

An Ergativity-driven Change of Adjectival Past Participles in the History of English

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My investigation based on the Helsinki parsed corpora including YCOE, PPCME2, PPCEME and PPCMBE shows that while adjectival past participles formed from transitive verbs (henceforth, transitive participles), e.g., *my broken heart*, have been attested since OE, those formed from intransitive verbs (henceforth, intransitive participles), e.g., *a fallen leaf*, were not available until EModE. Importantly, the attested intransitive participles were all formed from unaccusative verbs.

Table 1. Distribution of first occurrences of transitive participles

Period	Old English (OE) (850-1150)	Middle English (ME) (1150-1500)	Early Modern English (EModE) (1500-1710)	Late Modern English (LModE) (1710-1900)
Token	1561	1069	1002	1200
Type	274	225	333	343

Table 2. Distribution of first occurrences of unaccusative participles

Period	Old English (OE) (850-1150)	Middle English (ME) (1150-1500)	Early Modern English (EModE) (1500-1710)	Late Modern English (LModE) (1710-1900)
Token	0	0	20	31
Type	0	0	6	4

My search of the distribution of unaccusative verbs utilizing the quotation search function of Oxford English Dictionary (OED) also shows that 22 out of the investigated 54 verbs had their past participles adjectively used in the history of English and most of the participles were not attested until the 16th century. The investigated unaccusative verbs, including verbs of appearance, verbs of disappearance and inherently directed motion, are ones strictly selected in accordance with Levin and Rappaport' (1995: 281-282) criterion.

As for the motivation for the extension from transitive participles to unaccusative ones, this paper argues that the emergence of a large number of ergative verbs, e.g., *close*, which have both transitive and unaccusative valences, throughout ME and EModE triggered the extension. When past participles of the largely emerged ergative verbs adjectively modified nouns in ME and EModE, it was possible for them to be interpreted as derived from the unaccusative variant, which in turn made it possible for past participles of unaccusative verbs to adjectively modify nouns, by analogy. This is evidenced by the results of my empirical investigation. In my investigation, among the list of 322 ergative verbs in Wikitionary, the top 50 verbs by frequency in Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) were chosen as target verbs. My OED-based investigation of these 50 verbs shows that 46 out of them formed past participles in the history of English. The majority of the 46 verbs and their participles adjectively used were first attested in ME or EModE. By contrast, while the majority of the 22 unaccusative verbs were first attested in OE and ME, all cases of their participles adjectively used were first attested in EModE or LModE.

Table 3. Distribution of first occurrences of ergative verbs and their adjectival past participles

	OE	ME	EModE	LModE
Ergative verbs	5/46 (10.87%)	21/46 (45.65%)	14/46 (30.43%)	6/46 (13.04%)
Ergative participles	1/46 (2.17%)	11/46 (23.91%)	27/46 (58.70%)	7/46 (15.22%)

Table 4. Distribution of first occurrences of unaccusative verbs and their adjectival past

participles

	OE	ME	EModE	LModE
Unaccusative verbs	5/22 (22.73%)	12/22 (54.55%)	4/22 (18.18%)	1/22 (4.54%)
Unaccusative participles	0/22 (0.00%)	0/22 (0.00%)	11/22 (50.00%)	11/22 (50.00%)

Combining this result with Table 1 and 2, we get this historical order of first attestation: Transitive verb & Transitive participle & Unaccusative verb < Ergative verb & Ergative Participle < Unaccusative participle. This confirms the conclusion that the emergence of a large number of ergative verbs in ME and EModE served as a trigger for the extension from transitive participles to unaccusative ones.