

The Evolution of Non-Finite Verb Forms from Old English to Modern English: A Diachronic Comparative Study



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Keywords	Abstract
Non-finite verbs infinitive participle gerund historical linguistics Old English Modern English verb evolution	This study investigates the historical evolution of non-finite verb forms in the English language, focusing on their morphological and syntactic transformation from Old English to Modern English. By analyzing the development of infinitives, participles, and gerunds across distinct historical periods—Old English, Middle English, and Modern English—the research highlights the shift from a synthetic to a more analytic linguistic system. The paper examines the structural changes in form, usage, and function, drawing comparisons that illustrate how inflectional endings were gradually replaced by word order, prepositions, and auxiliary constructions. Key areas of focus include the grammaticalization of non-finite elements, the decline of inflectional variation, and the emergence of verbal-nominal hybrids such as the gerund. This diachronic comparative analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how English verbal morphology evolved, providing valuable insights for historical linguistics, grammar instruction, and the study of syntactic change.

1. Introduction

Language is the primary vehicle of human communication, and its structure evolves continuously across time, shaped by both internal linguistic developments and external socio-cultural influences. English, one of the most widely spoken languages in the world today, has undergone substantial transformations in its grammatical system, especially in the verbal domain (Barber, Beal, & Shaw, 2009).

Among the most notable areas of change is the evolution of **non-finite verb forms**—infinitives, participles, and gerunds. These verbals, which do not show tense or subject agreement, have historically functioned in both verbal and nominal roles. In **Old English**, they were heavily inflected and closely tied to the nominal system, whereas in **Modern English**, they have become more fixed and analytic in nature (Fischer, 2007). This transformation reflects the broader typological shift in English from a synthetic to an analytic language, marked by the loss of inflectional morphology and the rise of periphrastic constructions (Lass, 1992).

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This paper explores the diachronic development of non-finite verb forms in English, comparing their structure, function, and usage from Old English through to Modern English. It seeks to uncover how historical phonological and syntactic processes contributed to the restructuring of the verbal system. Through detailed comparison and linguistic analysis, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of English grammatical history and to highlight the importance of non-finite forms in tracing syntactic change.

2. Theoretical Background

The English verbal system is divided into **finite** and **non-finite** forms. A **finite verb** carries tense, person, and number agreement, functioning as the grammatical core of a clause. In contrast, a **non-finite verb** does not reflect tense or subject-verb agreement. These verb forms cannot stand alone as the main verb in an independent clause but serve critical roles in constructing complex grammatical structures.

2.1. Definitions and Classification

Non-finite verbs typically include three major types: the **infinitive**, the **participle**, and the **gerund**. Each form exhibits both verbal and nominal (or adjectival) properties. Though they originate from verbs, they can function as nouns, adjectives, or adverbs within a sentence.

- The **infinitive** may appear with or without “to” (e.g., *to write*, *write*) and can function as a subject, object, or complement.
- The **participle** appears in two forms: the **present participle** (ending in *-ing*) and the **past participle** (usually ending in *-ed*, *-en*, or as an irregular form). Participles are used in constructing continuous and perfect tenses, and they also serve adjectival functions.
- The **gerund** ends in *-ing* and functions syntactically as a noun while retaining some verbal features such as taking an object (e.g., *reading a book*).

2.2. Syntactic and Semantic Functions

Non-finite verb forms are integral to English syntax. They enable the embedding of clauses, reduction of sentence complexity, and creation of nominal or adjectival phrases. Semantically, they often carry aspectual or action-related meanings, sometimes expressing causation, purpose, or simultaneity. For example, in the sentence *I heard him singing*, the present participle *singing* describes an ongoing action concurrent with *heard*.

The **gerund** often performs as the subject or object of a sentence (e.g., *Swimming is healthy*), while the **infinitive** is frequently used to express purpose, intent, or result (e.g., *She went to study*). **Participles**, on the other hand, frequently function as modifiers within participial phrases (e.g., *Tired from work, he sat down*).

2.3. Grammatical Categories in Non-Finites

Although non-finite verbs do not conjugate for tense in the traditional sense, they participate in **tense**, **aspect**, **mood**, and **voice** through analytical constructions:

- **Tense and aspect** can be indicated through combinations like *having written* (perfect aspect) or *being written* (passive continuous).
- **Voice** can be active (e.g., *to see*) or passive (e.g., *to be seen*).
- **Mood**, though not formally marked in non-finites, may be implied contextually, especially in infinitival clauses expressing potentiality or necessity (*to be honest*, *to leave now*).



The blending of verbal and nominal features in these forms plays a pivotal role in the structural and functional versatility of English grammar. Understanding their development provides insight into broader typological shifts, particularly the decline of inflection and the rise of periphrasis in English.

3. Non-Finite Verb Forms in Old English

The non-finite verb system of **Old English (OE)** was highly inflectional and structurally distinct from its Modern English counterpart. OE preserved a complex verbal morphology, with non-finite forms serving dual functions—retaining core verbal meaning while exhibiting nominal or adjectival properties. The two main non-finite categories in Old English were the **infinitive** and the **participle**, as the **gerund**, in its modern grammatical sense, had not yet fully developed as a distinct category.

3.1. Infinitives in Old English

The **Old English infinitive** existed in two forms: the **bare (uninflected)** infinitive and the **inflected (dative)** infinitive, often introduced by the preposition *to*.

- The **bare infinitive** typically functioned as the complement of modal verbs or causative constructions. For example: *Ic mæg singan* ("I can sing").
- The **inflected infinitive** ended in *-enne* or *-anne* and was used with *to* to express purpose or result. For example: *to writenne* ("in order to write").

This distinction gradually disappeared in Middle English, leading to the modern *to-infinitive*, which no longer functions as a true case-marked noun form but rather as a fixed syntactic construction.

3.2. Participles in Old English

Old English featured two participles:

- The **present participle**, formed with the suffix *-ende* (e.g., *lufende* – "loving"), functioned adjectivally and was often used in periphrastic verbal constructions, though less frequently than in Modern English.
- The **past participle**, often prefixed with *ge-* (e.g., *gelufod* – "loved"), served both as an adjective and in the formation of passive and perfect-like expressions, especially with the auxiliary *beon* (to be) or *habban* (to have).

These participles displayed inflection for **gender, number, and case**, aligning them more closely with adjectives than with the more fixed participles of Modern English.

3.3. Early Gerundial Equivalents

While the **modern gerund** as a verbal noun did not formally exist in Old English, early **verbal nouns** in *-ung* or *-ing* were used with clear nominal characteristics (e.g., *huntung* – "hunting" as a noun). These forms did not yet take direct objects or show verbal syntax, but they laid the groundwork for the **Middle English gerund**, which emerged from the blending of verbal and nominal uses.

3.4. Syntactic Roles and Limitations

In Old English, non-finite verb forms played a limited but growing syntactic role. Participles were primarily attributive or used in absolute constructions, and infinitives functioned as nominal complements or adverbials. Gerund-like forms remained confined to nominal usage, without yet adopting the full verbal flexibility seen in later stages.



Overall, Old English non-finite forms were more morphologically complex but syntactically constrained compared to their modern equivalents. Their development illustrates the gradual **simplification of morphology** and the **rise of syntactic abstraction** in the English verb system.

4. Non-Finite Verb Forms in Middle English

The **Middle English (ME)** period (circa 1100–1500) marks a transitional phase in the history of non-finite verb forms. During this time, significant morphological simplification took place, and new analytical constructions emerged. The distinctions between Old English inflections began to erode, while the syntactic roles of non-finite verbs expanded. Middle English saw the consolidation of earlier forms and the introduction of structures that laid the foundation for Modern English verb usage.

4.1. The Infinitive in Middle English

The **infinitive** underwent considerable restructuring in Middle English. The Old English *-an* ending evolved into *-en* or *-e*, with the **bare infinitive** often appearing after modal verbs and causative verbs, much like in Old English. The **inflected infinitive** (e.g., *to writenne*) gradually disappeared, with *to* losing its prepositional force and becoming a marker of the **to-infinitive**.

- By the 13th century, *to* was no longer an independent preposition in this construction, but part of the infinitive phrase (e.g., *to sing*).
- The **use of the infinitive** expanded to include more frequent syntactic roles as subjects, objects, and predicatives, especially with the rise of periphrastic verbal expressions.

Additionally, the **infinitive of purpose** continued to be marked with *to*, while *for to* + infinitive also appeared and was quite common in earlier ME texts (e.g., *for to seken* = “in order to seek”).

4.2. Participles in Middle English

Middle English participles became more regularized:

- The **present participle** endings shifted from Old English *-ende* and its dialectal forms (*-ande*, *-inde*) to the **-ing** ending we recognize today. This change occurred around the late 12th to early 13th centuries.
- The **past participle**, previously marked with the prefix *ge-*, gradually lost this prefix (e.g., *gewriten* became *writen*), although remnants of it persisted in southern dialects into the 15th century.

Participles became increasingly important in forming compound tenses, especially with the spread of auxiliary verbs (*have*, *be*) for perfect and passive constructions.

4.3. Emergence of the Gerund

The **gerund** as a verbal noun began to take shape in Middle English through the fusion of the **verbal noun in -ing** and the **present participle**. This led to structural ambiguity, especially in written form, since both forms ended in *-ing*.

- The gerund began to take **objects** and **adverbial modifiers**, indicating its verbal properties.
- Simultaneously, it could be modified by determiners or possessives, displaying its **nominal character**.

By the late Middle English period, the **gerund** had developed into a unique hybrid category, paving the way for its modern syntactic roles as subject, object, and complement.



4.4. Increasing Syntactic Flexibility

In Middle English, non-finite forms were used more flexibly:

- **Infinitives** began appearing more frequently in subject positions, particularly in impersonal constructions (e.g., *It is good to learn*).
- **Participles**, especially present participles, were used in descriptive appositions and emerging progressive-like constructions (e.g., *he was walking*).
- The **gerund** increasingly replaced the infinitive in certain contexts, such as after prepositions.

This period was marked by a steady shift from **inflectional morphology** to **analytic syntax**, allowing non-finite forms to serve as foundational tools in expressing complex ideas without extensive verb conjugation.

5. Non-Finite Verb Forms in Modern English

In **Modern English**, non-finite verb forms have become indispensable tools for expressing complex syntactic relationships with minimal morphological variation. Unlike in Old and Middle English, where inflection played a key role, Modern English relies heavily on **word order, auxiliaries, and fixed structures** to convey grammatical relationships. The three non-finite forms—**infinitives, participles, and gerunds**—are now clearly distinguished in function and form, though they still reflect their shared origins.

5.1. Infinitives

The **to-infinitive** is the dominant form, used for nominal, adjectival, and adverbial purposes. Common syntactic functions include:

- **Subject:** *To err is human.*
- **Object:** *She wants to leave.*
- **Complement:** *His goal is to succeed.*
- **Modifier:** *He is the first to arrive.*

The **bare infinitive** remains in use after modal verbs (*can, must, should, etc.*), causatives (*make, let, have*), and certain perception verbs (*see, hear, feel*).

Modern English also includes **split infinitives**, a now widely accepted stylistic option (e.g., *to boldly go*), and **perfect** (*to have written*) and **progressive** (*to be writing*) infinitive constructions.

5.2. Participles

Modern English participles exist in two main forms:

- **Present participle (-ing):** used in **progressive tenses, participial phrases, and as adjectives**.
 - *She is running.* / *The running water sparkled.*
- **Past participle (-ed, or irregular):** used in **perfect tenses, passive constructions, and as adjectives**.
 - *He has eaten.* / *The broken vase was on the floor.*

Both types of participles participate in **complex verb phrases** and **modifying clauses**, enabling rich descriptive structures.



5.3. Gerunds

The **gerund** is fully developed as a verbal noun in Modern English. It ends in *-ing* but functions syntactically as a noun:

- **Subject:** *Swimming is relaxing.*
- **Object:** *She enjoys reading.*
- **Object of a preposition:** *He is good at drawing.*

Gerunds often take **objects** and **adverbs**, showing their verbal nature, but they also accept **determiners**, **possessives**, and function in **noun phrases**, affirming their nominal role. Their flexibility in form and usage makes them essential to expressing ongoing or abstract actions.

6. Comparative Analysis of Non-Finite Verb Forms

This section contrasts **Old** and **Modern English** in terms of structure, function, and syntactic flexibility of non-finite verbs.

Feature	Old English	Modern English
Infinitive	Two forms: bare (singan) and inflected (to singanne); used with case distinctions	Unified to-infinitive (to sing); used for subject, object, modifiers
Present Participle	-ende ending; limited use in progressive constructions	-ing ending; used in continuous tenses, modifiers, and participial clauses
Past Participle	Strong (-en) and weak (-d, -t); often with ge- prefix	Regular/irregular; used in perfect tenses and passive voice
Gerund	Not distinct; verbal nouns in -ung or -ing used nominally	Distinct form; blends verbal and nominal properties with full syntactic range
Voice and Aspect	Mostly synthetic; limited use of auxiliaries	Analytical constructions; auxiliaries have, be, will common
Syntactic Flexibility	Limited; restricted positions in clause	Broad; functions as subject, object, complement, modifier

The progression from Old to Modern English reflects a shift from **morphological complexity** to **syntactic versatility**. Modern English non-finites are structurally simpler but **functionally richer**, supporting precise and flexible expression.

7. Conclusion

The evolution of non-finite verb forms in English mirrors the broader linguistic transformation from a **synthetic** to an **analytic** grammatical structure. In Old English, non-finite forms such as the infinitive, participles, and verbal nouns were governed by complex inflectional paradigms, with distinct morphological markers indicating case, number, and gender. Over time, these forms underwent simplification, losing many of their inflectional endings while gaining syntactic mobility and flexibility.

Middle English served as a crucial intermediary period in which the language began shedding its inflectional complexity and adopting periphrastic constructions, particularly with the increasing use of auxiliaries. The participle and infinitive acquired greater roles in forming compound tenses and passive



voice. Simultaneously, the gerund emerged as a distinct category, combining features of both verbs and nouns.

In Modern English, non-finite verb forms have become central to both written and spoken discourse. Infinitives express intent and possibility; participles contribute to aspect, voice, and modification; and gerunds function fluidly as subjects, objects, and complements. The decline of inflection has been compensated by fixed word order, auxiliaries, and prepositions, resulting in a system that is semantically rich and syntactically efficient.

This historical development not only reflects internal linguistic logic but also the influence of contact with other languages, changes in literary and oral traditions, and the evolving needs of communication. The comparative study of non-finite verb forms reveals both the continuity and adaptability of English grammar over centuries.

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