

## Changes in the English Language from Synthetic to Analytic: An Argumentative Approach

By

**PhD Kadri Krasniqi**

AAB College, Prishtina, Kosovo

[kadri.krasniqi@universitetiaab.com](mailto:kadri.krasniqi@universitetiaab.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7943-0382>

**PhD Fatmir Ramadani**

AAB College, Prishtina, Kosovo

[fatmir.ramadani@universitetiaab.com](mailto:fatmir.ramadani@universitetiaab.com)

<mailto:https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8243-8828>

### Abstract

The debate upon whether present day English language is analytical is still ongoing, which is why the aim of this study was to determine whether the changes that the English language have gone through have allowed it to change from Synthetic to Analytic. In order to achieve this aim, two research questions were raised: 1. What changes have had an impact on the modern English language since Old English? 2. Is the English language really analytical today? This study was conducted by using qualitative data and the famous Rogerian Argumentative Method. The results showed that as much as English language still has some synthetic aspects, if one looked back all the way to Old English, it is understood that the analytical side of the language takes the lead. The analysis that the English language has had many changes, not just through history itself, but also through its grammar plays a significant role in answering the problem to this research paper.

**Keywords:** Synthetic, Analytic, English Language, Changes, Approach.

### Introduction

Synthetic and Analytic in the English language has been debated upon for quite some time. Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to bring back this discussion and try to find a definite answer as close as possible. A major reason why this topic is very important to the English language is due to the fact that it has been left unanswered. There is still no clear answer which can be relied upon. This position, together with Schlegel (1818) who once stated how typological changes in the English language deserve to be discussed, and that “no one interested in typological change in the history of English will manage to avoid the terms ‘analytic’ and ‘synthetic’” (as cited in Szmrecsanyi, 2012, p. 654). Moreover, another aim is to also argue (with the use of various facts) as to whether the changes that have affected the English Language really caused it to change from synthetic to analytic.

#### *Distinction between Synthetic and Analytic*

Before getting into detail, it is important to start by determining what synthetic and analytic really mean, especially when it comes to the English language. English has certainly evolved over time, this has been seen and proven by many authors like Baugh and Cable (2002) who strongly argue that the most fundamental feature that distinguishes Old English from the language of today lies inside its grammar, specifically - its inflection. Therefore, inflectional languages divide into two classes: ‘synthetic’ and ‘analytic’. Synthetic, consisting of a

language in which its words relate to one another as a result of inflection, while analytic, through the use of prepositions and auxiliary verbs.

### ***Research questions***

The purpose of this current study is dyadic **a)** to see what changes have had an impact on English since Old English, and **b)** to find out whether the English language is really analytic today. These questions will be answered by using the Rogerian Method, which provides an understanding towards both points of view, in order to find the correct answer through various materials and studies which have been conducted in the past.

## **Literature Review - Synthetic Usage**

The use of Synthetic phrasing in the English Language has been proven to take place in the English language even today. Gelderen (2016) who shows the main reasons and use of a synthetic language especially in English are the use of endings like in 'the table's leg', use of case to indicate subject 'De-r Mann sah einen Freund (German) - [the-NOM man saw his-ACC friend]'. He also states how "verbs are marked for tense and aspect, e.g. ge- on the verb marks perfective". Once compared to analytic English though, changes are spotted right away, for instance, the use of prepositions in today's English 'the leg of the table' or the use of word order as an indication to the subject 'The man saw his friend'" (p. 13) which in Analytic differ.

### ***Latest findings***

Despite the changes the English language has been through, inflection is still used in Modern English. This just goes to show why many scholars and linguists question as to which one English really is (analytic or synthetic). Potter and Crystal (2019) prove that English does not use inflection the way it used to, meaning in today's English "modern English nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and verbs are inflected. Adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections are invariable.". When it comes to nouns the main plural inflection is (-e)s, as said before especially in third person. Phonetics come in here as some are pronounced with a "Z", "S" and some even with a "IZ" depending on which word, for example we have "Cats" with an "s", dogs pronounced with a "z" and horses with an "iz".

Seven of the English nouns as Potter and Crystal (2019) show "have mutated (umlauted) plurals: man, men; woman, women; tooth, teeth; foot, feet; goose, geese; mouse, mice; louse, lice." and three other nouns have "plurals in -en: ox, oxen; child, children; brother, brethren." leaving three other nouns to remain untouchable like "deer", "deer", "sheep", "moose", "grouse". Pronouns, though, apart from five from the seven personal pronouns "have distinctive forms for subject and object (e.g., he/him, she/her)" and last but not least, adjectives that change whilst used for comparison and take up the ending - er for comparative and - est in superlative. If the verbs are taken a look at, it is noted that they use inflection in various cases:

The forms of verbs are not complex. Only the substantive verb (to be) has eight forms: be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been. Strong verbs have five forms: ride, rides, rode, riding, ridden. Regular or weak verbs customarily have four: walk, walks, walked, walking. Some that end in t or d have three forms only: cut, cuts, cutting (Potter and Crystal, 2019, p. 6).

## **Method**

The method used in this paper is one of the three well known argumentative methods: Rogerian Method. The reason for having chosen this method is because this topic has still not

been solved. Bearing in mind that a language is a living thing and is constantly changing which is why this method was best for the purpose of this paper. Purdue Online Writing Lab (n.d.)

states that “The Rogerian argument (or Rogerian rhetoric) is a form of argumentative reasoning that aims to establish a middle ground between parties with opposing viewpoints or goals.” It is hoped that through this paper the reader can find a balance and feel closer to the correct answer without completely taking away reasons that are relevant, but not completely in the sense that they fully answer our main question; which is finding whether today's English is analytic or not.

Apart from using the Rogerian's Method this paper is constructed by using various important and considerable material gathered from research papers and scientific analyses which makes this paper a qualitative one through the use of findings, texts and their meanings.

## **Results**

Even though German is still spoken using inflection, English on the other hand, has definitely simplified its inflection, and has gone the furthest in Europe for renewing its language. Baugh and Cable (2002) confirm this by stating:

The verb has been simplified by the loss of practically all the personal endings, the almost complete abandonment of any distinction between the singular and the plural, and the gradual discard of the subjunctive mood. The complicated agreements that make German difficult for the non- native speaker are absent from English (p.23).

The result of this grammatical change, is in fact a positive one as Hock and Joseph (1996) explain that the speakers of languages such as English are quite happy without all those case endings, while speakers of modern ‘case-rich’ language such as Finnish or Turkish are just as happy with them (as cited in Bough & Cable, 2002, p. 23).

Inflection does not create new lexemes it only changes the form of the lexeme meaning (number, person, tense etc.), English does have, and uses, eight types of inflection, but in order to explain in greater depth the loss of inflection and entrance of ‘analytic language’ in all aspects of the English language grammar and historical events must be considered.

The conjugation of words is a reason that caused English to lower its inflectional use, was discussed by Alegro (2010) who show that conjugation is one of the reasons that caused inflection to lose its usage. Even today inflectional endings are added, especially to verbs when past or progressive is formed but “Old English had several kinds of weak verbs and seven groups of strong verbs distinguished by their patterns of vowel change; and it had a considerably larger number of strong verbs than Modern English”. The writer discovered that “a fair number of irregular verbs in both the weak and strong categories” was frequent throughout the whole of English. Alegro also points out that If we compare this synthetic conjugation with the English that we have today, we will see that there is a difference, because in modern English the verb ‘keep’ (in present) stays the same apart from in third person where it gets the suffix - s - this though is not the case in Old English. The inflections we have today are only added when we change the tense (be it, past, present, future or third person) but other than that the verb most of the time stays the same.

As much as Old English may seem difficult to us compared to Modern English, it is a fact that when it came to nouns Old English was more simplified compared to German or Latin.

There was no Old English noun that had more than six forms, including both singular and plural, however to the speakers of Modern English this may still seem surprising given today's English only uses two forms, but back in the day this was the bare minimum. It is seen here that "As far as speech is concerned, guys, guy's, and guys' are all the same" but in Old English this was not the case, "Old English had a large number of patterns for declining its nouns, each of which is called a declension" (Alego, 2010, p.93).

Declensions in Old English differed from German, back in the day, and they are known as those in which 'survived' the inflectional transition but still differ from Modern English as Alego (2010) describes by stating the following:

Declensions or those that have survived somehow in Modern English. The most important of the Old English declensions was that of the a-stems, so called because a was the sound with which their stems ended in Proto-Germanic...The name for the declension has only historical significance as far as Old English is concerned...For example, Germanic \*wulfaz (nominative singular) and \*wulfan (accusative singular) had an a in their endings, but both those forms appeared in Old English simply as wulf 'wolf' (p.94).

Therefore, when it came to nouns, even when English was using inflection, it was using it in a

more simpler form only by changing a letter or two ('wulf' in today's wolf) whereas German stuck to the inflectional endings -az and an.

Campbell (1959), on the other hand, states that the loss of inflection is a result of the 'stress system' - meaning, the stress in old English was most of the time on the first syllable explaining the end words were not as important nor emphasised as much. This is seen and cited in O'Donnell (2012) where he displays the following:

In Germanic (the ancestor of Old English and other languages like German and Dutch), primary stress fell on the first syllable of all words. In Old English, this rule is largely preserved, meaning that primary stress falls on the first syllable of all simple words and most compounds: unnytt, 'useless'; giefu, 'gift'; standan, 'to stand'. The main exceptions, to this rule include the prefix ge-, which is never stressed, on any part of speech, e.g. gehwæs, 'of each'; gesittan, 'to sit'; gesceaft, 'creation' (p.4).

Other than grammar and word stress there is also contact between the north and south during the period of Old English that brought a final end to the use of inflections. Lieber (2009) investigated that language contact in northern parts of Britain played a huge role, due to the fact that during the Old English period, Northern parts were occupied by Danes - who spoke Old Norse. Old Norse was the closest to Old English, meaning they shared the same cases, and same stems of words, but the inflectional endings were different. The stem 'bōt' used to mean 'remedy' in both languages, but when said using the plural form they both changed (the inflectional suffix changed):

*In Old Norse = 'bōtaR'*  
*In Old English = 'bōta'*

Speakers of Old English and Old Norse could communicate more or less due to similarities in the stem of the word but when it came to the inflectional endings - there was confusion caused which explains the de-emphasise/drop of infection so that they could

understand one another more. It is also believed that inflection was lost in the northern parts of Britain much earlier due to the fact that Old Norse speakers cohabited with Old English speakers. Meaning the southern part, which was not exposed to Norse, helped English get rid of inflection as it spread from north to south causing all parts of Britain to become equally poor in inflection.

Due to the loss of inflection, word order is considered very important, as it is needed in order for sentences and speech to make sense. Vít (2005) conveys that English, is analytic these days due to all the historical changes it went through, but also how it distinguishes the meaning of its language through word order. For example without the word order in English we would not know who is chasing who:

*A dog is chasing a cat.*

*A cat is chasing a dog.*

Old English relied on its nouns, adjectives, and verbs but was mainly free when it came to word order as proven by Gelderen (2016) who provides the following:

In Modern English, the subject appears before the verb in a declarative sentence. It also can show nominative case and change the ending on the verb. Thus, in (1), the subject is marked by being a nominative she rather than an accusative her, and the verb is marked by a third person singular agreement marker –s. 16 (1) She walks regularly (p. 15-16).

Gelderen (2016) also makes the contrast of how it is more common for Modern English nouns and verbs to not be evaluated ‘for case and agreement’, as in ‘Rabbits eat mallow in the spring.’ The word order, however, has strict rules when it comes to observation, “Mallow in the spring rabbits eat.’ In many languages, objects are signaled by a special case marking. In Modern English, again only the pronouns are marked, e.g. him, me, us and them, not the nouns.”.

What also makes English analytic is the fact that it only uses two of the four cases it used to have, and as Watley (2020) states English “allows room for greater interpretation because of the ambiguity and vagueness fostered by the less complex inflectional system and grammatical morphology.”. This statement shows how Modern English allows itself to rely on pragmatic factors when it comes to getting to the meaning of a sentence. Semantics, must be stated as well, as differences are seen inside these two sentences:

*The woman gave the boy a hat.*

*The woman gave a hat to the boy*

English has also changed over the years meaning “the direct and indirect objects are denoted by word order; inflectional morphemes are not added to hat and boy to express their grammatical function in the sentence.” whereas in languages like German for instance that still use inflection in its language till this day.

Taking into consideration the meaning of an “Isolating Language” also hints at another reason as to why English is mainly considered to be analytic. According to the Encyclopædia Britannica (2011) English or any language that is considered analytic to the matter, use specific grammatical words or particles as opposed to inflection “to express syntactic relations within sentence”, thus causing English to be named as an isolating language together with analytic. To define “isolating language” further, it is said that each word contains one morpheme, which

just goes to show that inflection in our case is being completely emitted. Although analytic and isolating language both have slightly different meanings, when it comes to contrasting a synthetic and analytic language and taking a look at their changes isolating language play its own part and therefore these two are used with one another due to the fact that “an isolating language tends also to be an analytic language”.

## Discussion

Having used the Rogerian Method throughout this paper considering the two research questions that were raised at the beginning: 1. What changes have had an impact on the modern English language since Old English? and 2. Is the English language really analytical today? a discussion can now be fully made. It is best to start off with what claims there are of Synthetic being used in the English language today. Declension happened way back in time as seen in Old English hence it is still being used today when it comes to nouns. So, it is understood that nouns were simpler back then and today they are much more dynamic - making them synthetic instead of analytic. This part of the results was to prove that Synthetic does exist and has not been removed completely from the English language.

However, if turned to the analytic side the first answer can now be justified as it has been identified that for reasons of the simplified loss of inflection, conjugation of words, word stress, the use of the four cases, word order and the cohabitation of the north and south resulting to the removal of inflection it is understood that not only have they impacted English since Old English but it goes without saying that the English language is indeed more analytical than synthetic.

## Conclusion

In this paper the importance that the English language holds in comparison to other languages and just how many changes have occurred to it was noticed. Together with why these changes had to happen, what has changed over the years and how - allowing English to be identified as analytic.

All in all, with the help of the Rogerian Method used, and qualitative various facts and arguments claiming both sides, it has been noticed that analytic outweighs synthetic. However, this data and analysis should not be considered exhaustive since the topic has only received a brief consideration and might face further investigation in order to determine once and for all whether English is Analytic and Synthetic.

Hopefully this study provides a platform for future generations to carry on this research as English is a language that is always evolving and just as mentioned in the introduction anyone who studies English, sooner or later, will come across these two terms.

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