and past participle. (If you are not clear about what a past participle is, make sure that you have read the description given in the answer to Exercise 8.1.)

Weak verbs add a *-d* or *-t* to the root in order to form the past or the past participle, for example:

Present	Past	Past participle
kiss	kissed	kissed
fill	filled	filled
build	built	built
hear	heard	heard

The vast majority of verbs in English form their past and past participles in this way.

Strong verbs do not add an inflection, but change the vowel of their base form:

Present	Past	Past participle
ride	rode	ridden
speak	spoke	spoken

see	saw	seen
drink	drank	drunk

All strong-verb past participles originally had the inflection *-en* at the end and also *ge-* at the beginning. So, in OE the past participle of the verb *ride* is *geriden*.

**EXERCISE**

8.3 Old forms of participles have survived in some contexts. Where might you hear:

drunken as opposed to *drunk*
molten as opposed to *melted*
stricken as opposed to *struck*
shrunken as opposed to *shrunk*

One should bear in mind here that not all speakers of English make the same distinctions between the past and past participle; some use one form for both. Thus, today many speakers of English use *done* as both past participle (*It was done well*) and simple past (*She done well*), and many are using *drunk* for the simple past (e.g. *She drunk the milk*). Variations such as these or those of the previous unit are part and parcel of gradual language change: before a change is completely regular there will be variation with the new and the old forms that are still part of the system.

The most important change to these weak and strong verb patterns is the conversion of the minority of strong verbs to the weak pattern. According to one estimate, five-sixths of the 360 or so strong verbs have changed. At various points in time, you can find both strong and weak forms of a verb. Thus, in the sixteenth century you can find both *laughed – low*, *crept – crope* and *helped – holp*.

**EXERCISE**

8.4 Which of the following pairs would you use: *dived – dove*, *hanged – hung*, *weaved – wove*, *strived – strove*, *digged – dug*? Would you use both but in different contexts? Your response will probably depend on factors such as your variety of English, or the specific meaning you wish to convey. Interestingly – bizarrely, perhaps – sometimes the item in a pair given above that is more frequently used is not following the regular ‘add *-ed*’ pattern.

Analogy

It’s worth noting that all new verbs follow the *-ed* weak pattern. In other words, if we want to indicate the past tense or make a participle, we put an *-ed* on the end of the word. For example, a British television advertisement for the soft drink *Tango* converts the brand name into a verb and makes it a past participle by adding *-ed*: *You know when you’ve been tangoed*. Extending a pattern in this way, just as happens with the extension of the English

-s plural inflection to etymologically foreign words, is change by ANALOGY: a process whereby one part of the language is remodelled according to the pattern of another part. This process is involved in many language changes.

Auxiliary verbs Main verbs

Let’s turn to AUXILIARY VERBS. What are auxiliary verbs? I will introduce a distinction between MAIN VERBS and auxiliary verbs by way of some examples:

- 1 I *may* drive
- 2 I *do* not drive
- 3 It *is being* driven
It *has been being* driven

In each case the main verb is *drive*. The italicised auxiliary verbs help the main verb in some particular way; they perform functions that in other languages might be performed by inflections. I’m going to focus mainly on the use of *do* as an auxiliary verb, as illustrated in example (2). However, a general point to note about auxiliary verbs is that the further you go back in time the less likely you are to find a series of auxiliary verbs. In fact, neither of the examples in (3) above existed in EMod.E, and the final (admittedly rare) example *It has been being driven* is a twentieth-century development.

Modal verb

First, a brief comment on the verb in example (1) above. *May* is a MODAL VERB. Modal verbs are a subset of auxiliary verbs and include: *may*, *can*, *will*, *shall* and *must*. But they used not to be fully-fledged auxiliary verbs – they could stand alone. Sentences like *I must away* or *The truth will out* sound archaic (Shakespearean?), because they reflect the modal usage of earlier periods of English. Modern equivalents would be something like *I must go away* and *The truth will come out*, where a main verb is included. Today, the modals do not take inflections or express tense. But again this used not to be the case. *May*, *can*, *will* and *shall* used to have the past tense equivalents *might*, *could*, *would* and *should*. Now, the difference between, say, *may* and *might* is primarily a matter of meaning. If you say *Might I go* as opposed to *May I go*, the difference is to do with increased tentativeness, not reference to the past. The meanings of the modals have also changed (in accordance with Traugott’s hypotheses about the direction of semantic change discussed in Unit 6).

Today, the meanings typically expressed by the modals are:

permission, possibility, ability = *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*
 obligation, necessity = *must*, *should*, *need to*, *ought to*
 volition (i.e. intention), prediction = *will*, *would*, *shall*, *be going to*

All the modals used to express rather different meanings. In OE, *shall* generally expressed obligation. This sense does occur occasionally today, but sounds somewhat archaic or is part of a register characterised by archaisms (e.g. the biblical Ten Commandments: ‘Thou shalt not ...’). Nowadays, in sentences like *I shall discuss dialects in the next unit* or *You*

shall finish this unit soon, the meanings are to do with intentions and predictions, not obligation (note that, in accordance with Traugott, intention and prediction are more self-orientated than obligation, which can rely on some external authority).



EXERCISE

8.5 In the light of the discussion in the above paragraphs, investigate the modals 'shall' and 'can', referring in particular to Text 5 from 1567. Can they stand alone? Do they carry inflections? Has the meaning changed?

The development of the auxiliary verb *do* represents one of the most important changes in the English language. Today, it can be used as an auxiliary in a variety of ways: for emphasis in statements (e.g. *They do look for trouble*), to form a negative statement (e.g. *They do not look for trouble*), and in questions (e.g. *Do they look for trouble?*). In OE the use of *do* was somewhat different. As a main verb, it seems to have originally meant 'to put or place something somewhere': 'ðt mon his sƿeord doo ofer his hƿe' (King Ælfred, *Gregory's Past*, 897) (= literally, that man his sword places over his hip). Indeed, *do* can still be used as a main verb today with the sense of 'putting', 'giving' or 'performing'. Consider: *to do to death*, *to do someone credit*, *to do some work*. It was not until ME that it developed as a common auxiliary.

From Late ME until about 1700, *do* was popular as a 'dummy' auxiliary, that is to say, an auxiliary that is relatively empty of meaning. Examples can be seen in Text 7 (Appendix IV) (John Milton, 1644): *For Books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a violl the purest efficacie...* The historical meanings of *do* are often a pragmatic matter; they are used to express particular meanings in context. Note that Milton uses *do* in both instances above to help express a contrast (*but doe contain; nay they do preserve*). *Do* could help manage the discourse or add to its intensity. The important point to note here is that *do* does not always simply add emphasis as it does today. Consider this text: 'when thou lokeste on the hearbes and trees, howe they **do growe**, and flowryshe in places, convenient for them [...]. For some of them **do growe** and sprynge in the felde, other in the mountaynes, other in the marish, and other **do cleue** to the rocks [...]' (George Colville, *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy*, 1556). There is no emphasis of the type we would expect today. If you interpret every instance of *do* in Shakespeare as adding emphasis, you will be misreading Shakespeare, particularly as Shakespeare and other literary writers often used *do* if they needed an extra syllable to make up a metrical line.

The typical way of forming questions in OE had been to reverse the normal subject–verb order. This question-forming method was still regularly used in EMod.E. Thus, Shakespeare could write 'Spake you of Caesar?' (*Antony and Cleopatra* III.ii.11), reversing the normal order for a statement: *You* (subject) *spake* (verb) *of Caesar*. But by Shakespeare's time questions were being formed simply by placing *do* before the subject: 'Do you see this?' (*Hamlet* IV.v.197).

The typical way of forming negative statements in OE was by supplying the word *ne* (usually before the verb): 'he *ne* iaf him al' (*Peterborough Chronicle*, 1140) (= he did

not give him all). They could also be formed by adding *ne* before the verb (auxiliary or main) and *not* after: '*Ne con ic noht singan*' (King Ælfred, Cædmon's *Hymn*, ninth century) (= I know not [how] to sing). In sentences like this, *not* added emphasis. Note here that what we are saying is that multiple negation (e.g. 'We don't need no education') was a regular feature of English and served the useful function of emphasis. Only later, as we shall see in the following unit, did such grammatical constructions become a focus of attention for prescriptivists. By EMod.E, *ne* is virtually obsolete, leaving just *not*: 'she vnderstode hym not' (Text 3, Caxton, 1490). This method of forming negative statements carries on well into the EMod.E period. But at this time we also find *do* beginning to be used with increasing frequency. So, in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) we can read both 'I care not what I meet' and 'I did not put the question to thee.' (Check Text 6(a) for examples of negative statements formed without *do*. The fact that the *do* construction is absent from a 1611 text can be explained again by the fact that it is a religious text representing the language of earlier periods.) Note that in the new *do* construction the position of *not* has changed, so that it comes before the main verb (*I care not* vs. *I did not put*).

In this and the last unit, we have seen some radical changes in inflections of words. But why did English lose its inflectional complexity? (Refer back to the possible reasons for language change given towards the end of Unit 2.) One convincing explanation concerns a structural change elsewhere in the language system. English underwent a phonological change leading to a grammatical change: the inflections at the ends of many words had ceased to be stressed, and were thus liable to blend with other inflections and disappear altogether, since people could not hear them so well. Evidence for this is in the considerable spelling variation for inflections. The neat Tables 7.1 and 8.1 are idealised paradigms, disguising all the messiness of actual practice. Another explanation points out that British English has experienced contact with an array of different languages (i.e. Celtic, Norse and French), and there may well have been some pressure for regularisation, in order to make it easier for people to communicate. Outside Britain, English – as we shall see in Unit 11 – has come into contact with many languages, creating yet further pressure to regularise the inflectional system.

DISCUSSION POINT

Note that, as in the example from King Ælfred above, a regular way of forming a negative statement in the past has been to use more than one negative word. In what varieties of today's English are you more likely to meet double or multiple negatives? What are the social implications of using double or multiple negatives? Is there any *linguistic* reason why they are a problem (consider whether communication is impaired or made more effective)?

SUMMARY

- Today, there is one remaining inflection for person, the *-s*, which is a Scandinavian borrowing. The Anglo-Saxon inflection used in OE, the *-eth*, lingered on until the eighteenth century.

- The presence today of a number of verbs that form their past and past participles in an irregular way (i.e. not with an *-ed* inflection) can be explained by examining the development of weak verbs and strong verbs. The strong-verb pattern has become increasingly rare. In a few cases, a verb has both strong and weak forms (e.g. *hung – hanged*).
- Auxiliary verbs have played an increasingly important role in English. Today, it is not unusual to have two or more auxiliary verbs in a row.
- A subset of auxiliary verbs, the modal verbs, have undergone dramatic change, both in terms of their grammatical characteristics and their meanings.
- The auxiliary *do* has had a profound effect on the development of English grammar, playing a role in forming emphatic statements, questions and negative statements.
- Two explanations, one structural and the other sociolinguistic, have been put forward for the dramatic loss of inflectional complexity in English: (1) the loss of distinctiveness in pronunciation, due to the fact that the inflections were unstressed; and (2) the regularisation of inflections to facilitate communication between peoples speaking different languages and dialects. There is good evidence in spelling for the first of these.

FOLLOW-UP READING

The same readings mentioned in the last unit from Dick Leith's *A Social History of English* (London: Routledge, 1997) and David Crystal's *Encyclopedia of the English Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) are also relevant to this unit. In addition, pp. 204–5 and 212 in Crystal's *Encyclopedia* contain relevant general information on verbs, and, of course, you can look up the sections on verbs in a standard historical textbook. For a clear description of the general grammatical characteristics of each period of English, try Jeremy Smith's *Essentials of Early English* (London: Routledge, 1999). The readings and websites on OE suggested in the previous unit are relevant too.