

The aim of the project is to analyze the changing forms and functions of English Nominal Phrases, i.e. syntactic units built around a noun, which can be additionally modified (e.g. by adjectives). The temporal scope of the study covers the periods of Old English and Middle English, which were languages in their own right and differed significantly from the Present-Day English. The former was the language of the Anglo-Saxon invaders who settled in Britain in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, and its character was predominantly Germanic. The latter was spoken in England between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and was massively influenced by French, the language of the Norman nobility who ruled the country after the conquest of 1066.

Changes between these two periods have long been studied on various levels, including words, which were analyzed in terms of their meaning and how they combine into larger units. However, this latter aspect, referred to in linguistics as syntax, has been mostly explored on the clause level, the focus being on the relative order of e.g. the subject and the verb, the verb and the object, etc., while less attention has been given to the arrangement of elements inside a phrase, e.g. the position of the noun against the adjective which modifies it (the adjective can follow its noun or precede it). What is more, there has been a long tradition of studying syntax under very theoretical models which largely ignore the fact that language is a means of communication, and as such its form is as important as the function performed by its individual constituents. Frequently, this tendency has also led to attaching too much importance to unrepresentative samples of language and at the same time neglecting larger sets of linguistic data produced in the course of actual language usage.

This project will offer an account of language structure and change, using a local example of early English Nominal Phrase. Its methodology will be based on obtaining large samples of data from historical language corpora, i.e. digital searchable collections of authentic texts. That way, it will address a largely understudied aspect of early English syntax. Moreover, it will adopt a usage-based framework, where language is seen as a primarily functional phenomenon organized according to more general principles of human cognition, i.e. as a network of mutual relations between elements which are categorized into groups according to formal and functional similarities holding between them. As a result, the project will contribute to our better understanding of both a particular syntactic aspect of early English, and the operating of language in general, which is a “complex adaptive system” that keeps changing to address the functional needs of its speakers.