

The preterite and perfect in Middle English

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The Proto-Germanic preterite originally had a broader semantic range than its Modern English reflex; before the development of a periphrastic perfect or pluperfect, the preterite could be used where Modern English would require one of the latter forms. In Old English, even after the periphrastic perfect had become available, the preterite continued to be used for the expression of comparable temporal meaning (e.g. Mitchell 1985). Previous discussions of the tense system of Middle English have remarked the continuing existence of preterites that would correspond to a Modern English perfect (e.g. Mustanoja 1960; Fischer 1992); however, no detailed investigation exists of the variables influencing the choice between these two categories. This presentation will use data from the Helsinki Corpus (Rissanen et al. 1996) to illustrate loci of potential competition between the preterite and the perfect in early Middle English texts. It will be shown that the periphrastic perfect is already the norm in the majority of texts from the beginning of the Middle English period, and that Middle English authors could alternate between the preterite and the perfect to make subtle distinctions regarding present relevance, of the sort that are possible in Modern English. It is proposed that most preterites that would appear anomalous in terms of Modern English practice can be explained in terms of two factors: variation in speakers' use of the preterite to refer to past situations of present relevance, of the sort seen among varieties of Modern English (cp. *I already ate* with VV 17.30 *helle, ðar næure ȝiete liht ne cam* 'Hell, where light never yet came'), and variation in the sequence of tenses, so that preterites that would always have been unexceptional in main clauses may also occur subordinated to verbs in the present tense to a greater degree than is now possible (e.g. Brut I.384.7424 *Ich þonkie mine Drihte [...] þet he swulche mildce; sent to moncunne.* 'I thank my Lord that He sent such mercy to mankind.'). The data will be seen to provide support for the hypothesis that subsequent development towards the Modern English verbal system primarily affected these two factors, rather than the paradigmatic relationships between the preterite and the perfect.

References

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