# THE SPREAD OF THE *S*-PLURAL IN MIDDLE ENGLISH (1150-1420): A CORPUS STUDY

JOHN G. NEWMAN

*Nicholas Copernicus University, Toruń*

## 1. Introductory statements

This paper investigates the problem of the spread of the *s*-plural across English noun paradigms from the 12th to the 15th century. Although the groundwork was laid in the early part of the century, surprisingly little has been done since to clarify the details of this morphological change. The most comprehensive work on the subject, Roedler (1911), is not widely known. As a result, we still lack a clear picture of when and in which dialects the *s*-plural was extended from the Old English strong masculine *a*-stem nouns to all others (cf. Lass 1994: 130). The order in which the various classes of non-strong masculine nouns began to take the *s*-plural, originally as a secondary ending and later as the regular plural ending, is not firmly established.

One of the most informative accounts, Wright and Wright (1928: 134-145), offers three postulates concerning the extension of the *s*-plural to non-strong masculine classes of nouns: (1) by Late Old English, the strong masculine nom./acc. plural ending -*as* had been extended in Northumbrian to *a*-stem neuters, some *ō*- and *i*-stem feminines, and *n*-stem nouns; (2) by the late 12th century, the *s*-plural, now graphemically <-(e)s>, probably corresponding to /-əs/ by atonic vowel reduction, had spread to all stem classes from the North to North Midland, and from the middle of the 13th century to all South Midland strong feminine and neuter nouns as well as some weak nouns; and (3) in the South, the *s*-plural began to be attached to *a*-stem neuters in the 12th century, becoming "general for all classes of nouns" by the close of the 14th century (Wright – Wright 1928: 136).

In his grammar, Brunner (1963: 45-49), provides the following assertions regarding the extension of the *s*-plural to non-strong masculine classes of nouns: (1) by Late Old English, the strong masculine nom./acc. ending *-as* had been extended to *i*-stem nouns and *u*-stem nouns with heavy stem-syllables as well as the minor consonant declension *r-, ð-,* and *nd*-stems; (2) by the 12th century, the *s*-plural had spread to "almost all nouns" in the North and Midland (1963: 49); (3) in the 13th century South and Southwest, the *s*-plural had spread to "some masculines and neuters", although feminine and neuter nouns did not yet regularly take *-(e)s* until the 14th century; and (4) at some point in the 13th century *-(e)s* became the most common plural ending in certain Southeast areas, but not in Kent until the early 14th century.

Although Roedler (1911) treats the problem of the spread of the *s*-plural comprehensively by dialect, and largely so by period, his conclusions ultimately say less than those of the Wrights (1928) or Brunner (1963). His corpus of some 50 items, covering the 10-14 centuries, consists mostly of standard texts, whose treatment is, of course, one of pre-structuralist study. Roedler's comment on the cross-paradigm extension of the *s*-plural suffix is limited to the following general conclusions: (1) by the end of the 12th century, the *s*-plural had been extended to all declension classes of nouns in the North and North Midland; (2) by the first half of the 13th century the *s*-plural had been extended to all classes of nouns in the South Midland; (3) the *s*-plural was not extended in the South and Southwest until the first half of the 13th century; and (4) South East-Saxon dialects did not accept the extension of the *s*-plural until the 14th century.

As regards *s*-plurals, thus far more attention seems to have been paid to revealing the causes of the spread than to its description, and very little to the systematic substantiation of the descriptive conclusions reached. It is well established that the primary trigger was the pre-Late Old English reduction across dialects of the back vowels /a, o, u/ to /ə/ in atonic, final position (cf. Jordan 1974: 137). Distinctions of case, gender, and number were in the process of being obliterated, and although forces of analogical extension preserved overtly marked distinctions of number, grammatical gender was lost altogether and case distinctions began to be represented in the main through word order and preposition usage. As is generally true across languages, the obstruent of the ending /-əs/ proved ultimately more resistant than the nasal of the ending /-ən/.

It is also generally accepted, if less fully understood, that loanwords from Old Norse and Norman French influenced the spread of the *s*-plural by simply joining the nouns already employing the ending *-(e)s.*

However, a related point has nowhere (to the author's knowledge) been noted as significant in the extension of the *s*-plural: strong masculine nouns seem to have been the most frequent. A sampling of the 200 highest frequency Old English nouns from the corpus of the Dictionary of Old English Project at Toronto reveals that over 30% were strong masculines which employed the *s*-plural ending *-as* in nominative and accusative cases. Strong feminine nouns taking *a-* or *e*-plurals in these cases represented 25%. Weak nouns with nominative/accusative *n*-plural, like strong neuters with *u*-plural and strong neuters with Ø-plural, constituted approximately 10%. Since no noun class can be said to have included a genuinely disproportionate number of countable nouns, these figures suggest that the *s*-plural was more frequent in Old English than any other nominative/accusative plural ending. When we consider the presence of genitive plural noun forms, primarily with the ending *-a* (equal to that of most strong feminines in nominative/accusative plural), and dative plural noun forms, uniformly with the ending *-um,* the status of the nominative/accusative plural ending *-as* is seen with greater perspective. In sum, it may be inferred that the *s*-plural was at least the third most frequent plural ending in Old English.

## 2. Study outline

Instead of exploring the causes of the spread of the *s*-plural, this section concentrates on the morphological processes of change involved in *s*-plural extension across paradigms from the model *a*-declension to all other declensions in Middle English. The section below presents the findings of a recent examination of texts which represent the five standard dialects of Middle English over the period 1150-1420.

The Toronto Dictionary of Old English Project Corpus was the basis for the compilation of the present study corpus of 50 highest frequency non-strong masculine nouns from Old English[1] which (1) were countable in both Old English and Middle English, (2) survived down to the 15th century, and (3) were attested with the plural suffix *-s* or *-n* during the study period in both Stratmann's (1891) *Middle English Dictionary* and *The Oxford English Dictionary* (see Appendix 1). Adhering to these criteria, down to a frequency of 267 occurrences in the Project Corpus, the following numbers of nouns were culled by class: 17 *a-,* 7 *ō-,* 7 *i-,* 1 *u-,* 13 *n-,* 2 *r-,* and 2 root-consonant stems. As the corpus comprises only non-strong masculine nouns, no effort was made to trace the spread of the competing weak *n*-plural, even among non-strong masculine nouns, although its decline will be duly considered. Since this plural marker is known to have also spread to strong masculine nouns, no overall picture based on the present evi-

---

[1] Because vowel length is not indicated for concordance listings, several choices between homographs were made in favor of standard-most word forms in the process of culling the noun corpus; that is, regarding significations of non- nominal as well as nominal lexemes. These were verified by recourse to the *OED.*

dence would be, in any sense, complete. Further, the presence of original plural beside *s*-plural forms will not here be discussed, although many such forms were encountered in the tracing process.

The next step involved selection of 15 texts representing the five standard Middle English dialects in three periods (1150-1250, 1250-1350, and 1350-1420). In all but four cases (Northern 1150-1250 and 1250-1350, Southeastern 1250-1350 and 1350-1420) samples were taken from the Helsinki Corpus of English texts. The period divisions and dialect distinctions are those used in organizing the texts of the Helsinki Corpus. The only departure concerns the Southeastern dialect, similar in boundaries to that in Burrow and Turville-Petre (1992), not inclusive of Buckinghamshire.

Among the Helsinki Corpus selections, no more than one sample was chosen from each text-type category for each period and dialect. Where more than one choice was available, priority was given to the text with the greatest number of words. As a final criterion, selection comprised only texts not examined by Roedler (1911), which followed from the belief that if few contrary patterns were encountered, evidence would be supplementary.

## 3. Categorization of noun bases and plural allomorphs

The following set of noun categories will be used to make morphological statements about forms attested in the texts examined. Noun base categories are morphologically defined by historic stem class. Statements are symbolized by the notation {NOUN BASE} + {PLURAL} → <SURFACE FORM>, where {NOUN BASE}[2] equals nominative/accusative singular form, and the morpheme {PLURAL} has an *s*-plural allomorph and an *n*-plural allomorph respectively represented by the *s*-plural and *n*-plural endings, regardless of case.[3]

Table 1. Morphological categorization

Noun bases

| {Na1} | neuter | *a*-stem | monosyllabic |
| {Na2} | neuter | *a*-stem | disyllabic |
| {Nwa1} | neuter | *w-a*-stem | monosyllabic |
| {Fō1} | feminine | *ō*-stem | monosyllabic |

---

[2] Noun bases {Fō1}, {Fjō1}, {Fi1}, {Mn1}, {Mn2}, {Nn1}, and {Fn1} may or may not have final /ǝ/. For our purposes, final /ǝ/ is uniformly considered non-syllabic when encountered. On the dialecto-temporal complexities of Middle English loss of final /ǝ/, cf. Minkova (1991).

[3] Our focus is on the analogical extension of the *s*-plural across paradigms, not the analogical leveling of forms within paradigms. It should also be noted that morphological case is indistinguishable at the point of *s*-plural attachment, and further that *n*-stems were attaching the plural ending *-en* in all cases by this time (aside from the occasional genitive with *-ene*).

| {Fjō1} | feminine | *j-ō*-stem | monosyllabic |
| {Fi1} | feminine | *i*-stem | monosyllabic |
| {Fu1} | feminine | *u*-stem | monosyllabic |
| {Mn1} | masculine | *n*-stem | monosyllabic |
| {Mn2} | masculine | *n*-stem | disyllabic |
| {Nn1} | neuter | *n*-stem | monosyllabic |
| {Fn1} | feminine | *n*-stem | monosyllabic |
| {Fr2} | feminine | *r*-stem | disyllabic |
| {FRC1} | feminine | RC-stem | monosyllabic |

Plural allomorphs

| {Spl} | for *-as, -es, -is, -ys, -us, -eʒ, -se, -s* |
| {Npl} | for *-an, -en* |

## 4. Distribution of *s*-plurals

The distribution of *s*-plurals encountered in our study will be discussed in succession for each of the five dialects: the North, East Midland, West Midland, the South, and Southeastern.[4]

### 4.1. The North

Evidence for the North generally tends to support the view of the Wrights (1928) that *a*-stem neuters adopted *s*-plurals earlier than did *ō*-stem feminines. Our earliest text of this dialect reveals the extension of the *s*-plural to feminine *j-ō*-stem nouns, which suggests that both *a*-stem neuters and *ō*-stem feminines were attaching *s*-plurals in the North by the late 13th century.[5] Both Brunner (1963) and Roedler (1911) hold that all major classes of nouns then included items which took *s*-plurals. In the second period (1250-1350), the extension is evident among pure *ō*-stem nouns. The ending is also being attached to mono- and disyllabic *a*-stem neuters, and feminine *n*-stem nouns. Manifest additions in the final period (1350-1420) are evident in *i*-stem and *u*-stem feminines as well as *n*-stem neuters. Because the two nouns belonging to the latter class (*eaʒe*

---

[4] The corpus of texts in which forms attesting plurals were encountered is presented by dialect and period in Appendix 2. Forms evident in *Sir Tristram* were culled from the *Oxford English Dictionary* corpus of quotations. Findings among the three other texts not of the Helsinki Corpus were culled from the following editions: *Interludium de Clerico et Puella* (Bennett – Smithers 1968); *The Owl and the Nightingale* (Stanley 1960); *John Gower: Confessio Amantis* (Burrow – Turville-Petre 1992).

[5] The paucity of Northern Early Middle English texts is widely recognized. The oldest Northern Middle English text available to us containing *s*-plural forms of corpus nouns has been dated as early as the second half of the 13th century, if closer to the turn of the 14th century (cf. Wells 1916: 546). It is thus not properly within the temporal limits of our first period (1150-1250).

'eye' and *eare* 'ear') commonly take the *n*-plural across dialects in later Middle English, *s*-attachment in the North may signal the initial stage of the completion of the new plural extension between 1350 and 1420. However, this is not the only dialect offering evidence for the spread of the *s*-plural to the *n*-stem nouns in this period. The form *eres* 'ears' is encountered in both East Midland and Southern dialects.

Correlations between noun bases and the *s*-plural allomorph attested in the North include: (1150-1300)[6] {Fjō1} + {Spl} *scynnes* 'sins'; (1250-1350) {Na1} + {Spl} *barnes* 'children', *londes* 'lands', *schippes* 'ships', {Na2} + {Spl} *heuedes* 'heads', *maidens* 'maidens', *wounders* 'wonders', {Fō1} + {Spl} *markes* 'marks', {Fn1} + {Spl} *woukes* 'weeks'; (1350-1420) {Na1} + {Spl} *howses* 'houses', *landes* 'lands', *thinges* 'things', *werkes/werkis* 'works', *wiues* 'wives', *wordes* 'words', *ȝeres* 'years', {Na2} + {Spl} *wonders* 'wonders', {Fō1} + {Spl} *saules* 'souls', {Fi1} + {Spl} *dedes/dedis* 'deeds', {Fu1} + {Spl} *handes* 'hands', {Nn1} + {Spl} *eres* 'ears', {Fn1} + {Spl} *hertes* 'hearts', *tonges* 'tongues'.

### 4.2. East Midland

Like in the North, from the earliest period the *s*-plural was being extended in East Midland to all classes of nouns, even weak nouns, according to the Wrights (1928), Brunner (1963), and Roedler (1911), and our evidence in the main confirms this. Mono- and disyllabic *a*-stem neuters, *j-ō*-stem feminines, and masculine *n*-stems have undergone an extension of the *s*-plural in the first period, *w-a*-stem neuters, as well as feminine *ō*-, *i*-, *u*- and *n*-stems, are attested in the second period, together with neuter *n*-stems and feminine RC-stems in the third period. Correlations between noun bases and the *s*-plural allomorph attested in East Midland include: (1150-1250) {Na1} + {Spl} *bernes* 'bairns', *wordes* 'words', {Na2} + {Spl} *deuules* 'devils', {Fjō1} + {Spl} *sinnes/synnes* 'sins', {Mn2} + {Spl} *lichames* 'bodies'; (1250-1350) {Na1} + {Spl} *bones* 'bones', *hedes* 'heads', *horses* 'horses', *londes* 'lands', *shippes* 'ships', *þinges* 'things', *wordes* 'words', {Na2} + {Spl} *heuedes* 'heads', *maidens* 'maidens', *wondres* 'wonders', {Nwa1} + {Spl} *trewes/trowes/trees* 'trees', {Fō1} + {Spl} *douns* 'downs', {Fi1} + {Spl} *dedes* 'deeds', *nedes* 'needs', {Fu1} + {Spl} *hondes* 'hands', {Fn1} + {Spl} *hertes* 'hearts'; (1350-1420) {Na1} + {Spl} *hedes* 'heads', *þinges* 'things', *werkes* 'works', *wordes/woordes* 'words', {Na2} + {Spl} *deuels* 'devils', {Fō1} + {Spl} *soules* 'souls', {Fjō1} + {Spl} *sinnes/synnes* 'sins', {Fi1} + {Spl} *dedes* 'deeds', {Fu1} + {Spl} *hondes/handes* 'hands', {Mn1} + {Spl} *tymes* 'times', {Nn1} + {Spl} *eres* 'ears', {Fn1} + {Spl} *hertes* 'hearts', {FRC1} + {Spl} *bookes* 'books'.

### 4.3. West Midland

The various processes of phonological and morphological change which define the border between Old English and Middle English, the spread of the *s*-plural being one of the hallmarks, are generally accepted to have come somewhat later and somewhat less consistently in West Midland than in East Midland. Significantly, the former area lay outside the Danelaw in Late Old English times. The influence of Old Norse loanwords, it is thought, could not have been as great in West Midland, despite the settlement at that time of some number of Norsemen in the northern counties.

Our authorities agree that by the middle of the 13th century West Midland nouns in every class had begun to attach *s*-plurals. Present evidence suggests *s*-plural extension in the earliest period (1150-1250) to mono- and disyllabic *a*-stem neuters, as well as RC-stem feminines. The second period (1250-1350) data confirm *s*-plural extension to *j-ō*-stems, and the third period (1350-1420) data to feminine *i*-, *u*-, and *r*-stems, along with masculine *n*-stems.

Correlations between noun bases and the *s*-plural allomorph in West Midland include: (1150-1250) {Na1} + {Spl} *þinges* 'things', *werkes* 'works', *wordes/weordes* 'words', {Na2} + {Spl} *meidnes* 'maidens', *weattres* 'waters', {FRC1} + {Spl} *bokes* 'books'; (1250-1350) {Na1} + {Spl} *londes* 'lands', *ȝeres* 'years', {Fjō1} + {Spl} *sunnes* 'sins', {FRC1} + {Spl} *bokes* 'books'; (1350-1420) {Na1} + {Spl} *londes/landes* 'lands', *shippes* 'ships', *þinges* 'things', *wordes* 'words', {Fi1} + {Spl} *dedes* 'deeds', {Fu1} + {Spl} *hondes/handes* 'hands', {Mn1} + {Spl} *names* 'names', {Fr2} + {Spl} *douȝtres/doughtres* 'daughters'.

### 4.4. The South

Like Southeastern, the Southern dialect is known to have witnessed the spread of the *s*-plural later than Midland and Northern dialects. Thus, our evidence can be seen to have more weight as regards the southern dialects. According to the Wrights (1928), *a*-stem neuters began to accept the extension of the *s*-plural in what is our first period (1150-1250). This implies not only the generally held view that they were the first to do so, or were at least the most susceptible (by paradigmatic proximity to the model strong masculine *a*-stems), but is also clearly confirmed by our findings. Further, the Wrights (1928) state that the plural marker *-(e)s* became common to all noun classes by the end of the 14th century in the South. This point of process completion is confirmed by others (cf.

---

[6] See note 5.

Fisiak 1968: 74). As stated earlier, Brunner (1963) maintained that during the 13th century the s-plural spread to certain masculine,[7] and neuter, but not to feminine nouns and certain other neuter nouns until the 14th century. Our evidence, which concurs with Roedler (1911) as to the 13th century introduction of the s-plural in the South, indicates that by the first half of the 13th century, the s-plural had extended to a-stem neuter nouns, although, conservatively, with -as (cf. *þingas*). In the second period (1250-1350), the process had clearly accelerated so that in the first half of the 14th century even masculine and feminine weak nouns are attested with the s-plural, along with feminine i-stems as well as mono- and disyllabic a-stem neuters. Weak neuters are attested with the s-plural only in the third period (1350-1420).

Correlations between noun bases and the s-plural allomorph attested in the South include: (1150-1250) {Na1} + {Spl} *þingas* 'things'; (1250-1350) {Na1} + {Spl} *þingus* 'things', *wordes* 'words', {Na2} + {Spl} *maydenes/maidenes* 'maidens', {Fi1} + {Spl} *dedes* 'deeds', {Mn1} + {Spl} *tymes* 'times', {Fn1} + {Spl} *churches* 'churches'; (1350-1420) {Na1} + {Spl} *bonus/bones* 'bones', *þyngus* 'things', *wordus* 'words', {Fō1} + {Spl} *soulus* 'souls', {Fi1} + {Spl} *nyȝttus* 'nights', {Nn1} + {Spl} *eres* 'ears'.

### 4.5. The Southeast

The Southeastern dialect is held to have been most resistant to the extension of the s-plural, regardless of the direction from which most Norman French loans came to England in the course of Middle English. Perhaps the strongest in this case is Brunner's (1963: 49) assertion that the onset of the 14th century saw the plural suffix -*(e)s* in common use, even in Kent. Our evidence shows that the s-plural had been extended to (a) certain w-a-stem neuters by the first half of the 13th century, and (b) mono- and disyllabic a-stem neuters, as well as i-stem feminines, no later than the middle of the 13th century.[8] Our masculine n-stems and feminine RC-stems attest to s-plural extension no earlier than the second half of the 14th century.

Correlations between noun bases and the s-plural allomorph attested in the Southeast include: (1150-1250) {Nwa1} + {Spl} *treowwes* 'trees'; (1250-1350) {Na1} + {Spl} *horsse* 'horses', *huses* 'houses', *schipes* 'ships', *wiues* 'wives', *wordes* 'words', {Na2} + {Spl} *maidenes* 'maidens', {Fi1} + {Spl} *niȝtes*

'nights'; (1350-1420) {Na1} + {Spl} *þinges* 'things', *wordes* 'words', {Mn1} + {Spl} *times* 'times', {FRC1} + {Spl} *bokes* 'books'.

### 5. Distribution of n-plurals

The Middle English n-stem neuters are attested with the n-plural in (a) West Midland, East Midland, the South, and the Southeast in the first period (1150-1250), (b) East Midland and the Southeast in the second period (1250-1350), and (c) the North, East Midland, and the South in the third period (1350-1420). However, n-stem masculines and feminines are in evidence attaching n-plurals only in the first period: masculines in West Midland, feminines in East Midland, and both in the Southeast. Attested correlations between n-stem noun bases and the n-plural allomorph include: (1150-1250) {Mn1} + {Npl} *welen* 'possessions', {Nn1} + {Npl} *egen/eagene* 'eyes', and {Fn1} + {Npl} *circen* 'churches' in the Southeast, {Mn1} + {Npl} *weolen* 'possessions', {Nn1} + {Npl} *earen* 'ears' and *ehnen* 'eyes' in West Midland, {Nn1} + {Npl} *earen* 'ears', *egen* 'eyes', {Fn1} + {Npl} *tungene* 'tongues' in East Midland, and *earan/earen* 'ears' and *eaȝan/eaȝen* 'eyes' in the South; (1250-1350) {Nn1} + {Npl} *eiȝen* 'eyes' in East Midland, and *earen* 'ears' and *eȝen* 'eyes' in the Southeast; (1350-1420) {Nn1} + {Npl} *eghen* 'eyes' in the North, *eren* 'ears' and *iȝen* 'eyes' in East Midland, and *eyen/yȝen* 'eyes' in the South.

### 6. s-plurals: combined evidence

Combining Roedler's (1911) data and those of the present study corpus for the South and Southeast reveals the following distributions.

Firstly, noun base classes attaching the s-plural suffix in the South (1150-1250) included {Na1}, {Na2}, {Fō1}, {Fi1}, {Mn2}, {Nn1}, {Fn1}, {FRC1}, and additionally (1250-1350) {Fjō1}, {Mn1}, {Fr1}. Thus, in the first period, the s-plural is seen to have been extended to our mono- and disyllabic a-stem neuters and ō-, i-, and RC-stem feminines as well as n-stems of all genders, whereas in the following period monosyllabic n-stem masculines and j-ō- and r-stem feminines were attaching the s-plural suffix. No other types are attested in the final period.

Secondly, noun base classes seeing the extension of the s-plural in the Southeast (1150-1250) included {Na1}, {Nwa1}, {Fō1}, {Fi1}, {Fu1}, {Fn1}, and additionally (1250-1350) {Na2}, {Mn1}, {FRC1}. Nouns shown to have succumbed by the first half of the 13th century are a- and w-a-stem neuters and ō-, i-, u-, and n-stem feminines, and by the first half of the 14th century, disyllabic a-stem neuters, monosyllabic n-stem masculines, and RC-stem feminines. No other types are attested with s-plural for the last period.

### 7. n-plurals: combined evidence

---

[7] We presume these to be u-stem masculines, since n-stems would most likely have been specifically mentioned. It is also well established that even in Old English these masculines took the a-stem masculine ending -*as* (cf. Campbell 1959: 247).

[8] The text used in this case, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, is dated as late as the middle of the 13th century.

Combined *n*-plural findings for the South and Southeast, in turn, reveal the following distributions.

Firstly, noun base classes of *n*-stems attested with the *n*-plural suffix in the South include (1150-1250) {Mn1}, {Nn1}, {Fn1}, (1250-1350) {Nn1}, {Fn1}, and (1350-1420) {Nn1}. Hence, the *n*-plural seems still to have been regularly employed in the dialect for these classes of nouns, although, as we have seen, the *s*-plural has clearly been extended to certain *n*-stem nouns of all three genders in the South by the first period. Only neuter and feminine *n*-stems are attested with *n*-plurals in the second period, which perhaps reflects a general transfer of masculine *n*-stems to nouns taking the *s*-plural. Only neuters are attested in the final period.

Secondly, noun base classes of *n*-stems attested with the *n*-plural in the Southeast included (1150-1250) {Mn1}, {Nn1}, {Fn1}, and (1250-1350) {Nn1}, {Fn1}. Like in the South, weak masculines are found with *n*-plurals in the first period, but not in the second or the third period, yet neuter and feminine weak nouns are attested with the *n*-plural suffix in both the first and second periods. No evidence was available for the final period.

## 8. Concluding statements

It has long been recognized that the spread of the *s*-plural across paradigms began as early as the 9th century[9] and was completed in the 14th century, although various weak and strong nouns remained to be affected by the operation of the *s*-plural rule in the southern dialects.

Our findings confirm in the main the general assertions to date regarding the direction of the spread of the *s*-plural (Roedler 1911: 81-82; Wright – Wright 1928: 134-145; Brunner 1963: 45-49; Fisiak 1968: 73-74; Wełna 1996: 84-90). Although the Northern dialect is not substantially represented in the current findings before the 14th century, the East Midland dialect data seem to illustrate adequately the early extension of the *s*-plural. Evidence culled for the West Midland dialect indicates that *s*-plural extension there occurred later than in East Midland. It seems that further evidence might reveal a broader extension than was seen in the present study. The combined evidence for the Southern dialect makes it plain that by the first half of the 13th century, the *s*-plural had been extended to some number of nouns in all major vocalic stem classes, all weak stem classes, and certain minor consonant stem nouns. Previous claims about the late extension of the *s*-plural to the Southeastern dialect are consistently confirmed by our findings as well as the combined findings for the dialect.

However, an attempt to establish the order in which classes of nouns saw the extension of the *s*-plural across paradigms would certainly reveal the limits of the present study materials. Although the present corpus is composed of high frequency nouns, and should thus be widely representative of the greater lexicon, certain classes of nouns are certainly under-represented. The noun *hand* is the sole representative of *u*-stem nouns. Neuter *w-a*-stems and feminine *j-ō*-stems are likewise represented by single items. Further limitations follow from shortages of text materials. The most significant case is that of the earliest Northern text used, which was shorter than any of the Helsinki Corpus samples.

Considering the findings of the present study as a whole, *s*-plural extension to the classes of *a*-stem neuters appears prominent. Already in the first period, class {Na1} nouns, monosyllabic *a*-stem neuters, are attested as having undergone the spread of the *s*-plural in three of the five dialects, and during the second period in all five dialects. {Nwa1} nouns, an *a*-stem subclass, had evidently experienced the extension in two of the five dialects in the first period, but in four of the five dialects in the second period. This would confirm the Wrights' (1928) view that the *s*-plural was first extended from masculine *a*-stems to neuter *a*-stems.

Patterns in the spread of the *s*-plural to *n*-stem nouns also seem indicative to some degree. The two *n*-stem neuters are not attested with the *s*-plural until the third period (1350-1420), although the new plural is then found in three of the five dialects. However, in that period they are likewise attested with the *n*-plural in three of five dialects. Clearly more progressive appear to have been both *n*-stem feminines, attested with the *s*-plural in three of the five dialects in the second period (1250-1350), and *n*-stem masculines with the *s*-plural as early as the first period (1150-1250).

At the point of perhaps his greatest contribution, more substantial (sic!) than the later assertions of the Wrights (1928), Brunner (1963), and others, Roedler (1911) found that all stem classes of nouns included members taking the *s*-plural by 1250 in the North, East Midland, and West Midland. Our findings nowhere contradict this conclusion. Nevertheless, the spread of the *s*-plural, even in these dialects, is still less than fully substantiated in terms of the representativeness of forms encountered. Without considering the frequency or statistical significance of nouns attested with the *s*-plural, and the ratio of *s*-plurals to other plural types at given points in time, we cannot approach the questions of when and where the ending indeed achieved dominance among the several classes of nouns.

A final point concerns the resistant productivity of *n*-plural suffixing in the South. A count of nouns in Roedler's (1911) study attested with the *n*-plural in the Southern dialect reveals that the continuing existence of the ending there may not be solely attributable to the *n*-stems themselves, as is often implied, but rather at least equally to non-weak nouns employing the weak ending -*en*. For

---

[9] *The Oxford English Dictionary* cites the *a*-stem neuter noun *scipas* at c888 (K. Ælfred. Boeth.).

the 14th century, 14 non-weak nouns are listed with the plural ending -*en,* while only 8 weak nouns contain this suffix.

No doubt, it remains vital to establish the details of the decline of the *n*-plural from Old English through Middle English, in addition to those reflecting the spread of the *s*-plural.

## REFERENCES

Allen, Cynthia L.
 1995 *Case marking and reanalysis.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Bennett, Jack Arthur Walter – Geoffrey Victor Smithers (eds.)
 1968 "Interludium de Clerico et Puella", in: *Early Middle English Verse and Prose.* (2nd edition.) Oxford: OUP.
Brunner, Karl
 1963 *An outline of Middle English grammar.* (Translated by Grahame Johnston.) Oxford: Blackwell.
Burrow, J. A. – Thorlac Turville-Petre
 1992 "John Gower: Confessio Amantis", in: *A book of Middle English* (2nd edition.) Oxford: Blackwell.
Campbell, Alistair
 1959 *Old English grammar.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Classen, E.
 1919 "S and N plurals in Middle English", *Modern Language Review* 14: 94-96.
Ekwall, Eilert
 1975 *A history of Modern English sounds and morphology.* (Translated by Alan Ward.) Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Fisiak, Jacek
 1968 *A short grammar of Middle English: Orthography, phonology, and morphology.* Warszawa: PWN.
Huddleston, Rodney
 1984 *Introduction to the grammar of English.* Cambridge: CUP.
Jordan, Richard
 1974 *Handbook of Middle English grammar: Phonology.* (Translated by Eugene J. Crook.) The Hague: Mouton.
Kaluza, Max
 1901 *Historische Grammatik der englischen Sprache.* Berlin: Verlag von Emil Felber.
Kemenade, Ans van
 1987 *Syntactic case and morphological case in the history of English.* Dordrecht: Foris.
Lass, Roger
 1994 *Old English: A historical linguistic companion.* Cambridge: CUP.
McMahon, April M. S.
 1994 *Understanding language change.* Cambridge: CUP.
Minkova, Donka
 1991 *The history of final vowels in English: The sound of muting.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
Moore, Samuel
 1928 "Earliest morphological changes in Middle English", *Language* 4: 238-266.
Murray, James A. H. et al. (eds.)
 1989 *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edition.) Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Nida, Eugene
 1948 "The identification of morphemes", *Language* 24: 414-441.
Quirk, Randolph – C. L. Wrenn
 1957 *An Old English grammar* (2nd edition.) London: Methuen.
Rissanen, Matti – Ossi Ihalainen (eds.)
 1993 *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts.* Bergen: Norwegian Computing Centre for the Humanities.
Roedler, Eduard
 1911 Die Ausbreitung des s-Plurals im Englischen. [Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Kiel.]
Spang-Hanssen, Henning
 1959 *Probability and structural classification in language description.* Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger.
Stanley, Eric Gerald (ed.)
 1960 *The owl and the nightingale.* London: Thomas Nelson and Sons.
Stratmann, Francis Henry
 1891 *A Middle English dictionary.* Oxford: OUP.
Venezky, Richard L. – Antonette di Paolo Healy
 1980 *A microfiche concordance to Old English.* Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies.
Wells, John Edwin
 1916 *A manual of the writings in Middle English: 1050-1400.* New Haven, Conn.: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences.
Wełna, Jerzy
 1996 *English historical morphology.* Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
Wright, Joseph W. – Elizabeth M. Wright
 1928 *An elementary Middle English grammar.* (2nd edition.) London: OUP.
Wyld, Henry Cecil
 1937 *A short history of English* (3rd edition.) London: John Murray.

Appendix 1. Corpus of Old English non-strong masculine nouns

| Old English nominative singular form | Gloss |
|---|---|
| 1. *þing* (n.) | 'thing' |
| 2. *nama* (wk.m.) | 'name' |
| 3. *sawl* (f.) | 'soul' |
| 4. *word* (n.) | 'word' |
| 5. *land* (n.) | 'land' |
| 6. *wif* (n.) | 'wife' |
| 7. *hand* (f.) | 'hand' |
| 8. *lichama* (wk.m.) | 'body' |
| 9. *tid* (f.) | 'tide', 'time' |
| 10. *synn* (f.) | 'sin' |
| 11. *niht* (f.) | 'night' |
| 12. *weorc* (n.) | 'work', 'action' |
| 13. *hus* (n.) | 'house' |
| 14. *burg* (f.) | 'borough', 'town' |
| 15. *eage* (wk.n.) | 'eye' |
| 16. *heafod* (n.) | 'head' |
| 17. *þeod* (f.) | 'people', 'nation' |
| 18. *wæter* (n.) | 'water' |
| 19. *ȝear* (n.) | 'year' |
| 20. *heorte* (wk.f.) | 'heart' |
| 21. *boc* (f.) | 'book' |
| 22. *deofol* (n.) | 'devil' |
| 23. *wyrt* (f.) | 'wort', 'herb' |
| 24. *spræc* (f.) | 'speech' |
| 25. *bliss* (f.) | 'bliss' |
| 26. *modor* (f.) | 'mother' |
| 27. *wundor* (n.) | 'wonder' |
| 28. *tima* (wk.m.) | 'time' |

| | |
|---|---|
| 29. *hid* (f.) | 'hide' (of land) |
| 30. *dun* (f.) | 'down', 'hill' |
| 31. *mona* (wk.m.) | 'moon' |
| 32. *dæd* (f.) | 'deed' |
| 33. *tunge* (wk.f.) | 'tongue', 'language' |
| 34. *cyrce* (wk.f.) | 'church' |
| 35. *bearn* (n.) | 'child' |
| 36. *mæsse* (wk.f.) | 'mass' |
| 37. *dohtor* (f.) | 'daughter' |
| 38. *ban* (n.) | 'bone' |
| 39. *mæden* (n.) | 'maid' |
| 40. *bot* (f.) | 'boot', 'remedy' |
| 41. *treow* (n.) | 'tree' |
| 42. *neod* (f.) | 'need' |
| 43. *burna* (wk.m.) | 'spring', 'stream' |
| 44. *wela* (wk.m.) | 'wealth', 'possessions' |
| 45. *hors* (n.) | 'horse' |
| 46. *wucu* (wk.f.) | 'week' |
| 47. *scip* (n.) | 'ship' |
| 48. *eare* (wk.n.) | 'ear' |
| 49. *lið* (n.) | 'limb', 'joint' |
| 50. *mearc* (f.) | 'mark', 'boundary' |

## Appendix 2. Text corpus by period and dialect

### 1150-1250

| | |
|---|---|
| Northern | Interludium de Clerico et Puella (13th century) |
| East Midland | Trinity Homilies (a. 1225) |
| West Midland | St. Margarete (c. 1225) |
| Southern | Vespasian Homilies (a. 1150) |
| Southeastern (Kent) | Pere Didaxeon (c. 1150) |

### 1250-1350

| | |
|---|---|
| Northern | Sir Tristram (c. 1320) |
| East Midland | Kyng Alisaunder (a. 1350) |
| West Midland | Song of the Husbandman, Satire on the Consistory Courts (a. 1325) |
| Southern | The Life of St. Edmund (c. 1300) |
| Southeastern (Surrey) | The Owl and the Nightingale (c. 1250) |

### 1350-1420

| | |
|---|---|
| Northern | The Northern Homily Cycle (c. 1400) |
| East Midland | The Cloud of Unknowing (c. 1400) |
| West Midland | The Brut, or the Chronicles of England (c. 1400) |
| Southern | A Late Middle English Treatise on Horses (a. 1450) |
| Southeastern (Surrey) | John Gower: Confessio Amantis (c. 1390) |

## Appendix 3. Summary of findings: s-plural extension

| DIALECT | PERIOD | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 1150-1250 | 1250-1350 | 1350-1420 |
| Northern | | {Na1} {Na2} {Fō1} {Fjō1} {Fn1} | {Na1} {Na2} {Fō1} {Fi1} {Fu1} {Nn1} {Fn1} |
| East Midland | {Na1} {Na2} {Fjō1} {Mn2} | {Na1} {Na2} {Nwa1} {Fō1} {Fi1} {Fu1} {Fn1} | {Na1} {Na2} {Fō1} {Fjō1} {Fi1} {Fu1} {Mn1} {Nn1} {Fn1} {FRC1} |
| West Midland | {Na1} {Na2} {FRC1} | {Na1} {Fjō1} {FRC1} | {Na1} {Fi1} {Fu1} {Mn1} {Fr2} |
| Southern | {Na1} | {Na1} {Na2} {Fi1} {Mn1} {Fn1} | {Na1} {Fō1} {Fi1} {Nn1} |
| Southeastern | {Nwa1} | {Na1} {Na2} {Fi1} | {Na1} {Mn1} {FRC1} |