

Adjective in Old English

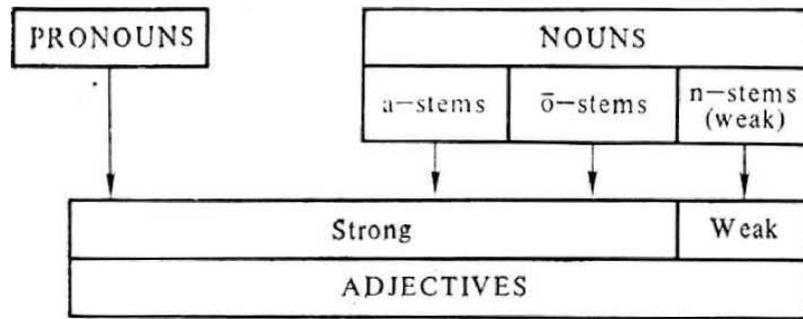
Adjective in Old English had five grammatical categories: three dependent grammatical categories, i.e forms of agreement of the adjective with the noun it modified – number, gender and case; definiteness – indefiniteness and degrees of comparison. Adjectives had three genders and two numbers. The category of case in adjectives differed from that of nouns: in addition to the four cases of nouns they had one more case, Instrumental. It was used when the adjective served as an attribute to a noun in the Dat. case expressing an instrumental meaning.

Weak and Strong Declension

Most adjectives in OE could be declined in two ways: according to the weak and to the strong declension. The formal differences between the declensions, as well as their origin, were similar to those of the noun declensions. The strong and weak declensions arose due to the use of several stem-forming suffixes in PG: vocalic *a-*, *o-*, *u-* and *i-* and consonantal *n-*. Accordingly, there developed sets of endings of the strong declension mainly coinciding with the endings of *a*-stems of nouns for adjectives in the Masc. and Neut. and of *o*-stems – in the Fem.

Some endings in the strong declension of adjectives have no parallels in the noun paradigms; they are similar to the endings of pronouns: *-um* for Dat. sg, *-ne* for Acc. Sg Masc., [r] in some Fem. and pl endings. Therefore the strong declension of adjectives is sometimes called the ‘pronominal’ declension. As for the weak declension, it uses the same markers as *n*-stems of nouns except that in the Gen. pl the pronominal ending *-ra*, is often used instead of the weak *-ena*.

The relations between the declensions of nouns, adjectives and pronouns are shown in the following chart:



Strong Declension of Adjectives in OE

		Masc	Neut	Fem
sing	N	zōd	zōd	zōd
	G	zōdes	zōdes	zōdre
	D	zōdum	zōdum	zōdre
	A	zōdne	zōd	zōde
	Inst	zōde	zōde	zōde
pl	N	zōde	zōd	zōda
	G	zōdra	zōdra	zōdra
	D	zōdum	zōdum	zōdum
	A	zōde	zōd	zōda

Weak Declension of Adjectives in OE

		Masc	Neut	Fem
sing	N	zōda	zōde	zōde
	G	zōdan	zōdan	zōdan
	D	zōdan	zōdan	zōdan
	A	zōdan	zōde	zōdan
pl	N	zōdan		
	G	zōdra		
	D	zōdum		
	A	zōdan		

The difference between the strong and the weak declension of adjectives was not only formal but also semantic. Unlike a noun, an adjective did not

belong to a certain type of declension. Most adjectives could be declined in both ways. The choice of the declension was determined by a number of factors: the syntactical function of the adjective, the degree of comparison and the presence of noun determiners. The adjective had a strong form when used predicatively and when used attributively without any determiners, e. g.: *Ʒōd mann* (strong) – a good man.

The weak form was employed when the adjective was preceded by a demonstrative pronoun or the Gen. case of personal pronouns, e. g.: *sē Ʒōda mann* (weak) – the good man.

The strong forms were associated with the meaning of indefiniteness, the weak forms with the meaning of definiteness. The formal and semantic opposition between the two declensions of adjectives is regarded as a grammatical category of definiteness – indefiniteness.

It follows that potentially OE adjectives could distinguish up to sixty forms. In reality they distinguished only eleven. Homonymy of forms in the adjective paradigms was three times as high as in the noun. It affected the grammatical categories of the adjective to a varying degree.

Neutralisation of formal oppositions reached the highest level in the category of gender: gender distinctions were practically non-existent in the pl, they were lost in most cases of the weak declension in the sg; in the strong declension Neut. and Masc. forms of adjectives were almost alike.

Formal distinction of number, case and the strong and weak forms was more consistent. Number and case were well distinguished in the strong declension, with only a few instances of neutralisation; the distinction of number was lost only in the Dat. case, Masc. and Neut. The forms in the weak declension were less distinctive, as thirteen forms out of twenty ended in *-an*.

The formal difference between strong and weak forms was shown in all cases and both numbers, the only homonymous forms being Dat. pl and Gen. pl, -i f it took the ending *-ra*.

In later OE the distinction of forms in the adjective paradigm became even more blurred. The Instr. case fell together with the Dat. Numerous variant forms with phonetically reduced endings or with markers borrowed from other forms through analogy impaired the distinction of categorial forms.

Degrees of Comparison

Most OE adjectives distinguished between three degrees of comparison: positive, comparative and superlative. The regular means used to form the comparative and the superlative from the positive were the suffixes *-ra* and *-est/ost*. Sometimes suffixation was accompanied by an interchange of the root-vowel (see the table below). Some adjectives were suppletive and completely changed the root in the comparative and superlative degrees.

Comparison of Adjectives in Old English

Means of form-building	Positive	Comparative	Superlative	NE
Suffixation	soft	softra	softost	<i>soft</i>
Suffixation plus vowel inter-Change	lanȝ eald	lenȝra ieldra	lenȝest ieldest	<i>long</i> <i>old</i>
Suppletion	ȝod lytel	bettra læssa	bet(e)st læst	<i>good</i> <i>little</i>