

RELEVANCE THEORY
AND HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS:
TOWARDS A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO
THE MORPHOLOGICAL CHANGES IN THE PRETERITE
FROM OLD ENGLISH TO MIDDLE ENGLISH*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to suggest a pragmatic explanation for some of the morphological changes that occurred in the evolution of the preterite of both weak and strong verbs from Old English to Middle English. In order to do so, this work will be based on Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, *Relevance* (1986); *Relevance* (1995); Wilson & Sperber, "Relevance") and will focus only on the weakening and subsequent loss of person and number inflections, as well as on the processes of analogical extension and paradigm levelling.

KEY WORDS: Relevance Theory, verb morphology, preterite, conceptual/procedural meaning, explicatures.

RESUMEN

El propósito del presente artículo es sugerir una explicación pragmática de algunos de los cambios morfológicos que ocurrieron en la evolución del pretérito de los verbos débiles y fuertes del Inglés Antiguo al Inglés Medio. Para ello, este trabajo se basa en la Teoría de la Relevancia (Sperber & Wilson, *Relevance* (1986), *Relevance* (1995); Wilson & Sperber, "Relevance") y se centra sólo en el debilitamiento y posterior pérdida de las desinencias de persona y número, así como en los procesos de extensión analógica y nivelación de los paradigmas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: teoría de la relevancia, morfología verbal, pretérito, significado conceptual/procedimental, explicaturas.

1. INTRODUCTION

In much of the existing literature in historical linguistics the morphological changes undergone by verbs in their evolution from Old English to Middle English [henceforth OE and ME, respectively] are usually explained in formal terms (Baugh & Cable; Barber; Burrow & Turville-Petre; Ekwall; Fennell; Fernández Cuesta &



Rodríguez Ledesma; Freeborn; García García; Görlach, *Introduction; Linguistic*; Horobin & Smith; Lass; McMahon; Moore; Pyles & Algeo; Trask). Those changes are part of a general shift from a more synthetic language, in which grammatical relationships within and between phrases or clauses were expressed through inflections, to a more analytic language, in which those relationships became largely expressed by word-order and prepositions. However, as Horobin & Smith (90) emphasise, ME cannot be said to have become a purely analytic language, but to be in an intermediate position on the synthesis/analysis cline.

The two most important changes that occurred in the evolution of the morphology of the preterite from OE to ME are the weakening and subsequent loss of person and number inflection, and the analogical development of some verbal forms. On the one hand, in order to account for the factors intervening in the former process, reference is normally made to the phonetic or syntactic changes that affected the linguistic system. On the other hand, as regards the latter change, it is normally explained as the result of an irregular tendency that produced regularity in paradigms, which McMahon calls *systematic analogy*.

However, little or no mention is made to the cognitive factors that could have influenced these changes. It must be pointed out that the aim of this work is not to deny the validity and correctness of any previous account of these morphological changes coming from the field of historical linguistics, but to suggest a complementary pragmatic approach which could contribute to a better and more accurate understanding of the cognitive factors that could have favoured those changes. In order to do so, this paper will be based on the two main ideas proposed by Sperber & Wilson (*Relevance (1986); Relevance (1995)*) and Wilson & Sperber (“Relevance”) that underlie most of the research on grammar under the Relevance Theory [RT henceforth] framework, namely, their “[...] proposal of a balance between interest and effort, which guides hearers in the selection of a (first and only) appropriate interpretation of utterances, together with the importance of [their] proposal of an enrichment of the logical form of utterances in the search for this interpretation [...]” (Yus Ramos 237).

A wider picture of the morphological changes undergone by the verb could be obtained if what happened in the present indicative and in the subjunctive mood were to be also considered. However, this paper will focus only on the morphological evolution of the preterite indicative tense, since an analysis of the changes occurred in the subjunctive would have to address other issues that go well beyond its scope.¹ The structure is as follows: firstly, the formation of the

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¹ For a similar explanation of the morphological evolution of the present indicative, see Padilla Cruz (“Relevance Theory”), and for an RT discussion on the subjunctive, see Jary, Sperber and Wilson (*Relevance (1986), Relevance (1995) 180*) or Wilson and Sperber (“Mood”).

preterite in both OE and ME will be briefly presented; then, a short summary will be offered of the most common explanations provided by the field of historical linguistics of the aforementioned changes. Obviously, it should be borne in mind that those changes took some time to develop, that they did not affect all the regions in which English was spoken in the same way, and that there were usually great differences between the oral realisations of the language, more open to innovations, and its written realisations, more stable or conservative. When examples are given, they will be taken from the dialect of Wessex, which is the variety of the bulk of written OE records and the literary standard in the Anglo-Saxon period.² After this, the basic postulates of RT (Sperber & Wilson, *Relevance* (1986); *Relevance* (1995); Wilson & Sperber, “Relevance”) will be introduced, and, finally, a proposal to understand those changes from an RT viewpoint will be suggested.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF INDICATIVE PRETERITE FROM OE TO ME

2.1. THE FORMATION OF THE PRETERITE IN OE

The inflection of the verb in Germanic languages was much simpler than it was in Indo-European [IE henceforth] times, and, at the same time, in OE it was much simpler than in Germanic. OE had three moods (indicative, subjunctive and imperative), and it also had the usual distinctions for the two numbers (singular and plural) and for the three grammatical persons. However, OE only distinguished two simple tenses by means of inflection: a present and a past. As was the case with other Germanic languages, it also had two types of verbs: weak and strong.

On the one hand, weak verbs formed the past tense by adding a dental suffix to the verb stem, which was realised as *-ede*, *-ode*, or *-de*.³ This suffix was derived from the grammaticalisation of the Proto-IE verb **dhe/dho* (“to do,” “to put”), which was added to verbal stems to mark the past tense (e.g. Horobin & Smith 115; García García 203; Lass, 125). There were three classes of weak verbs in OE. The first included those verbs with the infinitive ending in *-an* (*-ian* after [r]) and with the preterite ending *—(e)de*. The second class contained verbs whose infinitive ended in *-ian* and with the preterite ending *-ode*. The third class grouped verbs such as *habban*, *libban*, *secgan*, or *hycgan*. The following table illustrates the three different classes of weak verbs (Pyles & Algeo 125):

² For dialectal variation, see Fernández Cuesta & Rodríguez Ledesma.

³ This suffix could change to *-t* by assimilation to the previous consonant of the stem.



TABLE 1. OE WEAK VERBS

	INFINITIVE	PRETERITE	PAST PARTICIPLE
Class I	Fremman	Fremede	gefremed
	Ferian	Freed	gefered
	Pencan	Þohte ⁴	geþoht
Class II	Endian	Endode	geendod
Class III	Habban	Hæfde	gehæfd

On the other hand, strong verbs formed their past tense by means of gradation or *ablaut* in the stem vowel. This variation in the stressed vowel derives from alternations already present in Proto-IE, based on a pattern according to which front vowels were used to indicate present or progressive aspect and back vowels marked past tense or perfect aspect (e.g. García García 194-198; Horobin & Smith 114). In OE strong verbs, the first and third person singular had the same stem vowel, whereas the second person singular and all the persons of the plural had another vowel. These verbs are normally grouped in seven general classes.⁵ While there are variations within each class, they may be illustrated by the following table (adapted from Pyles and Algeo 126-127), which shows their main parts:

TABLE 2. OE STRONG VERBS

	INFINITIVE	PRETERITE SINGULAR	PRETERITE PLURAL	PAST PARTICIPLE
Class I	Ridan	Rad	ridon	geriden
Class II	(1) Cleofan	Cleaf	clufon	geclofen
	(2) Scufan	Sceaf	scufon	gescofen
	Ceosan	Ceas	curon	gecoren ⁶
Class III	(1) drincan	Dranc	druncon	gedruncon
	(2) helpan	Healp	hulpon	geholpen
	(3) feohtan	feaht	fuhton	gefohten
Class IV	beran	bær	bæron	geboren
Class V	(1) metan	mæt	mæton	gemeten
	(2) gifan	geaf	geafon	gegifen
Class VI	(1) faran	for	foron	gefaren
	(2) standan	stod	stodon	gestanden
Class VII	(1) cnawan	cneow	cneowon	gecnawen
	feallan	feoll	feollon	gefallen
	(2) hatan	het	heton	gehaten
	slæpan	slep	slepon	geslæpen

⁴ The macrons conventionally used in many textbooks to mark vowel length have been omitted in all the quoted forms.

⁵ However, authors such as Fennell (69), prefer only six classes of strong verbs.

⁶ The change from [s] to [r] in the preterite plural and in the past participle was the result of Verner's Law. In these forms, the Indo-European accent fell on the ending rather than on the stem of the word, thus creating the necessary conditions for rhotacism to take place.

As regards the endings for the preterite, to both weak and strong verbs were added the inflectional morphs shown in the following table (adapted from Görlach, 1997: 67):

TABLE 3. OE ENDINGS FOR THE PRETERITE		
PERSON	WEAK VERBS	STRONG VERBS
1sg.	-e	∅
2sg.	-est	-e
3sg.	-e	∅
Pl.	-on	-on

2.2. THE EVOLUTION OF THE PAST TENSE IN ME

In ME verbs continued to be divided into strong and weak, since the gradational distinctions expressed in the stem vowels of strong verbs were fully preserved. However, three great changes took place in the preterite in this historical period of the evolution of English:

- a) The vowels of the endings were weakened and the endings levelled as a result of a general tendency to fix the lexical stress on the first syllable of words, which drew attention away from the final syllables, where inflectional information was to be found. Thus, final [n] disappeared and vowels became [↔], which would also disappear later on (e.g. Blake 150; Burrow & Turville-Petre 20-21; Fennell 101; Fernández Cuesta & Rodríguez Ledesma; Freeborn 86; García García 216; Lass 135; Leith, “Origins” 118). As Horobin & Smith (132) explain, this tendency had already begun during the Proto-Germanic period because of linguistic contact with non-IE languages, and was increased because of contact with Old Norse [ON henceforth], particularly in the North and the North Midlands. In fact, inflectional innovations seem to have always been more advanced in those areas where linguistic contact took place, and they expanded from there towards the South. The endings added to mark person distinctions in ME in the past tense are illustrated by the following table⁷:

TABLE 4. ME ENDINGS FOR THE PRETERITE		
PERSON	WEAK VERBS	STRONG VERBS
1 sg.	-e	-∅
2 sg.	-est	-e
3 sg.	-e	-∅
Pl.	-∅/-en/-e	-e/-en

⁷ For dialectal variations in the preterite endings, see Blake (151), Burrow and Turville-Petre (32-33), Fernández Cuesta & Rodríguez Ledesma, Horobin & Smith (117-118) or Lass (136-138), among others.

An immediate consequence of this process was the development of a more fixed word-order in which the subject tended to precede the verb, so that word-order took over the grammatical function of inflection (e.g. Horobin & Smith 132). Closely related to this, pronoun-differences became even more important in discourse terms during ME. Therefore, the pronominal system had to be modified by means of the introduction of Scandinavian forms for the third person plural, as there was also a certain phonological confusion between the original OE forms for that person in the North (Fernández Cuesta & Rodríguez Ledesma; García García 214; Horobin & Smith 133; Padilla Cruz, “Relevance-Theoretic”). Nevertheless, García García (213) comments that the use of explicit subjects for plural verbs was already necessary in OE, and that it had almost become obligatory in the first and second person singular. Accordingly, the use of subject personal pronouns might have been well extended before the total disappearance of personal endings in the plural in Proto-OE. Otherwise, this disappearance would not have been possible because of the resulting grammatical ambiguity.

- b) Although some of the verbs maintained the OE four-grade distinction, (as shown in Table 5), there was a tendency to use exclusively one or the other of the preterite vowel grades. Lass (131) mentions that this reduction started with the levelling of the past singular under the vowel of the first and third person singular, thus setting a contrast between the singular and the plural forms. Later on, number opposition in the past was eliminated by the selection of the vowel of the older plural or of the singular for the whole tense. However, as Pyles & Algeo point out, “The older distinction [...] was more likely to be retained in the Midlands and the South than in the North” (160). Although, as in the case of the previous change, the Northern variety was more innovative, by 1450 the unification of the vowels in the preterite was completed in all dialects (García García 198; Lass 132-133).

TABLE 5. ME STRONG VERBS

	INFINITIVE	PRETERITE SINGULAR	PRETERITE PLURAL	PAST PARTICIPLE
Class I	ride(n)	Rod	riden	(i)ride(n)
Class II	crepen	crep	crupen	cropen
Class III	finden	fond	founden	founden
	helpen	halp	hulpen	holpen
	fighten	faught	foughten	foughten
Class IV	teren	Tar	teren	toren
Class V	meten	mat	meten	meten
Class VI	faren	For	foren	faren
Class VII	fallen	Fel	felen	fallen
	hoten	Het	heten	hoten

According to Blake (1996: 150), Ekwall (1980: 99) or García García (2001: 198), in some cases the preterite singular could take over the vowel of the

plural when the participle had the same vowel as the preterite plural. Nonetheless, there was little consistency: the vowel of the past participle was also extended in some cases to the preterite; there were dialectal peculiarities, such as doublets —ran/runnen— for the preterite plural (e.g. Burrow & Turville-Petre, 1996: 35; García García, 2001: 198-202; Lass, 1992: 132), and some verbs were subjected to influence from one class to another. For instance, Baugh & Cable (1993: 160-161) exemplify that one of the verbs that was influenced by another class is Present-day English [PDE henceforth] “to slay,” which in OE had the forms *slean-slog-slogon-slægen*. This verb would have evolved to **slea-slough-slain*, but the present tense was reformed from the past participle, and its past tense “slew” is due to analogy with other preterites such as “blew” or “grew.” Table 6 reflects the levelling of forms within the same class that took place in ME (adapted from Görlach, 1997: 73):

TABLE 6. LEVELLING OF VERBS IN ME⁸

	OLD ENGLISH		MIDDLE ENGLISH
Class I	Risan		risen
	ras		ros
	rison	∅	↓ rosen
	gerisen		risen
Class II	ceosan		cesen
	ceas		↓ ces
	curon	∅	cesen
	gecoren		coren, cosen
Class III	findan		finden
	fand		↑ fond, found
	fundon		founden
	gefunden		founden
Class IV	beran		beren
	bær		↓ bar
	bæron	∅	beren
	geboren		boren
Class V	sprecan		speken
	spræc		↓ spak
	spræcon	∅	speken
	gesprecen	∅	spoken

c) Finally, there were also cases of *hybridisation*, since some forms of one strong class were transferred to another class, as in “given” and “spoken,” which reflect transfer from class IV to class V (Baugh & Cable 133; Blake 151;

⁸ “∅” indicates the verb forms that were lost in the later evolution of English and the arrows point in the direction of analogical levelling.

García García 198; Lass 133). Besides, the strong conjugation lost some of its verbs, for they acquired the dental suffix in the course of ME to form the preterite by analogy with the considerably larger group of weak verbs, as in the case of *gliden*, *crepen*, *sheren*, *meten*, *aken*, or *wepen*. Other strong verbs were rare in OE or had to compete with weak verbs with similar meaning, as *stope/stepped*, *rewe/rowed*, *clew/clawed*, *holp/helped*, (Baugh & Cable 158-159; Blake 151; García García 202-203; Lass 133). Baugh & Cable (160) regard these changes as a gain because of the difficulty the irregularity of such verbs constituted in the language, and Burrow & Turville-Petre (31) and García García (198-203) mention that they were due to the fact that new verbs formed from nouns and adjectives or borrowed from other languages were regularly conjugated as weak.

2.3. COMMON EXPLANATIONS FOR THE CHANGES IN THE PRETERITE

The three changes explained in the previous section have often been accounted for from a traditional viewpoint “[...] as the result of a highly complex cooperation of sound changes, syntactic changes, and analogical changes” (Moore, 1968: 228). However, following Leith (“Origins” 118), it is necessary to distinguish between the internal and external causes for these changes.

2.3.1. *Internal Causes*

As Leith (“Origins” 118) comments, it has been rather usual for 19th century and many modern philologists and linguists to conceive linguistic change as the result of the inherent nature of a language, as if it were an organism that has its own natural tendencies. However, modern linguists prefer to consider language as a system that can be reorganised or restructured if there are crucial changes that affect it in a serious way.

Thus, the placement of lexical stress on the initial syllable of words resulted in the weakening of inflections, with the subsequent loss of distinctions for grammatical person and number (Blake 150; Burrow & Turville-Petre 20-21; Fennell 101; Fernández Cuesta & Rodríguez Ledesma; Freeborn 86; García García 216; Lass 135; Leith 118), as can be appreciated from a comparison of tables 3 and 4, where the graphic representations of inflections evidence their phonological weakening in the plural forms of strong verbs and their disappearance in weak ones. This change was related to the development of a more fixed word-order and the tendency to place the subject before the verb, which would become “therapeutic” devices that compensated for the weakening and loss of inflections (García García 214; Horobin & Smith 133; Padilla Cruz, “Relevance-Theoretic”). As regards the changes based on analogy, they are examples of what McMahon (71) calls *systematic analogy*. Analogy is an irregular process that produces regularity in a paradigm, since it tries to maintain the link between sounds and meanings “[...] by keeping



sound structure, grammatical structure and semantic structure in line, especially when sound change might have made their relationship opaque” (McMahon 70).

On the one hand, there were cases of *analogical extension* (McMahon 71) in those strong verbs that took the dental suffix to form their preterite form (e.g. *gliden*, *crepen*), and in those verbs that were influenced by others belonging to a different class (the case of PDE “to slay”). On the other hand, there were examples of *analogical levelling* (McMahon 73), because there were verb stems that were reorganised so as to display the same sound, such as *ceosan-ceas-curon-(ge)coren*, which in ME evolved to *cesen-ces-cesen-coren/cosen*. By means of the re-establishment of a sound that had changed during a previous stage of the evolution of the language because of rhotacism the semantic relationship between the forms of the verb was made clearer (McMahon 74; Trask 109). In relation to this, Leith correctly states that “In using the different forms of a verb [...], it is suggested that speakers will be reminded of other verbs which are similar in some parts of the pattern, but not others; thus, verbs originally belonging to different verb classes are blended in the mind of the speakers, and new forms for those verbs, based on parts of the pattern of vowel changes in other verbs, are created” (*Social* 105).

Nevertheless, Leith (“Origins” 119) also points out that it is not enough to explain the evolution of a language or to account for some of its changes by relying only on the linguistic system itself. A more complete approach must deal with other questions and factors that might have intervened, such as how or why a particular change takes place or is adopted by speakers. In this sense, there are explanations that incorporate the role played by external factors such as linguistic contact.

2.3.2. *External Causes*

Although some scholars (e.g. Fennell) have argued that the influence exerted by linguistic contact between OE and ON was not deep enough —except in the lexicon, for many words were introduced in the English inventory in order to express or distinguish meanings in a more precise way— there is a widely extended opinion that contact between these two languages was crucial for the evolution from OE to ME. Thus, Freeborn (86), Leith (*Social* 12; “Origins” 119), Poussa, Rodríguez Redondo (410-414) or Tejada Caller (112-144) sustain that the effect of the Viking settlement in the Danelaw must have been an important factor that hastened the abandonment of the OE inflectional differences. The new forms that originated in that area and along its borders would have been gradually spread in popular speech.

These authors believe that in a contact situation where the dialects or varieties spoken were of similarly low prestige and largely unused in writing, it was quite likely that the two languages were mutually intelligible, that speakers were bilingual or used a kind of pidgin to communicate. This pidgin would have been a rather simplified version of one or the other language, to which speakers resorted for specific purposes. In those conditions, there would have been pressure to level inflections, above all, in contexts where verbal interaction had to be fast and effi-





cient. As Rodríguez Redondo (415) explains, the simplification of the inflectional system in the Danelaw would have caused a great syncretism, so that several grammatical functions were encoded through one single linguistic element which, therefore, became polyfunctional. This process of simplification affected those linguistic elements that were not very important or were regarded as superfluous, for their elimination would not hinder verbal understanding. However, those linguistic elements considered important and necessary by speakers were still maintained in the system and linguistically encoded.

On the contrary, Görlach (“Middle”) thinks that the linguistic system resulting from that contact situation in the Danelaw and along its borders was neither a pidgin nor a creole. Although he considers that these two concepts have not been yet clearly defined and distinguished, he believes that a creole normally evolves from a pidgin when speakers acquire and retain in a stable way the features of a pidgin, whose range of usage they expand as a consequence of nativeness. Instead, he prefers to treat that system as a *creoloid* that arose through the fossilisation of inadequately learnt patterns, with a lower degree of stability than that of stable pidgins. The evidence he adduces is that verbs in creoles do not have tense—with speaker deixis—but tend to have some features of events and their sequence indicated by pre-verbal markers that are never represented by inflectional morphemes. By contrast, ME retained the OE tense system and marked tense by means of inflection, making it even more explicit in those verbs in which the distinction was in danger of being lost. According to Görlach (“Middle” 76), what happened in the development of English can be explained as a reduction of the redundancy inherent in OE, and there was never a drastic break between two different linguistic systems, which is the most remarkable feature of pidgins. Although this hypothesis has been adhered to by other authors (e.g. Tejada Caller; Danchev postulates that ME was not definitely a creole and does not regard the term *creoloid* satisfactory, because these terms are associated with interlanguage at a very early stage of second language acquisition. For that reason, he prefers to speak about the existence of “creolisation-like processes.”

Without going into further details about the debate on the real nature of ME, what the works of these authors have shown is that the linguistic contact between OE and ON led to a morphological simplification that increased the rapidity and facility of verbal interaction. However, as Rodríguez Redondo (416-417) puts it, although verbal understanding was made easier by the elimination of many different morphemes, it was at the same time made more difficult by the conceptual load projected onto very few linguistic elements. This involves a tendency contrary to the principle of iconicity “one form-one function,” and also increases considerably the interlocutors’ processing effort because of the different interpretations available for a few grammatical elements. Therefore, the progressive loss of iconicity had to be offset gradually through the development of other devices that transmitted the grammatical information essential for a correct understanding.

As previously stated, the aim of this paper is to offer a pragmatic interpretation of the changes in the preterite in the light of RT (Sperber & Wilson, *Rel-*

evance (1986); *Relevance* (1995); Wilson & Sperber, “Relevance”), not to deny the validity of the explanations discussed so far but because its postulates on communication may contribute to a more accurate understanding of the cognitive factors that could have underlain the morphological evolution in this verbal tense. For this reason, in the following section the most important ideas of RT (Sperber & Wilson, *Relevance* (1986); *Relevance* (1995); Wilson & Sperber, “Relevance”) will be summarised and a proposal in line with them will be offered.

3. TOWARDS AN RT EXPLANATION OF THE MORPHOLOGICAL CHANGES IN THE PRETERITE FROM OE TO ME

3.1. RT AND COMMUNICATION

RT (Sperber & Wilson, *Relevance* (1986); *Relevance* (1995); Wilson & Sperber, “Relevance”) does not conceive communication as a mere process of encoding and decoding, but as an *ostensive-inferential* process in which the speaker produces an utterance, which is an ostensive stimulus aimed at drawing the addressee’s attention towards a particular set of assumptions she wants to communicate. In this process, the task of the addressee is to discover what the speaker intended to say, what she intended to imply, and her intended attitude to what was said and implied (e.g. Wilson, “Relevance” 337-341). In order to find out what the speaker intended to say, the hearer uses his knowledge of the language, his grammatical knowledge, which provides him with the range of linguistically possible interpretations of every utterance, although it will not tell him the exact interpretation that is intended on any particular occasion.

Every utterance is seen as communicating a set of assumptions, some explicitly, and others implicitly. Therefore, what the speaker intended to say is seen as belonging to the explicit side of communication. For the hearer to discover what was said by the utterance, he will have to decode its sense, disambiguate any ambiguous expression, assign reference to referential expressions, restore any ellipsed material, and narrow down the interpretation of vague expressions (e.g. Wilson, “Relevance” 338).

In their model, Sperber & Wilson (*Relevance* (1986); *Relevance* (1995)) and Wilson & Sperber (“Relevance”) envisage utterance interpretation as a two-phase process. The first one is a modular decoding phase that provides the linguistically encoded *logical form* of the utterance, i.e. a structured set of constituents that is used in the mental operations taking place during comprehension (Sperber & Wilson, *Relevance* (1986); *Relevance* (1995) 72). This logical form is not fully propositional because its truth-value cannot be established. So it must be developed and enriched through an inferential process in which the hearer must resort to contextual information until it becomes fully propositional. When the hearer obtains a fully propositional form, he is able to construct a hypothesis about the speaker’s *informative intention*, i.e. the set of assumptions she wants to make manifest to him. The authors (Sperber & Wilson, *Relevance* (1986); *Relevance* (1995)),



181; Wilson & Sperber, “Linguistic” 1) argue that the result of this process of enriching a linguistically encoded logical form to a point where it expresses a certain proposition is the construction of the *explicature* of the utterance, which is “[...] a combination of linguistically encoded and contextually inferred conceptual features” (Sperber & Wilson, *Relevance* (1995) 182). The lower the contribution of contextual information, the more explicit the explicature of an utterance will be, and, conversely, the higher the contribution of contextual information, the less explicit it will be. Thus, Wilson & Sperber (“Truthfulness”) distinguish between *strong* and *weak* explicatures. The identification of the explicatures of an utterance relies heavily on non-demonstrative inference, so the hearer has a certain degree of responsibility when he relates the contextual assumptions manifest in his cognitive environment. This responsibility and the level of (in)determinacy of the explicature of an utterance vary depending on the utterance itself: “Explicatures can be weaker or stronger, depending on the degree of indeterminacy introduced by the inferential aspect of comprehension” (Wilson & Sperber “Truthfulness” 619).

The explicature the hearer has to recover for the correct understanding of an utterance must be the one the speaker intended to communicate. In order to do so, he is guided by the expectations of *relevance* the utterance generates. This assumption is captured in the Communicative Principle of Relevance, according to which every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance (Sperber & Wilson, *Relevance* (1995) 260). This Principle governs utterance interpretation and makes an individual select a particular interpretation from different possibilities. It is grounded on a human tendency that makes people search for an optimal level of relevance, which is captured in the Cognitive Principle of Relevance: “Human cognition is oriented towards the maximisation of relevance” (Sperber & Wilson, *Relevance* (1995) 260).

In turn, relevance is a property of ostensive stimuli defined by the authors in terms of *contextual effects* and *processing/cognitive effort*. On the one hand, contextual effects are achieved when newly-presented information interacts in a context of existing assumptions by *strengthening* previous assumptions, *contradicting* and eliminating them, or yielding *contextual implications*, i.e. information that can only be derived from the interaction of both new and old information stored in memory. On the other hand, processing effort is the mental effort needed to obtain contextual effects; it depends mainly on two factors: the effort of memory to construct a suitable context in which to interpret utterances and the psychological complexity of utterances. Some causes for the psychological complexity of utterances can be their linguistic structure, or the occurrence of words that are more difficult to process or less frequently encountered than others (Wilson, “Relevance” 345-348). Greater complexity implies greater processing effort and detracts from relevance.

As mentioned above, every utterance can have a variety of interpretations, all compatible with the information that is linguistically encoded. However, not all these interpretations occur to the hearer simultaneously, since some of them require more effort to think up. The order in which the possible interpretations of an utterance can occur to the hearer is to some extent predictable, although it is un-



likely to be the same for all addressees at all times. By virtue of the Communicative Principle of Relevance, a hearer chooses one interpretation of an utterance and believes that that is the most relevant interpretation the speaker can have communicated because its processing yields some contextual effects that offset his processing effort. In order to select that interpretation, he follows the interpretative path that requires the least effort when testing his interpretative hypotheses in order of accessibility and he stops when his expectations of relevance are satisfied. Wilson (“Metarepresentation” 136) calls this the *relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure*. This procedure is also applied to the recovery of the implicatures of an utterance, i.e. to the recovery of its implicit meaning through a combination of implicated premises and conclusions that the speaker may communicate in a stronger or weaker way.

Once the hearer recovers the explicature of an utterance, he can optionally embed it under a higher-level description, such as a description of the speech act performed by the speaker or of her attitude towards the propositional content of the utterance. According to Sperber & Wilson (*Relevance* (1986); *Relevance* (1995) 182), an utterance does not only linguistically communicate a proposition, but also all its *higher-level explicatures*. As the authors (Wilson & Sperber, “Linguistic” 5) exemplify, an utterance such as Mary’s reply in (1) can have several different explicatures, as illustrated in (2):

- (1) *Peter*: Can you help me?
Mary: I can’t.
- (2) a. Mary can’t help Peter to find a job.
b. Mary says she can’t help Peter to find a job.
c. Mary believes she can’t help Peter to find a job.
d. Mary regrets that she can’t help Peter to find a job.

3.2. THE CONCEPTUAL/PROCEDURAL DISTINCTION

As mentioned in the previous section, among the *primary* pragmatic processes the hearer must perform in order to recover the explicature of an utterance—processes known as *saturation* (Carston, “Relevance”; Récanati, “What”)⁹— he must disambiguate the speaker’s utterance, for in most cases the underlying syntactic structure can have a wide array of semantic interpretations, all of which are grammatically possible and valid. This disambiguation involves, among other things, establishing the temporal relations between the different events described by means

⁹ Primary pragmatic processes are compulsory, whereas *secondary* pragmatic processes are optional and their result is the enriching of some linguistic elements present in the proposition, as in the case of metaphors, homonyms, polysemous or synonymous words (Carston, “Enrichment”; “Relevance”; *Thoughts*; “Metaphor”; Wilson, “Linguistic”; Wilson & Sperber, “Pragmatics”).



of the tense of the verbal forms used (e.g. Carston, “Implicature”; Smith), or establishing the relationship between the juxtaposed or co-ordinated clauses in the utterance (e.g. Blakemore & Carston; Carston, “Implicature”; “Conjunction”; *Thoughts*; “Truth-Conditional”). Furthermore, the hearer must also assign a reference to referential elements such as pronouns, which encode a *schematic conceptual* meaning and a *procedural* meaning that help him find a specific reference (e.g. Blakemore, “So”; Wilson, “Linguistic”; Wilson & Sperber, “Linguistic”).

Within the framework of RT (*Relevance* (1986); *Relevance* (1995); Wilson & Sperber, “Relevance”), a very important contribution has been the distinction between *conceptual* and *procedural* meaning. Utterances express propositions, which are conceptual representations, and those propositions have truth conditions. In the inferential phase of comprehension the hearer constructs and manipulates those conceptual representations. Thus, as Sperber & Wilson (*Relevance* (1986); *Relevance* (1995)), Wilson & Sperber (“Relevance”) and Blakemore (*Semantic*; “So”) argue, utterances can be expected to encode two basic types of information: representational and computational, or, in other words, conceptual and procedural information. This means, as Wilson & Sperber put it, “[...] information about the representations to be manipulated, and information about how to manipulate them” (“Linguistic” 2).

A conceptual representation has logical properties, since it enters into entailment or contradiction relations, and can act as the input to logical inference rules. But it also has truth-conditional properties, since it can describe or characterise a state of affairs. While conceptual representations can be brought to consciousness, procedures cannot, since human beings do not have direct access to grammatical computations or to the inferential computations used in comprehension (Wilson & Sperber, “Linguistic” 16). Moreover, these two types of information, as Wilson & Sperber (“Linguistic” 2) point out, cross-cut each other, since there are truth-conditional constructions that encode concepts, truth-conditional constructions that encode procedures, non-truth-conditional constructions that encode procedures, and non-truth-conditional constructions that encode concepts.

The class of truth-conditional constructions that encode concepts includes manner adverbials such as “seriously” or “frankly,” since they encode concepts which are constituents of the proposition expressed by the utterance, and hence contribute to the truth conditions of the utterance. The class of non-truth-conditional constructions that encode conceptual meaning groups various types of sentence adverbials, in addition to illocutionary adverbials such as “seriously” or “frankly” (Ifantidou-Trouki; Itani; Tanaka), or *hearsay* particles (Blass, “Pragmatic”; *Relevance*; Itani). These elements help the hearer recover the speaker’s attitude towards the propositional content of the utterance. Then, they encode concepts which are constituents not of the proposition expressed, but of the higher-level explicatures of the utterance. Among the class of non-truth-conditional constructions that encode procedures are discourse connectives such as “so” or “after all,” which encode procedural constraints on the implicatures of utterances (Blakemore, *Semantic*; *Language*; “So”). Finally, within the class of both truth-conditional and procedural expressions Wilson & Sperber (“Linguistic” 20-21) include personal pronouns:



“Pronouns impose constraints on *explicatures*: they guide the search for the intended referent, which is part of the proposition expressed” (Wilson & Sperber, “Linguistic” 21).

As has been observed, Sperber & Wilson (*Relevance* 1986; *Relevance* 1995) and Wilson & Sperber (“Relevance”) conceive the explicit side of communication as a terrain where the operation of pragmatics processes is necessary and, therefore, as a field liable for pragmatic research. These authors and other RT practitioners have successfully shown that the recovery of explicatures is an inferential task previous to the comprehension of utterances in which the hearer may act with the help provided by some linguistic elements because of their conceptual and/or procedural meaning. As a consequence, it seems adequate to forget the twofold distinction between “what is said” and “what is implied” proposed by Grice (1975) in favour of a threefold one that differentiates (i) the semantic meaning of an utterance, which amounts to its logical form; (ii) what is said, constituted by its explicature, and (iii) what is communicated, which includes its implicatures (e.g. Récanati, “Pragmatics” 99).

3.3. CHANGES IN THE PRETERITE: AN RT ACCOUNT

As mentioned above, a more complete account of any change in the evolution of the English language should also incorporate considerations about the pragmatic factors that might have underlain or favoured that change. Therefore, in this section an explanation of the phenomena that took place in the evolution of the preterite tense from OE to ME is proposed, following the theoretical postulates defended by Sperber & Wilson (*Relevance* 1986; *Relevance* 1995) and Wilson & Sperber (“Relevance”) and the distinctions drawn by Wilson & Sperber (“Linguistic”). In short, this explanation is based on the notion of processing effort as a factor that influences the relevance of an utterance, and on the existence of linguistic elements that constrain the explicatures of an utterance.

Regarding the weakening and subsequent loss of person and number inflections (tables 3 and 4), it is reasonable to argue that this was possible because there was a loss of procedural and schematic conceptual meaning. Accordingly, inflections can be hypothesised to have encoded both a procedural and a schematic conceptual meaning in OE that guided the hearer in the primary pragmatic process of search for a referent for the subject that performs the action expressed by the verb. Thus, inflections can be said to have imposed constraints on the explicatures of the utterances in which they were present in a similar way as personal pronouns do in PDE. However, as opposed to personal pronouns, inflections would have encoded a more schematic conceptual meaning, for they only contained information about the grammatical person and number of the subject. Should they have made distinctions for gender as well, they would also have had the same function and status as pronouns.

Obviously, the placement of the lexical stress on the first syllable of words and the subsequent phonological reduction or complete loss of final unstressed



vowels and final [n], and the development of a more fixed word-order in which subject personal pronouns or noun phrases preceded the verb played a crucial role in this loss of procedural and schematic conceptual meaning. In fact, García García (213) comments that the use of an explicit subject for plural verbs was already necessary in OE and that it was almost the rule for first and second person singular verbs. Moreover, García García (214), Horobin & Smith (133) and Padilla Cruz (“Relevance-Theoretic”) explain that the introduction of Scandinavian forms for the third person plural was aimed at solving the phonological confusions that arose between the different OE forms for that grammatical person. By doing so, the linguistic system had already preserved and secured the possibility of having explicatures recovered in an unambiguous way, so it was no longer necessary to encode that procedural and schematic conceptual meaning again. What must still be discussed is whether that loss of procedural meaning happened in the transition from OE to ME or whether it was already taking place in OE. One powerful reason to think that it was happening in OE is that explicit subjects were required in that period, so this loss might have occurred then.

In the same way, the cases of analogical levelling in which the paradigms of some strong verbs were re-organised so as to display the same sound in both the preterite singular and plural (OE *ceosan-ceas-curon-(ge)coren* vs. ME *cesen-cesesen-coren/cosen*) could also be accounted for in terms of a loss of procedural and schematic conceptual meaning. In OE the different gradational series of the preterite could be postulated to have encoded that meaning, since they informed the hearer about the subject of the action expressed by the verb. The first vowel of the series would indicate that the subject was either first or third person singular, whereas the second vowel of the series would show that the subject was either second person singular or one of the three persons of the plural. Thus, the different vowel grades also imposed constraints on the recovery of the explicatures of utterances. Since in the evolution towards ME personal pronouns acquired that function, it could be sustained that in those verbs whose paradigm was levelled so as to unify their stem vowel, the different vowels of the gradational series lost their procedural and schematic conceptual meaning.

In the case of inflections, it has been mentioned that Rodríguez Redondo (416-417) maintains that their elimination could have either facilitated or hindered verbal understanding because of the conceptual load projected over a limited number of linguistic elements. In turn, this could have increased the processing effort hearers had to invest in order to select one of the different possible interpretations of those elements. However, the changes in the word-order and the placement of explicit subjects before verbs were aimed at establishing a satisfactory level of processing effort when recovering explicatures. Moreover, if grammatical constituents such as subject pronouns or noun phrases, which allowed the recovery of the subject of the utterance, were already present in utterances, it would have been redundant to have other elements with similar procedural and schematic conceptual meaning that made possible the search for their explicatures. Thus, the retention of verbal inflections together with those constituents would have increased the hearers’ processing effort, for they would have had to process elements whose gram-



matical function was practically the same—to restrict the performer of the action—and those elements would have been confusing because of the phonological reduction they had undergone. As Sperber & Wilson (*Relevance* 1986; *Relevance* 1995) and Wilson & Sperber (“Relevance”) contend, utterance interpretation is governed by relevance, and relevance is conditioned by contextual effects and processing effort. Therefore, the loss of inflections might be understood as a process aimed at diminishing or establishing a satisfactory level of processing effort either by not processing elements with a similar function or by not having to disambiguate confusing linguistic elements.

Similarly, in the case of the gradational series, it could also be hypothesised that the existence of one grade for the two persons of the singular and another for both the second person singular and the three persons of the plural in OE preterite would have involved a certain degree of psychological complexity for the hearer because both of them were used to express the same temporal information. The only feature that distinguished those vowel alternations was that they encoded different information about the grammatical person and number of the subject of the verb. This would have increased the hearer’s processing effort when interpreting the utterances in which those gradational distinctions occurred, which, at the same time, detracts from relevance.

As has been stated, in the change from OE to ME personal pronouns acquired the procedural and schematic conceptual meaning that inflections and the series of grades had in strong verbs. Consequently, there was no need to encode again those meanings that guided the search for the subject of the utterance by means of the different vowels of the stems for the preterite. Since that information had been encoded in personal pronouns, the distinction between the different grades in the preterite also became redundant. Keeping that distinction between the stems for the same tense would have involved more psychological effort when processing the utterances, an effort that was unnecessary since the grammatical information they encoded had been undertaken by the personal pronouns. Therefore, the tendency towards the reduction of processing effort would have underlain and favoured the levelling of the stems in one or the other of the directions indicated above in Table 6. As Ruiz Moneva correctly suggests,

The objective to lead towards the maximum possible understanding with the least possible effort would have also lied behind the grammatical simplification. [...] The aim here would have been to get the most important referential ideas, for which the inflectional endings must have been fairly superfluous. The faster elimination of these endings would also have been favoured by the *oral* character of the interchanges, in the sense that for this kind of context the effort conveyed in communication, which aims at referential content rather than at linguistic or formal accuracy, would be relevant. (190; emphasis in the original)

Finally, as regards the cases of analogical extensions of those strong verbs that took the dental suffix of the weak group to form their preterite form (e.g. *gliden*, *crepen*, *helpen*, *sheren*, *meten*, *aken*, or *wepen*), and those verbs that were influenced by others belonging to a different class—an influence that resulted in



the formation of the past tense according to a different pattern (e.g. PDE “to slay”)— an explanation can be attempted in terms of the same tendency towards the reduction of processing effort. On the one hand, as regards the strong verbs influenced by forms belonging to other classes of strong verbs, it could be hypothesised that this analogy was favoured by the fact that those verbs exerting the influence upon them were more frequently used and therefore more frequently processed by the speakers of the language. However, this is a rather risky statement which needs the support of further empirical research that compares data of occurrence of those verbs in both OE and ME. The main problem of such a study is that, obviously, it will have to rely on written records of the language, subject to different conventions, and not in naturally occurring verbal interaction.

On the other hand, concerning the group of strong verbs that took the dental suffix to form the preterite, it could also be argued that the alternation of different vowels in the stems of OE strong verbs implied an element of psychological complexity which increased the processing effort when interpreting an utterance in which they occurred. The different series of vowels no longer constrained the recovery of the explicatures of utterances because personal pronouns had acquired that function, and so the only information those grades encoded was temporal. As has been shown, OE, like other Germanic languages, resorted to a dental suffix to mark temporal distinctions. Moreover, the class of weak verbs was much larger than that of strong verbs, and recently introduced verbs derived from nouns followed the pattern of weak ones. Therefore, it could be thought that it would have been relatively easier for interlocutors to process the temporal information encoded in that dental suffix than to process the information encoded in the different grades. Since it was easier for them to process the information linguistically encoded in that suffix, it could be concluded that they extended the dental suffix progressively to some of the strong verbs.

However, before concluding, it must be acknowledged that a more complete explanation of the changes discussed in this paper from the point of view of RT (Sperber & Wilson, *Relevance* 1986; *Relevance* 1995; Wilson & Sperber, “Relevance”) should have also included some considerations about the possible contextual effects that hearers might have achieved (Wilson, personal communication). Although this was originally outside the scope of this paper, such an explanation could be pursued in the following terms.

It is commonly said that by means of language human beings establish relations of identity with the different members of a community that speak it or the same variety. Therefore, following Sperber & Wilson (*Relevance* 1986; *Relevance* 1995), Wilson & Sperber (“Linguistic”) and Pilkington, it could be thought that when the changes illustrated in this paper were present in the speech of a particular group of individuals, hearers could retrieve a whole range of weak implicatures to the effect that (i) the speakers were showing their ascription to a particular social group or class, (ii) that they had a certain register that allowed those changes, (iii) that they were intentionally deviating from the kind of English regarded as standard or, simply, (iv) that their aim was to convey the most important referential ideas, with little or no concern for grammatical accuracy. In other cases, those con-



textual effects could consist of the strengthening of other previously held assumptions, some of which might be so weakly manifest in the interlocutors' cognitive environment that they would not be aware of them. They could even involve the contradiction of other assumptions, such as that those speakers were using a variety of English regarded as correct or that they had a great concern for grammatical accuracy. Obviously, these contextual effects depended on the assumptions interlocutors entertained, their use as implicated premises or conclusions in inferential reasoning, and on the operation of the Communicative Principle of Relevance.

Nevertheless, it is too soon to conclude that this was really so, and all that can be done at present in relation to this is to make more or less credible hypotheses. What must be noted is that the contextual effects that hearers might have obtained could be similar to the *poetic effects* (Sperber & Wilson, *Relevance* (1995) 222; Pilkington) that an individual achieves when processing some types of utterances or of discourse.

4. CONCLUSION

As has been observed in this work, RT (*Relevance* 1986; *Relevance* 1995; Wilson & Sperber, "Relevance") can be a valid and very useful framework to reach a pragmatic explanation of some of the grammatical processes that have taken place in the history of the English language. The proposal of a contextual pragmatic enrichment of the logical form of utterances in order to recover their explicatures, together with the proposal of a balance between contextual effects and processing effort in order to achieve an optimal level of relevance, can contribute to a more accurate and complete understanding of the pragmatic factors underlying the evolution of English. Therefore, these valuable insights into communication should be incorporated in the field of historical linguistics, which has been traditionally dominated by phonologic, semantic or syntactic explanations of linguistic changes. If the pragmatic factors operating in utterance production and interpretation were to be considered, historical linguistics would undoubtedly gain a more comprehensive view of what lies behind some of the changes that have occurred across time.

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