

The Case of Old English
N-stem Masculine Derivatives
*A typological contribution
to categorization in English
word-formation*

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Abstract

The paper redefines the Old English formative -a, marking n-stem masculine derivatives, both as a derivational and inflectional marker. It surveys its derivational functions in Proto-Germanic and Old English, demonstrating that it had not given up its double function, which was fully in keeping with the inflectional typological tenor of the earliest English, until the Early Middle English period. The paper goes then on to suggest a tentative typology of suffixes from Proto-Germanic to Old English along a cline connecting the agglutinating and inflectional pole, with an increasing diachronic predominance of suffixes of the latter type. This tendency, exemplified by the history of the formative -a, is seen as one of the ways in the Old English system to establish homological derivation as the dominant principle of word-formation, against the background of a gradual reorientation of the language from stem-based to word-based morphology.

0. PRELIMINARIES

In tracing the prehistory of Old English masculine *n*-stems, Roger Lass points out that an important sub-class of deverbal agent nouns, such as *hunta* ('hunter') or *gesaca* ('adversary'), comprised "the suffix {-a}" which had "much the same function as ModE {-er}". In a footnote to this observation, Lass goes on to add:

"'Much the same' does not mean 'the same', and this is crucial: the -a (whatever its precise 'meaning') is not a derivational affix but a nom. sg. marker, i.e. an inflection. This ending ... probably started life as a deverbal suffix, but was reanalysed as an inflection. It does, however, as is often the case, retain something of the semantics of its original." (Lass, 1994: 134)

Dieter Kastovsky, in less uncertain terms, follows suit, but adds an important dimension to the analysis by pointing out that the reinterpretation of the Old English suffix *-a* into an inflectional device was accompanied by the rise of a zero affix (i.e. a covert derivational suffix) so that the word-formation structure of *hunta* and related nouns in Late Old English was *hunt-O-a* (cf. e.g. Kastovsky, 2006: 153).

In the present paper, I wish to argue that the formative *-a* – a word-formation device of Indo-European origin that had several distinct derivational functions in Proto-Germanic – can be seen to have operated, until the end of the Old English period, *both* as an inflectional and derivational marker, i.e. that it had not given up its function as a suffix (alongside its role as an ending), and that this multifunctional parameter was fully in keeping with the inflectional typological tenor of the earliest English. Also, I hope to show that elaborating this apparently minor aspect of Old English (inflectional and derivational)

morphology may contribute to striking a better balance between synchrony and diachrony in our understanding of the process of a gradual reorientation in Old English from stem-based to word-based morphology¹, as well as help to refine our sense of categorization in English word-formation.²

1 EMPIRICAL AND TYPOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Arguments in favour of assessing *-a* (and its likes, because an analogical case may be put forward for other, mainly vocalic formatives³) as a structural segment of both derivational and inflectional significance are based on empirical facts as well as typological theory (here applied in terms of the Prague School Typology).

1.1 The empirical evidence is provided both by a diversified functional presence of the formative *-a* in Old English word-formation and by its subsequent history in Early Middle English texts.

1.2 The typological framework – itself too dependent on language material to be straightforwardly labelled ‘theoretical’ – suggests, in its turn, that the inflexional⁴ *and* derivational

1 For a succinct summary of the progression of English morphology from root-based to stem-based to word-based morphology, cf. e.g. Kastovsky (2006).

2 Here I come to re-evaluate my opinion on this problem, presented, as a side issue, in Čermák, J. (forthcoming).

3 Such as e.g. Old English *-u*, a suffix with the function of an inflexional ending (as in *giefu*, ‘what is given, gift’, also analysed by Kastovsky as *gief-0-u*), or *-e*, the feminine counterpart of masculine *n*-stem derivatives.

4 To prevent misunderstanding, I use the spelling distinction between *inflection* and *inflexion* throughout to distinguish between references to language typology and morphology, respectively.

marker *-a* is to be seen as part of a diachronic derivational cline connecting an inflectional and an agglutinating pole, and that its ultimate loss in both functions *at the same time* is intimately linked to the demise of inflection as a typological mainstay of the Old English morphological system. Additional support for this line of reasoning can be gained by reference to standards of categorisation and terminological apparatuses used in morphological analyses of other inflectional languages (such as Czech).

2 DERIVATIONAL PROFILE OF THE SUFFIX *-A*

The derivational profile of the suffix *-a* from Proto-Germanic to Old English exhibits a fundamental continuity and can be summarized as follows.

2.1 The suffix ranked among Proto-Germanic nasal stem-formatives of Indo-European origin (Gmc. **-an*, IE **-en*), with varying vowel grades. Its Old English form *-a* in nom. sg. (as opposed to *-e* in *n*-stems of the feminine and neuter gender) was the only one in the masculine paradigm that lacked the */-n/* formative. The loss of this formative (common in the *n*-stems to all three genders) is not completely clear but a parallel development is attested in Latin, Gothic and other languages. In Proto-Germanic, the suffix could be extended with a pre-thematic element */-j-/*, whose ancient presence came to manifest itself in Old English only indirectly, leaving its mark in the form of gemination, *i*-mutation, palatalization and other changes affecting the root to which it was once appended (cf. e.g. Old English *myrðra* as opposed to Gothic *maúrþrja* 'murderer', with the latter form exhibiting a full shape of the formative but no *i*-mutation). Such manifestations demonstrate immediate linking of formatives to the preceding constituents of the

word-structure, characteristic of typologically inflectional morphological behaviour.

2.2 In terms of derivational structure, both *-a* and *-ja* masculine *n*-stems were either extensions of *a*-stem nouns and adjectives (of the type *pēow* – *pēowa*, ‘servant, slave’, and *cūð*, ‘known, familiar’ – *cūða*, ‘acquaintance, friend, relative’, respectively⁵) or derivations from thematic verbs (*hunta*, ‘hunter’, based on *huntian*, ‘to hunt’).

2.3 In terms of derivational function, it was the individualizing sense motivating the formative conversion of adjectives into nouns (*blinda* as characterizing an individual that suffered from the defect denoted by the adjective *blind*) that represented the central derivational category (i.) of masculine *n*-stems both in Proto-Germanic and Old English. It was, in all probability, from this category that all the other derivational categories posited for Proto-Germanic evolved, and, again, all of them had come down to Old English as well.⁶ Among the other categories Krahe and Meid (1967: 90–100) list for *n*-stems of all three genders the following ones are relevant for the masculine:

ii. “[...] von Substantiven abgeleitete mask. Personenbezeichnungen nach Art von [...] lat. *Nāsō* „der Großnasige“ (zu *nāsus*),

5 The Old English noun system was very rich in this type of morphological alternation, cf. e.g. *blōstm* – *blōstma* (‘blossom, flower’), *eolh* – *eolha* (‘elk’), *ford* – *forda* (‘ford’). The evidence suggests that semantic differentiation in such morphological pairs was highly peripheral. – The functional conversion of adjectives into nouns was not identical “im Wesen” with the weak adjectival inflexion, as is claimed by Krahe and Meid (1967:92), but only in form: the difference here was of course between inflexional and derivational morphology, and so a fundamental one.

6 None of them seems to have been a mere residuum, measured at least against the material provided by fascicules A-F of the *Dictionary of Old English (DOE)* which yielded my sample.

praedō „Plünderer“ (zu *praeda* „Beute“)“ (ibid.: 92), but without ameliorative or pejorative senses typical of Latin formations. Old English examples in this category include *forestēora* (‘look-out man at the prow of a ship’, based on *stēora* ‘helmsman’, which was based on *stēor*, ‘helm’) and *cræfta* (‘craftsman, artificer’, based on *cræft*, ‘craft’).

iii. Agent nouns derived from thematic verbs, such as Old English *āgīta* ‘waster’ (based on *āgītan*, ‘to waste’) and *bylda* ‘builder’ (based on *byldan*, ‘to build’). Semantic motivation of these formations probably arose in such a way that objects of actions described by verbs (such as ‘helm’ or ‘craft’ in the preceding category) came to be associated with the actions themselves.

iv. Deadjectival formations that “insgesamt bezeichnen [...] die mit *n*-Suffix gebildeten Abstrakta vielfach sich an Personen äussernde (und daher quasi individuelle) geistig-seelische oder körperliche Phänomene” (ibid.: 94). They may have risen in semantic association with nominalized adjectives of the central category (such as *cūða* or *blinda*, described above) and in Old English they include such derivations as *ēaca* (‘addition, increase’) and *grama* (‘anger’).

v. Concrete nouns that were semantically based on metaphorical association with *a*-stem nouns denoting parts of the body and formally representing their extensions, such as Old English *barda* (‘ship with a beak’, based on *beard*, *bard*, ‘beard’).

2.4 The fact that all the derivational categories mentioned above were represented in Old English to an extent that does not imply a mere peripheral, residual existence is crucial for assuming that the formative *-a* had maintained its derivational function until the end of the Old English period. On the other

hand, it is not difficult to see factors that must have, by degrees, endangered the status of the suffix. Its decreasing productivity as well as a growing opacity of individual derivations was certainly fuelled by the progressing reorientation of Old English morphology from a stem-based (with not infrequent manifestations of the ancient root-based system) to a word-based configuration and by an increasing impoverishment of material in suffixes and endings (i.e. by their homonymy/synonymy) generally. These formal changes, along with the propensity of Old English to create extended formations of the *pēow* – *pēowa* type, must have resulted in growing semantic indeterminacy associated with some of the above-mentioned derivational categories (number iv. in particular).

2.5 Considering all these developments, it may be surprising to find that the Old English domain of the *-a* formative does not seem to have been substantially impinged upon by other, more robust suffixes *-ere*, *-end* and *-ing*. The evidence of a gradual recession of the *-a* suffix can be gleaned from a comparison of Old English to Gothic or Old Norse rather than from Old English word-formation itself (cf. e.g. Old English *fiscere* ‘fisherman’ as opposed to the ‘original’ Gothic form *fiskja*). In the Old English derivational system, the gradual recession of the suffix *-a* is largely represented by ‘irregular’ pairs such as the gender-marked opposition *hōre* (‘whore’) – *hōring* (‘adulterer’), as opposed to such ‘regular’ pairs as *gebedda* – *gebedde* (exhibiting varied suffixal gender-marking for ‘spouse’). Otherwise, Old English appears to have found ways to employ *-a* and the other suffixes side by side, either in free variation or distinguished semantically. The former case can be exemplified by such pairs as *efenwyrhta* – *efenwyrchend* (‘fellow-worker’) and *dēma* – *dēmere* (both meaning ‘judge’); the latter case is represented, in distinction to the last-mentioned pair, by *dēmend*

(‘God as judge’) or by such sets as *boda* (‘messenger’) – *bodere* (‘preacher’) – *bodiend* (‘preacher, teacher’) and *-lātere* (as in *blōdlātere*, ‘blood-letter’) – *-lāta* (as in *friglāta*, ‘freedman’).

2.6 How can be explained, then, that the formative *-a* had managed to hold its own until the end of the Old English period? First of all, its status was supported by firm association with the most productive derivational patterns in the above categories – primarily, with the central category of deadjectival nouns (i. in 2.3.). The smooth transition between adjectives and nouns used in an individualizing sense had, in turn, an inflexional parallel in the opposition of strong and weak adjectives.

Other productive derivational patterns included agent nouns of category iii. (in 2.3.) as well as extended exocentric (“possessive”) compounds that represented a distinct derivational subtype in categories ii. and v. Exocentric compounds of this type comprised not only formations attested solely in poetry and therefore considered traditional (such as *fāmigbōsma* ‘foamy-bosomed’ or *dēawigfeþera* ‘dewy-feathered’), but also lexemes occurring in Old English prose, such as *efenhāda* (‘one having an equal status’, rendering ‘fellow-bishop’).

Further, it seems reasonable to assume that in Old English the derivational status of vocalic suffixes such as *-a* may have also been kept alive and functional by the existence of minimally contrasted morphological pairs such as *cwalu*⁷ (‘killing’) –

7 An intriguing question concerns the relationship between the loss of productivity in a suffix and its functional polysemy: for example, the Old English *-u* had a number of functions in Proto-Germanic derivation but had maintained only the capacity to create action nouns (Krahe and Meid, 1967: 62). – These, and a number of other, examples come from the material collected from DOE by Michaela Hejná for appendices to her *Ablaut vs. Suffixation in Old English Word-Formation* (B.A. thesis to be submitted in 2010 at the Department of English Language and ELT Methodology, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague).

(self-)cwala ('suicide'); *flot* ('deep water, sea') – *flota* ('vessel'); *bed* ('prayer') – *bedu* ('petition') or *bod* ('command') – *boda* ('emissary'). Patterns such as those mentioned in this section may have together worked as a countertendency to the decreasing transparency of individual derivatives, a process which was fuelled by the generally increasing impoverishment of material in suffixes and endings and linked to growing semantic indeterminacy.

2.7 A corroboration of this long, and double, life of the formative *-a* in Old English is also provided by evidence available from Early Middle English copies of Late Old English texts. A comparison of three homilies by Ælfric⁸ to their copies produced some 150 years later (Čermák, J., forthcoming) shows that in the copies masculine *n*-stem nouns such as *cuma* ('visitor'), *wita* ('wise man, counsellor') and others of the above-mentioned derivational categories almost invariably came – due to the loss of the formative which originally functioned both as a derivational suffix and a grammatical ending – to be ousted by lexical replacements (such as *cuma* > *gest* 'visitor, guest') or periphrastic noun phrases (such as *wita* > *wise mon*).

The copied texts, although generally taken to have been produced by skilled and careful scribes, do exhibit significant changes ranging from spelling innovation and sound change

8 The comparison was based on the following homilies by Ælfric: *De octo uiciis et de duodecim abusiis huius seculi*: the Old English text in Cambridge Corpus Christi College, MS. 178, edited by Morris (1867, 1868/1988: 101–119) along with its Middle English copy of Lambeth MS. 487; the Middle English copy of Cotton MS. Vespasian D.XIV edited by Warner (1917: 11–19); *In die sancto pentecosten*: the Old English original edited by Clemoes (1997: 54–64); the Middle English version of Lambeth MS. 487 edited by Morris (1867, 1868/1988: 87–101); *De initio creaturae*: the Old English original edited by Clemoes (1997: 178–189); the Middle English version of Cotton Vespasian A.xxii edited by Morris (1867, 1868/1988: 217–231).

to replacements due to lexical mortality. In other words, their scribes, for all their faithfulness, can be seen as responding to differences between the language of their exemplars and the English of the time, in an effort to meet two ends at once: to produce a faithful copy which would be, at the same time, fully intelligible to the readership of their day. Even though stylistic choices and modifications motivated by clarification, amplification and embellishment must be allowed for, the consistency of shifts such as the replacement of Old English *n*-stem masculine derivatives by simplexes or periphrastic noun phrases in Early Middle English suggests that indeed we deal here with processes symptomatic of progressive change in the system of word-formation.

2.8 Although these data are of variable diachronic depth⁹, they suggest, then, that no re-analysis, to use Roger Lass' description, from a derivational suffix into an inflexional element took place in the Old English period. Nor there appears to have been much need for a concomitant restructuring that would involve a covert derivational marker – a zero affix, as suggested by Dieter Kastovsky. Despite the undisputed fact of *n*-stems' general recession in the history of English (which must indeed have started early on and manifested itself, on the derivational level, in gradual decrease of productivity and transparency) and the important fact of an early competition from other suffixes, the Old English formative *-a* still inhabited much the same derivational categories as were those posited, on the strength of comparative evidence, for Proto-Germanic. The marker *-a* thus continued to function in the inherited

9 Cf. such derivations of a presumably ancient date as Old English *guma* ('man', corresponding to Latin *homō*) or *bera* ('bear', a secondary and periphrastic – 'the brown one' – word for the original expression, lost by the Old English period). Cf. also section 3.1 below.

patterns and formations as a derivational suffix throughout the Old English period, and so there was no point in replacing it by other formal means – not until the beginning of Early Middle English when the formative lost its dual, inflexional and derivational, function at one and the same time, and disappeared from the language altogether.

3 TYPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

This dual function and the form of the suffix define *-a* as an integral part of Old English morphology as a typologically inflectional system.

3.1 Quirk and Wrenn, in their discussion of ‘formative conversion’ in Old English (1957: 104ff.), illustrate the process by listing four sets of nouns derived from verbs. Their sets marked as (a) and (c) comprise derivational items of the type *bite* (‘bite’) and *gripe* (‘grip’), and *cuma* (‘guest’) and *wita* (‘wise man’), respectively. In the subsequent commentary, they point out the following:

“In lists (a) and (c) ... we see *two patterns on which nouns were at one time formed from verbs*. /italics J.Č./ One of the most prolific ways of doing this was by the use of the suffix *-ung* (also found as *-ing*), yielding feminine abstract nouns, especially from consonantal verbs of Class II; thus *weorðung*, ‘honour’, *þrōwung* ‘suffering’. Agent-nouns were often formed from verbs by means of the suffix *-end* (as in *dēmend* ‘one who judges’, *hælend* ‘one who heals, saviour’), and *-ere* (as in *cwellere* ‘killer’, *leornere* ‘learner’.” (Quirk and Wrenn, 1957: 106)

This commentary describes, by implication, two characteristic features of Old English derivation. One is the above-mentioned

variable diachronic depth of individual derivational patterns and their manifestations in the language. Although Quirk and Wrenn may differ from Lass and Kastovsky in details of timing, they would, as the italicized part of the quotation shows, agree with them in assuming that the original derivational markers *-e* and *-a* in sets (a) and (c) no more performed the function of a suffix in the system of 'formative conversion' Quirk and Wrenn were describing. Focusing on the formative *-a*, the present paper aims to show, by combining empirical and typological evidence for Old English, that its derivational status at that stage was still that of a suffix, but this is just another way of confirming the crucial fact of a varying pace of the progression of the earliest English en route towards derivation based on a homological principle and characterized by word-based structures.

The other characteristic feature of Old English derivation, implied in the quotation above, is the difference between formatives such as *-e* and *-a* on the one hand, and suffixes such as *-end* and *-ere* on the other. In terms of the Prague School Typology, the former can be labelled as inflectional, the latter as agglutinating. The difference between the two is, of course, not seen as a binary, clear-cut opposition, but rather comprises a cline. The main reason for this lies in the varied relationship inflectional suffixes can have to the preceding constituent(s) in a given word-structure.

3.2 In this typological framework, the agglutinating suffixes are defined as heavy-built (and therefore heavy-wear), usually syllabic formatives that bear less immediate links to the word-structure to which they come to be appended so that they neither trigger phonological changes in it nor fuse with it.

In contrast, suffixes standing closer to the inflectional pole of the derivational cline do not usually comprise, being of a lighter

build, a syllable of their own. As such, they are more intimately linked to the stem. The linking manifests itself by phonological changes that suffixes of an inflectional nature trigger in the stem. Thus, it induces much formal variation in the stem¹⁰ (under specific conditions, the inflectional suffixes may fuse with the stem completely). This complex and varied scenario was no doubt also characteristic of the diachronic progression from Proto-Germanic to the early Germanic dialects including Old English. As markers of an inflectional nature, such suffixes could be multifunctional, i.e. they were capable of adopting inflexional functions. Such was also the case of the Old English formative *-a*.

3.3 If the marker *-a* and its likes indeed had a comparable double function to the original stem-formatives in Proto-Germanic which functioned both as derivational suffixes and inflexional class markers, no radical change is needed to assume in the word-structure or in its parsing (such as would be involved in the theory of a covert derivational suffix in Old English *cuma* or *giefu*). Technically, this type of affix represented one type of suffix-ending configuration: in the *-a* of Old English formations such as *cuma* we have a suffix and an ending in one segment. The other two possible configurations can be exemplified by Old English *gief-end* ('giver'), with a combination of the suffix *-end* and a zero ending side by side, and Old English *mylt-estre* ('prostitute'), in which the inflexional ending *-e* is subsumed in the heavy, agglutinating suffix *-estre*.

10 Such formal variation is manifested by e.g. suffix families, such as the Old English ones based on the elements *-l-* or *-d-/-t-/-þ-* (for an introductory reference to the concept of suffix families, cf. Kastovsky, 1992: 384). – In the framework of the Prague School Typology, such word-internal variation would be considered to manifest a specific language type – introflexion (or “inner flection”), opposed but closely associated with inflection (or “outer flection”).

3.4 Markers of a dual, derivational and inflexional, function are attested in a number of inflectional languages. Skalička and Sgall, for example, point out their existence in Bantu languages as well in such Spanish formations as *perro – perra, naranjo – naranja* (1994: 337). In a standard categorisation and terminological system developed for inflectional languages such as Czech, the Old English *-a* and its likes would be construed as “typological word-formation characteristics” (F. Čermák, forthcoming, Chapter 2.331.1.), as formatives whose dual role as suffixes and endings is a legacy form the past, determined by the inflectional typological tenor of the system, i.e. the necessity to derive nouns and, simultaneously, classify them into subsystems of genders, declensional patterns, etc.¹¹

3.5 In such cases as the one described in the present paper, the original markers, performing the dual, i.e. derivational and inflexional function, passed through the processes of weakening and syllable loss (themselves due to various fusions, syncope and apocope) relatively unscathed. This often happened when only a final step towards a word-based derivational system was needed but affiliation of inflectional markers to various classes and subclasses still had to be maintained (such as e.g. the contrasts between long and short stems). In other cases, the markers got lost in the fusion, and the resulting zero suffix can be therefore seen as an extreme form of an inflectional suffix. Whatever the case might be, inflectional suffixes were part of widespread synonymy and homonymy¹²,

11 Typological theory does not appear to have coined an umbrella term for such multifunctional markers: in the Czech historical word-formation, derivations employing such formatives are described as “derived by morphological endings”, cf. e.g. Lamprecht, A., D. Šlosar and J. Bauer (1984:253).

12 Such as that of the Old English derivational and, at the same time, inflexional marker *-e*, employed e.g. in masculine *i*-stem action

which cut across the board of Old English inflexional and derivational morphology and which, in its extreme extent, ultimately colluded with phonetic erosion in bringing about the collapse of the Old English inflectional morphological system.

3.6 Against this background, the gradual replacement of the marker *-a* by the suffix *-ere* – along with other means, as the evidence from Early Middle English shows – was highly significant. Being of an inflectional character, vocalic formatives such as *-a* were more prone to losing transparency and productivity, unlike formatives of a heavier, agglutinating build. It is tempting to assume that only suffixes of the latter type were disposed to live on even after the inflectional stage in the history of the language was over and that, in contrast, a good many among the two-thirds or so of the inherited suffixes that are assumed to have disappeared or became opaque on the way from Proto-Germanic to Old English¹³ were of an inflectional character. This is an intriguing issue in need of much further research.

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The dynamics of suffixation in Proto-Germanic and Old English seems to have been determined, to a considerable extent, by the clash between the inflectional and agglutinating principle. Gradual predominance of agglutination in suffixation was one of the ways in the Old English system to establish homological derivation as the dominant principle of word-formation. At

nouns (*bite*, *gripe* and others quoted by Quirk and Wrenn, 1957: 106, in their set (a)) and in feminine *n*-stems (such as *þēowe* 'female servant, female slave', complementing, in suffixal gender-marking, *þēowa* 'male servant, male-slave').

13 Cf. Lass (1994: 200), in reference to Quirk and Wrenn (1957), and Kastovsky (1992).

the same time, postulating the tendency to foster agglutinating suffixes is a way of defining "the type of morphological boundary separating the constituents"¹⁴. Inflectional and agglutinating formatives can be seen, respectively, as word-formation elements comprising, and defining, specific "derivational layers"¹⁵. Such individual derivational histories as that of the Old English formative *-a* offer a wider perspective on the variable pace of language change and, in their own way, prove the point that the divorce of English derivational and inflectional morphology was of a post-Old English date.

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14 Cf. Kastovsky (1992: 397).

15 Cf. Kastovsky (1992: 360).

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