

Where did *wer* go?

Lexical variation and change in third-person male adult noun referents from Old English to Middle English

To refer to a male adult, speakers of Present Day English have several lexical items to choose from (e.g., *man*, *guy*, *dude*, *fella*, *bloke*, *gentleman*, and *geezer*). However, variation within this semantic field is not new. According to *The Thesaurus of Old English*, there were at least 25 lexical items which denoted ‘male adult’ in Old English (e.g., *ceorl*, *guma*, *man*, *wer*) which could occur in referentially comparable contexts, as in (1). To examine the evolution of this onomasiological set from Old English and Middle English, the present study uses variationist quantitative methods, addressing two research questions. First, what was the distribution of third-person male adult nouns referents in Old English and Middle English? In other words, which variants were most frequent, in which contexts did they occur, and how did their ranking change over time? Second, is there any evidence to suggest that these variants were conditioned, constrained, or influenced by any attested intra- or extralinguistic factors of variation?

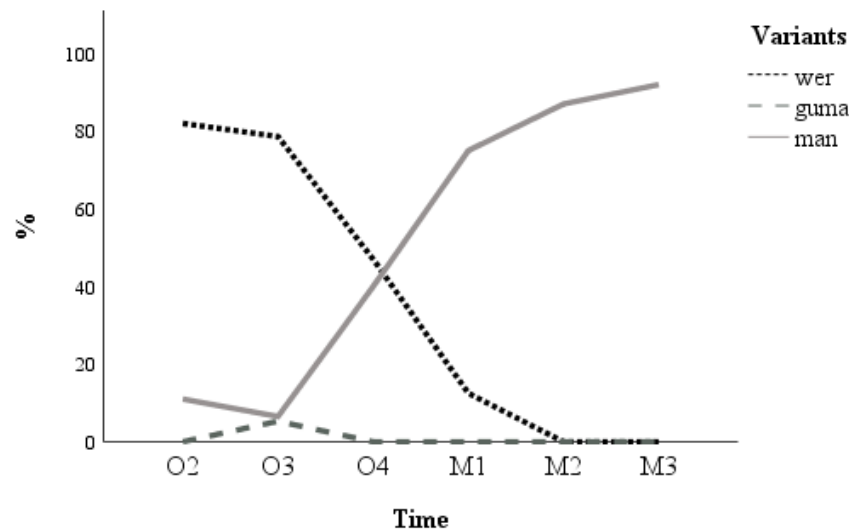
The *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts* (Rissanen et al., 1991) was used as the principal source of linguistic data. A list of third-person male adult noun referents was compiled using previous literature (e.g., Klepanski, 2005), dictionaries (e.g., Bosworth & Toller, 1882), and thesauruses (*The Historical Thesaurus of English*, *A Thesaurus of Old English*). Search queries were run to find instances of these variants in the corpus, which were subsequently downloaded and manually inspected for the removal of any functionally non-equivalent tokens (e.g., vocatives of address). Socio-historical context, as well as comparisons with Latin-based originals for translated texts, when available, were used to ensure only tokens with overt male referents were included in the envelope of variation. Each token was coded for both intra- (e.g., alliteration) and extra-linguistic factors (e.g., text type, provenance, time, text ID).

Results from the analysis demonstrate a significant shift in frequency from the favored variant *wer* in Old English to *man* in Middle English, a type of lexical replacement which coincides with collocational and frequency changes. As *wer* decreases, *man* takes on the former function of *wer*, with the diachronic shift in frequency following a prototypical s-curve distribution (Figure 1). Multivariate analyses using Rbrul (Johnson, 2009) found text type and text provenance to significantly constrain lexical choices, with certain variants (e.g., *rinc*, *scealc*, *kniȝt*) occurring more frequently in verse texts than prose texts on account of alliterative and metrical requirements.

Findings from the study are interpreted in the context of ongoing scholarship on lexical variation and change. First, the shift from *wer* to *man* illustrates a clear example of lexical replacement. As *wer* is replaced, it temporarily retreats to use as part of the semantic field ‘married man’ which later too is usurped by a competing lexical item *husband*. Second, although linguistic change does not have to follow an s-curve pattern, the shift from *wer* to *man* follows an s-curve trajectory, which is often used as a diagnostic for lexical replacement. Third, while work using apparent time data (Chambers, 1995) or short periods of time (Grieve et al., 2017) point to the applicability of s-shaped trajectories for lexical change, the present analysis of the semantic field of third-person male adult noun referents over approximately six hundred years adds a diachronic dimension to this discussion. Finally, in line with synchronic work on lexical variation, the present study shows how intra- and extra-linguistic factors harmoniously affect lexical choices and subsequently change diachronically.

- (1) (a) Ond on ðone ylcan dæg Crist gereorde fif ðusenda **wera** of fif hlafum ond of twam
 and on that same day Christ fed five thousand men of five bread and of two
 fixum, eac wifum ond cildum þara wæs ungerim
 fish also women and children which was uncountable
 ‘And on that same day, Christ fed five thousand men, with five loaves of bread and two
 fish. In addition, he also fed women and children, of which there were many’
 [Old English Martyrology, 950-1050]
- (b) on þære fyrde wæron þe ferdon fram Egipte, sixhund þusend **manna** butan wifum
 in the army were which traveled from Egypt six-hundred thousand men except women
 7 cildum
 and children
 ‘In that army, there were 600,000 men who travelled from Egypt, and that number
 does not include women and children’ [Ælfric’s Letter to Sigeward, 1050-1150]
- (c) ðonne onwæcneð eft wineleas **guma**
 then awakens again friendless man
 ‘Then the man without any friends woke up’ [The Wanderer, 950-1050]

Figure 1. Frequency of *wer*, *guma*, and *man* from Old English to Middle English



Selected References

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