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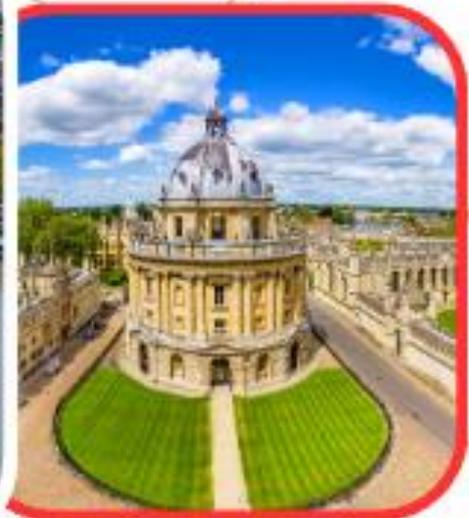
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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MULTIDISCIPLINARY STUDIES AND EDUCATION: a collection scientific works of the International scientific conference – London, England, 2025. Issue 3

Languages of publication: Uzbek, English, Russian, German, Italian, Spanish

The collection consists of scientific research of scientists, graduate students and students who took part in the International Scientific online conference **«INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MULTIDISCIPLINARY STUDIES AND EDUCATION»**. Which took place in London , 2025.

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Adjective, preposition, numeral in Old English

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Annotation: This paper surveys the structural properties of adjectives, prepositions, and numerals in Old English (c. 450–1150), focusing on their morphology, syntactic behavior, and diachronic significance. Old English adjectives were inflected for case, number, gender, and displayed strong/weak paradigms depending on definiteness. The prepositional system, while comparatively small and mostly monolexemic, governed case assignment and functioned as a core mechanism for expressing spatial and relational meanings. Old English numerals exhibited hybrid morphology: lower numerals behaved like inflectable adjectives or nouns, whereas higher numerals displayed invariant or partially declined forms. The findings illustrate the synthetic character of Old English and provide a baseline for understanding later morphosyntactic reduction in Middle and Modern English.

Keywords: Old English; adjective inflection; prepositional case government; numerals; strong/weak paradigm; morphology; diachrony; case assignment; Germanic syntax

Introduction

Old English occupies a central position in the diachronic profile of English because it retains many inherited Indo-European and Proto-Germanic morphological categories later lost in the Middle and Modern stages. Three word classes — adjectives, prepositions, and numerals — are particularly instructive for reconstructing the grammar of the period and for tracking the trajectory from synthetic morphology to analytic structure.

Old English adjectives did not behave as bare modifiers, but as fully inflecting forms sensitive to grammatical case, gender, and number of the head noun. Moreover, they exhibited a strong vs. weak inflectional contrast, conditioned by syntactic definiteness: strong adjectives emerged in indefinite contexts, whereas weak adjectives co-occurred with demonstratives or possessives, thus encoding discourse structure morphologically rather than syntactically.

Prepositions in Old English were not semantically "light" as often in Present-Day English, but retained the ability to govern nominal case, typically the dative or accusative, with genitive in restricted contexts. Case government by prepositions reveals that relations such as location, direction,

instrumentality, and possession were distributed between morphology and syntax rather than expressed periphrastically.

Old English numerals further demonstrate the synthetic profile of the system. The lower numerals (one through four) participated in agreement and inflection, sometimes operating adjectivally or nominally, while higher numerals tended toward fixed forms but could still trigger non-default case patterns.

Examining these classes in parallel illuminates how Old English encoded grammatical relations morphologically — a feature that sharply contrasts with the later analytic restructuring of English under both internal evolution and contact-driven simplification.

Methods: The study employs historical–comparative analysis drawing on:

(i) Old English prose corpora (Chronicle annals, Alfredian translations, Ælfrician homilies);

(ii) paradigmatic evidence from handbooks of Old English morphology;

(iii) syntactic annotation of case-marked nominal phrases governed by adjectives and prepositions;

(iv) comparative reference to Gothic, Old High German, and Old Norse for inherited vs. innovated features.

This investigation is based on a mixed historical–comparative and corpus-internal methodology. First, primary Old English prose sources were consulted to establish natural usage rather than paradigm-based abstraction. Representative corpora included the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (various recensions), King Alfred's translations (Pastoral Care, Boethius), legal codes, and Ælfric's homiletic prose. These were preferred because they provide controlled syntactic environments and relatively conservative morphosyntax.

Second, morphological paradigms for adjectives, prepositions, and numerals were verified against established grammars and etymological references to distinguish inherited Proto-Germanic features from later Old English innovations. Comparative reference to Gothic, Old High German, and Old Norse allowed isolation of features that are specifically Anglo-Saxon versus pan-Germanic.

Third, case assignment after prepositions and agreement patterns within noun phrases were annotated to detect consistent structural dependencies rather than anecdotal co-occurrence. Special attention was given to contexts where syntactic definiteness interacts with the strong/weak adjective contrast to ensure functional interpretation.

Results: Old English adjectives show full inflection for gender, case, number, and an additional strong/weak morphological dimension tied to definiteness. The strong paradigm appears in indefinite contexts, whereas

weak inflection accompanies demonstratives or possessors — evidence that discourse structure was morphologically expressed rather than syntactically.

2.   Prepositions:

Old English prepositions are not mere functional particles but case-governing heads that assign accusative or dative to their complements, with genitive only in restricted lexicalized expressions. As a result, relations of direction, location, instrument, and means are encoded morphologically rather than by rigid word order or auxiliary constructions.

3.   Numerals:

Lower numerals (especially from "ān" to "fēower") display hybrid behavior — they may decline and participate in agreement, sometimes functioning adjectivally or substantively. Higher numerals, while more fixed, still interact with case and can trigger non-default forms in dependent nouns. This demonstrates partial integration of numerals into the inflectional system, not categorical invariance.

Three robust outcomes emerged:

1.   Adjectival inflection is structurally double-tracked: strong and weak paradigms serve discourse-pragmatic rather than purely referential purposes.

2.   Prepositions are morphosyntactically active, not inert function words: they impose case selection and thus index grammatical relations overtly.

3.   Numerals form a stratified class: low numerals retain inflectional integration into nominal syntax, while high numerals already move toward morphosyntactic invariance.

Discussion: The behavior of adjectives, prepositions, and numerals in Old English demonstrates the system's synthetic typological profile and the informational density of morphology in the early stage of English. The strong/weak adjectival opposition anticipates later definiteness marking in syntax; the case-governing function of prepositions shows that relations now expressed analytically were once morphologically enforced; and the split behaviour of numerals anticipates the uneven erosion of inflection in later stages. Taken together, these classes document a grammar in which morphology performed functions that later shifted to syntax and lexicon, advancing our understanding of the path from Old English to the analytic profile of Present-Day English.

The behavior of numerals, especially their partial inflectional participation, illustrates that morphological erosion in English was gradual, non-uniform, and category-specific. The numerals constitute a diagnostic class capturing the transition from a fully synthetic Germanic system to an emergent analytic stage in Middle English, influenced later by phonological erosion and contact.

Conclusion. Overall, the three categories function as diagnostic evidence of a grammar in which morphology, not syntax, carried the informational burden. Their later simplification is essential to understanding how English moved from a case-rich, inflecting system to a structurally analytic language. In this sense, adjectives, prepositions, and numerals in Old English are not isolated topics but windows onto the larger typological reorientation of English grammar.

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