

ON THE DECLINE OF THE INFINITIVAL ENDING *-n* IN MIDDLE ENGLISH PROSE*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Inflectional morphology was considerably weakened during the Middle English period (ME). Several factors, such as language contact and internal developments, contributed to the gradual loss of the residues of the Old English (OE) inflectional system. These developments in language, observed in the different regional dialects, should be reflected in written productions of the time. During the Middle English period, the verbal system developed in many domains. Several variants often coexisted until one of them gradually replaced the other, generally leading to the loss of the old form. Infinitives were a part of this process. Their use and their construction changed during ME. In Present-Day English (PDE), the infinitive is constructed either as a bare infinitive, also known as the zero infinitive, which is often used after auxiliaries, or with the preposition *to*, as found in the following sentences:

- (1) a. Genoveva **will help** you tomorrow.
- b. Don't forget **to go** see Genoveva after class.

In Middle English, the infinitive consisted of both the bare and the (*for*) *to*-infinitives. The bare infinitive was found more often than the *to*-infinitive in early ME, although it was gradually replaced by the *to*-infinitive, which became the most common use of the infinitive. Similarly to most forms of the verbal system, the English infinitive does not possess an additional suffix after the stem in PDE. During the earlier stages of the English language, however, the verbal and the nominal systems, as well as other grammatical categories, were constructed with an additional suffix. The infinitive possessed two major different inflectional forms (or marked forms). One of them is the uninflected, also called simple, infinitive, usually characterised by an *-(i)an* suffix, and the other one is the inflected suffix, usually an *-(i)anne* ending, after the stem of the verb. Over the course of the Middle English period, the infinitive gradually began to lose its inflectional ending. By the late OE period, it already changed from *-(i)an* to *-en*. Progressively, during the ME period, the *-(e)n* suffix, which was the most common form of the infinitive inherited from OE, was then replaced by an *-e* suffix, before disappearing around 1500. The decline of the infinitive suffix *-n* progressed from the northern area of England to the southern region. By the end of the ME period, the infinitive inflection was considered to be lost in written productions (Drobnak 2004: 106).

This research aims to capture how Middle English prose texts used and lost the uninflected infinitive *-n* over time. This paper will first provide an overview of this linguistic change. Then, the material used for this research will be described. Finally, data collected from Middle English prose texts from the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English* (PPCME2) corpus will be analysed. The results obtained illustrate the decrease of the infinitive

*Thank you, Genoveva, for your advice and help! This one is for you.

suffix *-n*. However, the data do not reflect the total loss of the inflection by 1500. Several files contain late occurrences of this ending. Moreover, some earlier texts, which are expected to use it more frequently, contain few, or even no occurrences of the *-n* inflection. These variations suggest the potential impact of additional external and internal factors in the frequency of use of this suffix. This work aims to capture the gradual decline of the *-n* ending in ME prose texts. Since the written material is the only evidence we have access to, it will of course have to remain open to what extent the developments in writing reflect the status of the *-n* ending in the spoken language.

2. INFINITIVES IN THE HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

2.1. English inflectional morphology

PDE has a weaker inflectional morphology than earlier stages of the language. Verbal inflections in PDE occur in few forms, for instance, in the past tense and past participle (generally *-ed*), the present participle (the *-ing* form) or even in a single form of the present tense: the third person singular (*-s*). Most of the other forms are constructed around the verb stem. The forms of the present tense (bare the third person) and the infinitive are all identical. The infinitive is the only non-finite form which is not inflected in PDE, in contrast, for instance, to the present and past participles (Blake 1992: 144).

During the OE period, between 450 and 1100, English had a richer inflectional morphology in all grammatical categories, whether in nouns, adjectives, pronouns or verbs. Similarly to some modern Germanic languages, English had several cases: usually nominative, accusative, dative and genitive (Barber et al. 2009: 123). These cases were often identified by the inflections used. Verbal forms, including infinitives, were similarly distinguished by the use of inflections. As described by Callaway (1913) and subsequently developed by several linguists, the infinitive was first characterised as belonging to the nominal category, before evolving towards the verbal category (“dual nature of the infinitive”, “a verbal noun in Anglo-Saxon” Callaway 1913: 2). Hence, the nominal nature of the infinitive has been defined as the possible cause of the correlation between the infinitive and cases. For instance, the bare infinitive was observed to occur more generally with verbs that select an accusative object, while the *to*-infinitive favoured verbs selecting dative, genitive or some prepositional object (Fischer 1997: 117; Callaway 1913: 60-70). Callaway also links cases to the inflected and uninflected infinitives.

As observed previously, in early English, the verbal system possessed an inflectional morphology which differentiated grammatical forms: for instance, plural forms from infinitive forms, or different tenses from one another. During the OE period, the infinitive was constructed by the combination of the stem of the verb with a suffix, which usually depended on whether it was a strong or a weak verb (Ogura 1995: 12). As described by Callaway, the Anglo-Saxon infinitive usually displayed two types of inflections:

- The inflected, also known as the prepositional or gerundial, infinitive which was made up by the combination of the dative (recognised by the forms *-enne*, as the West Saxon standard, or *-anne*) and the preposition *to*.
- The uninflected, or the simple, infinitive which was generally constructed using the *-(i)an* ending, and occasionally presented the *-on*, *-en* or *-un* endings (Callaway 1913: 2; Ogura 1995: 12).

Although *-(i)an* is the common ending of the uninflected infinitive, it was also used for other verbal forms during the OE period. Similarly, the *-on* and *-en* endings were features of different verbal forms. For instance, the *-an* ending was also used by the first-person plural imperative

and the *-en* ending was found with the subjunctive or the preterit (Ogura 1995: 15). Some confusion between infinitives and other verbal forms has therefore been observed by linguists. For instance, as noted by Ogura (1995), the evolution of the past participle, which becomes *-en* over the course of the ME period, might have been mistaken with the common *-n* ending of the infinitive (Ogura 1995: 13): the past participle was constructed with *-(e)n* in strong verbs, but usually with *-(e)d* or *-t* in weak verbs, which resembles some uncommon infinitive endings found in my data set (cf. e.g. example 14 below). Similarly, Callaway (1913) notes that the present participle, which can be recognised by an *-ende* ending, was sometimes confused with some infinitive endings which used the *-ende* suffix, primarily present during the OE period (Callaway 1913: 2; Blake 1992: 144).

The process of reduction and simplification of the nominal and the verbal inflections started during the OE period. As characterised by Roger Lass, the development of inflectional morphology progressed in the following trajectory, from one system to its opposite: “a move away from the multiparameter inflection typical of the older Indo-European languages to a restricted system with one exclusive or dominant parameter per part of speech” (Blake 1992: 123). Morphological changes are particularly perceptible during the Middle English period, a period of transition which slowly constructs some of the basic structure of PDE. The ME period exhibits a weakened inflectional morphology which is partially impacted by other linguistic domains. ME morphology developed, for instance, due to phonological changes: the “loss and weakening of unstressed syllables (which had already begun in Late Old English...) at the ends of words destroyed many of the distinctive inflections of Old English” (Barber et al. 2009: 167). This development led many endings to “become identical” (Barber et al. 2009: 167). Verbal inflections then tended “to be replaced by more analytic devices” (Barber et al. 2009: 171).

2.2. The infinitive suffix *-n* during the Middle English period

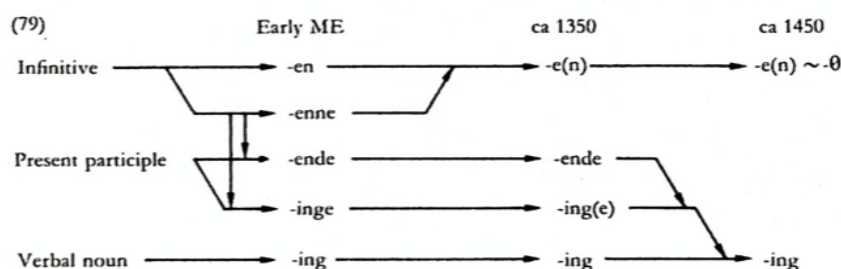
During the Middle English period, suffixes remained a characteristic attribute of verbs, although their frequency of use continued to decrease. The inflectional ending *-n*, spelt often as *-en*, was a recurrent feature of the infinitive during the Late Old English (LOE) period and the Early Middle English period (EME) (Ogura 1995: 15). The common infinitive inflection, for the uninflected form, *-(i)an* changed to *-(e)n* during the EME period, as a consequence of the weakening of unaccented vowels to an *e*, [ə], in the LOE period (Drobnak 2004: 105). The following infinitives provide examples of these instances (as found in the *Middle English Dictionary* and in my data):

- (2) PDE infinitive: *(to) tell – (to) bear*
 OE uninflected infinitive: *tellan – beran*
 ME uninflected infinitive: *tellen– bēren*
 telle – bēre

Various spellings of the infinitive were used in texts, particularly of the early English periods. Although *-(e)n* was the recurrent feature of the infinitive, some other inflections were used in Middle English prose texts: for instance, the *-i/yn* or the *-on* endings. Although the *-n* ending was the most frequent inflection of the infinitive at the beginning of the Middle English period, it was gradually replaced by the *-e* ending or even by the form which used no suffix at all. Verbal inflections generally developed differently in the various areas of England (Blake 1992: 136). Similarly, the disappearance of the *-n* suffix differed in the main regional dialects. The change usually starts in the northern areas and gradually spreads in England, ending in the southern parts. According to Wright (1928), cited by Drobnak (2004), “in Northumbrian, the final *n* of the infinitive disappeared already in Old English, in Midland dialects by the year

1300, in the south it survived until the 15th century” (2004: 105-106). Regional dialects might therefore influence the use of the *-n* suffix in prose texts. However, as pointed out by Robert Fulk, “dialect distinctions are valid only if they are understood to be very imprecise. As modern dialect surveys demonstrate, regional dialects are not uniform in nature, but in an area of any estimable size associated with a regional dialect there will be regional variation” (Fulk 2012: 113). In addition to regional variation, texts had different writing systems, as standardization of the language did not arise until the Late Middle English period. The Middle English literature often consisted of translations and transcriptions from works originating from other languages, primarily of French or of Latin origin. Copies and translations of ME documents usually involved scribes from different areas, which might present additional complications to the understanding of the language of ME manuscripts (Blake 1992: 163).

Between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the status of the English language changed. The new English standard was based on the East Midland dialect, more specifically on the London area, notably due to the economical and administrative strength of this region; this standard language therefore was not a descendant of the West Saxon literary language, the OE standard language (Barber et al. 2009: 154). As depicted by the following diagram of the verbal system of the London standard (Blake 1992: 146), the infinitive appears to start losing the *-(e)n* suffix around the mid-fourteenth century, following the general development of the reduction of the infinitival inflection in the Midlands regional dialects. By the end of the ME period, both the *-e* suffix and the *-θ* ending are more commonly used than the *-n* ending.



However, remnants of the suffix *-n* are observed in several manuscripts from the end of the ME period. In his examination of LME texts, Roger Lass notices that some works actually contain several instances of the infinitive inflection *-n* despite the general disappearance of this form in most written work (Blake 1992: 98). Lass observes in a sample from Caxton that some verbs, particularly those that are frequent and common, such as *to be*, appear to favour the *-n* ending more than other forms. Hence, he suggests that the lexicon plays a role in morphological change and in the resistance of the infinitive inflection in LME (Blake 1992: 98).

Despite the abovementioned analyses, linguists have not paid much attention to the development of the infinitive inflection *-n* throughout the ME period. The literature on this topic is not extensive. It is usually discussed as part of more general observations on the evolution and loss of the Middle English verbal inflectional system. Studies have mainly focused on the syntax of the infinitive in the early history of English, usually the functions and the use of the bare infinitive and the *to*-infinitive. Nevertheless, following notably Callaway (1913), some linguists, as discussed in the following subsection, have observed the coexistence of the infinitive inflection with specific infinitive markers.

2.3. The bare infinitive and the *to*-infinitive

In Present-Day English, the infinitive “is defined as the verb’s basic form, which can be used alone (‘bare’, ‘simple’ or ‘zero infinitive’), or with the particle *to* (*to*-infinitive)” (Drobnak 2004: 103). The PDE bare infinitive is found primarily after the auxiliary *do*, after modal verbs

(for instance, *shall*, *will*, *may* or *can*) and after certain specific verbs (for instance, *let*, *make* or *see*) (Drobnak 2004: 103). These syntactic variants also coexisted in ME texts, with an additional third form: the *for to*-infinitive. The following sentences provide examples of the use of these infinitive markers with the *-n* suffix during the Middle English period:

- (3) a. **to vndirstandyn** what þe forseyd creatur wolde seyn to hym
(CMKEMPE-M4, 82.1849)
'to understand what the said creature would say to him.'
- b. but rapar leuyd it was sum euyl spiryt **for to deceyuyn** hir
(CMKEMPE-M4, 144.3330)
'but rather believed it was some evil spirit to deceive her.'
- c. for he wyl not **belevyn** þis wordys (CMKEMPE-M4, 45.991)
'for he will not believe these words.'

The use of the Middle English infinitive was equally "conditioned by grammatical functions", as it could be used, for instance, as a subject or an object complement (Fischer 1997: 110). These functions generally affected the choice of the infinitive marker, favouring one marker over the other. Grammatical functions restrict the use of these variants throughout the history of the English language. As noted by Fischer (1997), from OE to PDE, the use of the bare infinitive becomes more and more restricted to few specific grammatical functions, mostly to object complement functions, primarily after modal auxiliaries, whereas all other positions favour the *to*-infinitive (1997: 110). These developments evolved in parallel to the general frequency of use of the two markers.

During the Old English period, the bare infinitive was the most common form of the infinitive, whereas, throughout the Middle English period, the bare infinitive is restricted to specific contexts and the *to*-infinitive becomes the most common form (Fischer et al. 2000: 96). Although several factors contribute to the rise of the *to*-infinitive at the expense of the bare infinitive during the ME period, one of the main causes identified by linguists is that the *to*-infinitive construction increased as it started replacing finite *that*-clauses (Fischer et al. 2000: 96). Nevertheless, in connection to the weakened ME morphology, Fischer et al. (2000) point out another possible cause of the rise of the *to*-infinitive. They suggest that it might have had the purpose of distinguishing the infinitive from other verbal forms "due to the reduction and loss of inflections" as the "infinitival endings *-(i)an* and *-enne* for the bare and inflected infinitive respectively) could no longer serve that purpose" (Fischer et al. 2000: 96). Some recent research emphasizes the increasing use of the *to*-infinitive coinciding with the loss, or absence, of the infinitive suffix *-n* during the ME period.

In his article on infinitives in Early Middle English prose, Jack (1991) studies the behaviour and the function of infinitives and their markers. He also demonstrates how suffixes can be analysed in correlation to the marker of the infinitive employed. He focuses on the behaviour of infinitives in early prose texts (between 1150 and c1250), primarily observing the combination of the *to*-infinitive and the inflected infinitive (ending in *-e(n)ne*). Drobnak (2004) also analyses the infinitive marker with the presence or absence of the infinitive suffix *-n*, primarily in past research on the topic and in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. She notes that the remaining instances of the *-n* ending occur primarily with the bare infinitive (Drobnak 2004: 111). An observation which might contribute to explain the development of ME infinitival ending *-n*.

3. METHODOLOGY

The texts used in this paper were obtained from The *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English, second edition* (PPCME2) (Kroch et al. 2000). This corpus contains 55 samples of prose texts,¹ produced between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries. Following the divisions made by the corpora, the files are divided into different sub-periods depending on their dates of composition, which correspond to stages found between 1150 and 1500. There are four main periods: M1-M4, i.e., M1 (1150-1250), M2 (1250-1350), M3 (1350-1420) and M4 (1420-1500), and five ‘unclear periods’, with generally fewer files, in which texts present a different date of composition and of manuscript or in which the date of composition is unknown (MX1, M23, M24, MX4, M34).² The main Middle English periods have around 12 to 16 files, with the Late Middle English period having more data than the earlier ME sub-periods; the M2 sub-period is the only exception, it consists of three works.

The Middle English works show clear evidence for dialect variation, even in the syntax. As English was not yet standardized before the fifteenth century, the language presented some developments which differed according to geographical background, with a distinction to be made among five main dialectal areas: The Northern area, the East and the West Midlands, the Southern area and the Kentish regional dialect, another southern dialect. Most of the Middle English works were composed in the dialects from the Midlands, primarily in the East Midlands dialect. The remaining dialects are less represented in the PPCME2. The Northern dialect and the Southern dialect are found in, respectively, six and five texts each, primarily from the LME period. The Kentish dialect is only observed in three texts, composed in the EME period. The texts group histories, religious texts, sermons, treatises, law works, philosophical texts, biographies, other types of handbooks. Similarly to dialects, some discrepancies in genres can be found between the early stages and the late stages of the Middle English period. The majority of the EME period texts are essentially religious texts (homilies, religious treatises), whereas the LME works present more diversity in terms of genre. Such considerations will not be considered in this paper.

Using *Corpus Search*, I searched for all infinitives, both bare infinitives or (*for*) *to*-infinitives, tagged as BE (*be*), HV (*have*), MD0 (modals), VB (verbs) and DO (*do*) in the texts, which were then combined in a list of the entire set of infinitives from each text. I then went through each text separately, counting manually the numbers of infinitives with the *-n* suffix, the *-e* suffix, the *-o* suffix and the other types of suffixes present in the data. The infinitives have several endings, often the same suffix spelt in a different manner. As the written language was not fixed, many different possible spellings were found in the data, which might have induced some errors in my distribution of the data set. The infinitive suffix *-n* was the main focus of my analysis. From the 35,042 infinitives, 9437 of them are found with the *-n* ending, and its variants. The most common ones are the following: *-(e)n*, *-in*, *-ien*, *-y(e)n*, *-on*, *-an* and *-un*, all of which were found frequently, particularly in EME. The *-(e)n* ending is usually the most common form in ME texts. This verb retains its *-n* ending even during the Late Middle English period, although the use of the form *be* starts becoming more common around the mid ME period. The following sentences provide some examples of the use of the *-n* suffix:

¹ I have omitted one text as it is mainly written in verse: *The Ormulum*, from the M1 period. I nevertheless analysed the infinitives and their suffixes found in the text. The *-n* ending was found in almost all the infinitives of the text: 99.9% (n=2408).

² I.e., MX1 (unknown date of composition, date of manuscript between 1150 and 1250); M23 (date of composition 1250-1350, date of manuscript 1350-1420); M24 (date of composition 1250-1350, date of manuscript 1420-1500); M34 (date of composition 1350-1420, date of manuscript 1420-1500); MX4 (unknown date of composition, date of manuscript 1420-1500). These 9 sub-periods will be combined in the following subsections and analysed on their own.

- (4) þat he xuld **preyn** hys modir to **beggyn** for hir (CMKEMPE-M4, 93.2108)
‘that he should implore his mother to beg for her.’
- (5) for heo ʒeseʒan hine **etan & drincan** mid heom (CMKENTHO-M1, 145.296)
‘for he said to him to eat and drink with him’
- (6) þe Lord þi God þow schalt **worschypon** (CMWYCSER-M3, 399.3129)
‘you shall worship the Lord, your God.’

The *-e* suffix is found in 20,741 infinitives, which represents more than half of the entire data set. It is also found in several different endings which have been grouped under the same label: *-e*, *-ie*, *-o*, or *-i/y*, with the *-e* suffix being the most frequent form. Some of these *-e* endings are still present in PDE spelling of certain verbs, such as in *to make* and *to come*; the PDE and the ME *-e* endings will not be distinguished in the following analysis. I also decided to add to this section all infinitives which present an *-e* ending with what looks now like an inverted spelling: the verb *to suffre* is an example of this phenomenon. The following sentences illustrate several of these instances:

- (7) ʒe schall **breke** vp their doris (CMREYNES-M4, 156.90)
‘he shall break up their doors.’
- (8) þey seyð þat þei wolde **make** al amendes. (CMBRUT3-M3, 3.41)
‘they said that they would all make amends’.
- (9) **Uor to harmi** opren (CMAYENBI-M2, 9.89)
‘(for) to harm others.’

The third most common ending in the data is the *-0* ending, which describes infinitives with no additional suffix, found in 4247 examples. This category generally consists of verbs which already present their PDE spelling: infinitives found nowadays, which do not have any suffix and do not end with a final *-e* in spelling, for instance, *to bring*. Although less common than the PDE *-0* ending, several texts displayed some occurrences of the ME *-0* suffix. The ME *-0* ending is observed in infinitives which possess a final *-e* in PDE, but appear to lose it in some ME texts. Recurrent examples of this phenomenon are found with the infinitives *to com* or *to becom*, in which the PDE *-e* suffix often disappears in some files. Similarly to the *-e* ending, these ME and PDE spellings will not be distinguished in this paper. The following sentences provide examples of the use of the *-0* ending in the data:

- (10) **to bryng** hir to heven (CMROLLEP-M24, 91.436)
‘to bring her to heaven.’
- (11) **to pray** for thaym ... þat ere synfull (CMGAYTRY-M34, 10.115)
‘to pray for them who are sinful.’
- (12) ther schall **com** ij prynsis ... froo Rome ... þe fadyr and þe son
(CMSIEGE-M4, 71.23)
‘there shall come two princes from Rome, the father and the son.’

Table 1. Data of the different infinitival suffixes in 55 Middle English texts

	Total of -n	Total of -e	Total with no suffix	Total of infinitives
P1 (1150-1250)	4686 (83.9%)	852 (15.2%)	50 (0.9%)	5588
P2 (1250-1350)	688 (14.4%)	3372 (70.6%)	718 (15.0%)	4778
P3 (1350-1420)	2479 (15.3%)	11,653 (72.1%)	2037 (12.6%)	16,619
P4 (1420-1500)	1584 (20.1%)	4864 (61.6%)	1442 (18.3%)	7890
total	9437	20,741	4247	34,425
average freq. of use	33.0	54.9	12.2	

The results obtained suggest that the -n inflection was not entirely lost by 1500, following Lass' observations (cited by Blake 1992). The -n inflection still represents 20.1% of the data in P4, even seemingly increasing in texts in LME. The decline of this suffix does not appear to be linear. The -n ending reaches 83.9% of the data between 1150 and 1250, which already suggests some form of development of the infinitival endings in the late Old English period. The -n inflection remains, nevertheless, the main infinitival suffix in P1 prose texts. All fourteen texts from this sub-period mainly present instances of the -n suffix (more than 70% in all texts except for *The Lambeth Homilies*: 58.9%), with, a slow increase of -e ending in texts from the later part of P1, and barely any -o ending. The -n ending decreases significantly after P1 from 83.9% of the data to only 14.4% in P2. In contrast, the -e ending increases considerably in P2 texts, becoming the main infinitival ending from 1250 to 1350, with, finally, the -o ending rising as well in the data, but not as drastically. This final category of infinitival ending does continue to increase in the data from 1250 to the end of the Middle English period, reaching then 18.3% of the data.⁶

The use of the -n ending, similarly to the -e ending, seems to remain relatively stable between 1250 and 1420. These results suggest some variation in the results, more specifically, in individual sub-periods, and individual texts. First, P2, which display the first important decline of the -n ending in ME, presents some variation among its different texts, and sub-periods. In the six P2 texts, the -n suffix only consists of 14.4% of the data, even slightly lower than the use of -o ending (15.0%). Only one text has a high number of -n (*Ayenbite of Inwyt* with 46.1% of use⁷), while all other have between 0% to 12% of -n examples, which contrasts significantly with the use of this inflection in P1 texts. The first change of use of the -n suffix in ME cannot be entirely explained based on the results from P2 texts as they are. Any hypotheses can only remain tentative for this sub-period, due to the small data set, i.e., the very few surviving texts from this time, but more in-depth analysis could offer additional clues to the development in EME.

⁶ From the -o endings found in P4, the majority is obtained from forms which already reflect PDE infinitival forms (with a lack of suffix after the root of the verb). Only 185 are written with the so-called ME form with a missing PDE ending. These results, in addition to the high concentration of the -e ending in P4, suggest that not only is the decline of the -n ending expected to continue in Early Modern English, but the other infinitival endings might also continue to develop in prose from the following centuries, in tandem with other developments, e.g. phonological, until PDE system is established.

⁷ This is not the earliest text from P2. It was composed in 1340.

In P3, the sub-period with the largest number of texts, the *-e* ending is the main suffix used with infinitives in prose (72.1%), the peak of use in ME, whereas the use of the *-n* (15.3%) and *-o* endings (12.6%) are quite similar, with a slight increase of use of *-n* in comparison to P2. Within the different texts from P3, variation of use again characterises the sub-period. Texts all present different frequencies of use of the *-n* suffix, going from little to already no instances, to even a majority of uses of *-n* (e.g. *The Mirror of St. Edmund (Vernon ms.)* with 82.6% of use). Similarly to P2, the different sub-periods combined in P3 show some differences in their use of the *-n* inflection. The sixteen M3 texts all show this considerable variation of use of no, some or majority of *-n*, whereas the seven M34 texts all have very few instances of this suffix, which generally is found in less than 7% of the data. P3 therefore appears to be an intermediate stage of use for *-n*, which, nevertheless has some important variations of use among texts and sub-periods.

Finally, in P4, for instance, despite the overall higher frequency of use of *-n* obtained in the thirteen text samples from this LME period, even higher than the *-o* ending, several of the texts have little to no instances of the *-n* suffix. The results are impacted on by one single text, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which contains 1490 instances of *-n* out of 1584 (90.1%). Had this text been removed from the data, the new total consists of 94 infinitives with the inflected form *-n* out of 5331 infinitives (1.8% of the data). Similarly, from the 94 remaining examples, 70 of them are found in the text *The Book of Robert Reynes*. This text provides 74.5% of the *-n* examples in the remaining data, after isolation of Margery Kempe's text. By removing this second file from the data, the new total of infinitives with the *-n* suffix from this period consists of 24 hits (0.5%; n=5018).

These results suggest that development of the infinitive inflection in the so-called unclear periods from the PPCME2 corpus, which had been combined based on their dates of composition in Table 1, might need to be analysed differently, or more generally, individual texts might need to be studied separately. The divergence in dates of composition and of manuscript might have impacted the language used (in this analysis, the use of the *-n* suffix) and, therefore, the period in which they are situated. The following table provides the results for the different PPCME2 sub-periods from 1250 to 1500.

Table 2. Data of the different PPCME2 – main and ‘unclear’ – sub-periods (1250-1500)

	Total of <i>-n</i>	Total of <i>-e</i>	Total with no inflection	Total of infinitives
M2	617 (21.7%)	1991 (70.0%)	234 (8.2%)	2842
M23	62 (11.2%)	466 (84.0%)	27 (4.9%)	555
M24	9 (0.7%)	915 (66.3%)	457 (33.1%)	1381
M3	2413 (19.3%)	9010 (72.1%)	1066 (8.5%)	12,489
M34	66 (1.8%)	2643 (71.8%)	971 (26.4%)	3680
MX4	0 (0.0%)	77 (72.6%)	29 (27.4%)	106
M4 without Kempe/Reynes	24 (0.5%)	4024 (80.2%)	972 (19.4%)	5020

As depicted by Table 2, each sub-period presents discrepancies in their use of the different infinitival endings. There are, however, some observations which can be made and could

explain the data from Table 1. All M24, M34, MX4 and M4 sub-periods,⁸ which contain texts with dates of manuscripts from the end of the ME period (1420-1500), show some similarities in their use of the different infinitival endings: very little use of the *-n* ending in contrast to the *-e* ending, or even, to a lesser extent, to the *-o* ending. These results seem to suggest that the language, and therefore the use of infinitival forms, in M24, M34 and MX4 sub-periods is closely related. These sub-periods might have to be analysed together instead, to better understand the disappearance of *-n* in ME. M24 and M34 texts indeed present important differences, as stated before, to their M2 and M3 counterparts. M2 and M3 texts, on the other hand, have similar use of the different suffixes, with some illustration of the continued decline of *-n*, which is at this point less significant than between P1 (which includes both MX1 and M1 texts) and M2. The decrease of *-n* is again more important between M3 and all M24, M34, MX4 and M4 works (combined as P4 in Table 3 below), in which *-n* barely survives, suggesting a second main phase in the decline of this infinitival ending. Finally, as the M23 text is the only file from the M23 subperiod, and as the M2 and M3 period are similar in their frequencies of use, it is less evident to combined it to either sub-period without a more in-depth analysis of the language of all sub-periods. The following table summarises the development of *-n* by compiling the different sub-periods by dates of manuscripts; the M23 text has been set aside.

Table 3. Data of the main ME periods, combined by dates of manuscript

	Total of <i>-n</i>	Total of <i>-e</i>	Total with no inflection	Total of infinitives
P1	4686 (83.9%)	852 (15.2%)	50 (0.9%)	5588
M2	617 (21.7%)	1991 (70.0%)	234 (8.2%)	2842
M3	2413 (19.3%)	9010 (72.1%)	1066 (8.5%)	12,489
P4 ⁹	99 (1.0%)	7659 (75.2%)	2429 (23.8%)	10,187

The following two sub-sections provide an analysis of two potential factors which could influence the development, use and considerable variation, of the *-n* ending in ME prose.

4.2. The dialectal hypothesis

As described in the literature, during the ME period, linguistic variants were not used, nor did they develop, in the same manner in the different dialectal areas. The older OE variants generally tended to disappear first in the northern areas, but subsisted, or rather resisted longer, in the southern parts of England. The infinitive suffix *-n* might therefore reflect those tendencies. As described in section 2 by Drobnak (2004), the northern area generally observed a disappearance of the *-n* ending at the beginning of the Middle English period, whereas the southern area continued using it until the end of the English Middle Ages (2004: 105-106). Although this general trend might be observed in my data, as described in section 2, ME regional dialects often present some internal discrepancies in their use of the English language (Fulk 2012: 113). This variation within dialects renders uniformity in the language from one dialect area rather uncertain and could influence some of the results discussed below. The following table provides the average frequency of use of *-n* in the five different dialects of the Middle English period: Kentish, Southern, East and West Midlands and Northern dialects.

⁸ These consist of two M24 texts, seven M34 texts, one MX4 text and twelve M4 texts.

⁹ This, in contrast to P4 in Table 1, contains all instances from M24, M34, MX4 and M4 (without Kempe and Reynes).

Table 4. Use of the *-n* ending in the 5 different ME dialectal areas

	Kentish Dialect	Southern Dialect	East Midlands	West Midlands	Northern Dialect
average freq. of use	33.2%	1.0%	24.4%	52.7%	0.4%

	P1	M2	M3	P4
Dialects found per period	Kentish East Midlands West Midlands	Kentish East Midlands	Southern East Midlands West Midlands Northern	Southern East Midlands West Midlands Northern

As stated previously, Late Middle English has more diversity in terms of regional dialects compared to the Early Middle English period. However, not all the dialects have the same weight. Most of the texts have been composed in one of the Midlands dialects, according to the PPCME2, most of which are written in an East Midlands dialect.¹⁰ Only three texts, composed in EME, are found in Kentish, whereas both the Southern and the Northern are observed in six LME texts each. Due to these discrepancies, only tentative analyses and observations can be made here.

The highest average frequency of use in Table 4 is found in West Midlands texts. However, as most of the West Midlands texts are from P1 (8 out of 14 files), which have been observed to use the *-n* ending more than other inflections, this result cannot be conclusive. The West Midlands texts from LME, on the other hand, have generally little to no instances of this suffix.¹¹ Had the P1 texts been removed, the average frequency of use would only reach 17.0%, lower than the average of the East Midlands texts, but nevertheless higher than all other two other regional dialects. Similarly, Kentish texts might have a higher average frequency of use due to their early composition dates from the ME period. For Kentish, there already is considerable variation between the three texts, as both P2 texts have significantly less *-n* endings than the P1 one. The use of the *-n* suffix in Kentish works appears to be more frequent than in the other ME southern variety, the Southern dialect, which only has 1.0% of this inflection. The six Southern texts all present very low frequencies of use. These results might again be due to their dates of composition, which are from LME, and would therefore reflect the overall disappearance of this suffix in favour of other forms. Southern texts have a similar average frequency of use of *-n* to Northern texts. The six Northern works present almost no examples of the *-n* suffix (average of 0.4%), which might have been expected from the literature. However, these works are also from LME, which would generally suggest less use of *-n* anyway.¹² Finally, the large amount of East Midlands texts, with their higher frequency of use of *-n*, overall present important variation in their instances of *-n*, ranging from no instance to few examples or even higher numbers of the suffix.

¹⁰ 26 East Midlands texts, which consist of most of the texts from P3 and P4, and 14 West Midlands texts (Although the text *Ancrene Riwe* from P1 is counted as one in the PPCME2, as I coded this text as two parts, I consider both parts as different files in my average frequency of use).

¹¹ Only one text contrasts with the other five and has 82.6% of *-n* inflection: *The Mirror of St. Edmund* (Vernon ms.) (P3), which was already one of the few texts from P3 which still favoured this inflection.

¹² As two Northern texts are from M24, their low use of *-n* in P2 (Table 1) might also be hypothesised to be due to the dialect used in the texts.

Additional factors might provide potential clues to the development of the infinitive suffix within dialectal areas or have an impact on the use of the infinitive suffix in ME prose, such as transcription errors by scribes or language contact. Nevertheless, from the texts analysed in this paper, these factors might not necessarily provide sufficient evidence to explain the use of the *-n* suffix, its absence or its resistance, in specific contexts. Due to the remaining uncertainties, the decrease of the infinitive suffix *-n* might have been influenced by additional factors, potentially language-internal ones. For instance, some linguists have linked the weakening of the infinitive inflection to the rise of the *to*-infinitive, which might suggest that late instances of the *-n* inflection might have occurred primarily with the bare infinitive.

4.3. The impact of the bare and the *to*-infinitives: A study of LME texts

As stated in the literature, the *to*-infinitive became more common during the Middle English period, whereas the bare infinitive started being restricted to specific contexts. The *to*-infinitive increased as the main tool to identify infinitives due to the “phonetic instability of the (unaccented) suffix *-en*” (Drobnak 2004: 109). It might therefore be expected not to appear with the *-n* inflection as commonly in LME. The bare infinitive, on the other hand, might be hypothesised to select the *-n* ending more frequently in infinitives (Drobnak 2004: 109). Two papers have presented some evidence of the use of specific infinitive markers (zero, *to*, or *for to*) with different infinitive inflections. Jack (1991) studies infinitival usage of selected EME prose texts (1991: 311). He primarily focuses on the forms and the functions of the early English infinitive. At the beginning of his paper, he focuses on the occurrence of the infinitive marker of the infinitive (zero, *to* or *for to*), but links the presence of these markers to some infinitive inflections (particularly the inflected *-enne* with the *to*-infinitive). The texts he examines include twelve texts from my data (although he does not use the PPCME2 corpus): eleven texts from P1 and one from P2 (the earliest, *Kentish Sermons*). Similarly, Drobnak’s (2004) paper demonstrates the correlation between the infinitive marker, the grammatical position of the infinitive and the presence or absence of the infinitive inflection. Although it is not the main focus of her article, she analyses the combined presence of the infinitive marker with the *-en* suffix or the lack of ending in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. This text contains two files from my data set, *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson’s Tale*, both from P3. Drobnak tested her theory on Chaucer due to the “general consensus that in his time different forms of infinitives featured as syntactic variants” (2004: 110). These two papers note the connection between the development of the infinitive marker during the ME period and the infinitive inflection. Drobnak, in particular, remarks the preference for the bare infinitive with the residues of the inflection *-n* in LME texts, however, her results present some examples of this ending with the *to*-infinitive.

I have decided to observe the behaviour of several LME works from my data in order to determine whether the infinitive marker might be significant in the evolution of the infinitive inflection *-n*. I have gone through the instances of the *-n* suffix of the texts with manuscript dates between 1420 and 1500 (M24, M34, and M4, corresponding to P4 in Table 3).¹³ These files were compiled together due to the similarities in the use of the *-n* ending, as observed previously, and due to their common date of manuscript. I have manually searched for the infinitives with the *-n* ending, excluding high frequency verbs,¹⁴ and divided them into the bare

¹³ The MX4 text, also considered here, does not have any *-n* ending and cannot be used in this analysis.

¹⁴ I have decided to focus here only on verbs other than *have/be/do*. Most of the data for *have/be/do* + *n* is found in one single file, *The Book of Margery Kempe*. As the results shown before suggested that other lexical verbs and those few high frequency verbs behaved similarly with their use of the different infinitival endings, it would be expected for them to follow the findings described in Table 5.

infinitive and the *(for) to*-infinitive.¹⁵ The data are composed of a total of fifteen files with the *-n* ending. There are 1417 verbs without *have/be/do* using this inflection. Each text generally has few instances of this suffix, compared, for instance, to the *-e* ending. The following table summarises the results obtained for infinitives without *have/be/do*. The texts are listed per period in chronological order.

Table 5. Use of the *-n* suffix with the different infinitive markers in LME prose texts

Text samples	Total of <i>-n</i>	Bare infinitive	<i>(For) To</i> -infinitive
<i>Rolle's Treatises (M24)</i>	5	2 (40.0%)	3 (60.0%)
<i>Rolle's Epistles (M24)</i>	4	2 (50.0%)	2 (50.0%)
<i>Mirror of St. Edmund (M34)</i>	2	0 (0.0%)	2 (100.0%)
<i>Gaytryge's Sermon (M34)</i>	1	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)
<i>Hilton's Chapters (M34)</i>	7	5 (71.4%)	2 (28.6%)
<i>Book of Vices and Virtues (M34)</i>	5	1 (20.0%)	4 (80.0%)
<i>ME Sermons (M34)</i>	1	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)
<i>Mirk's Festial (M34)</i>	38	18 (47.4%)	20 (52.6%)
<i>The Book of Margery Kempe (M4)</i>	1283	861 (67.1%)	422 (32.9%)
<i>Capgrave's Chronicle (M4)</i>	2	0 (0.0%)	2 (100.0%)
<i>Malory's Morte Darthur (M4)</i>	1	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)
<i>Book of Robert Reynes (M4)</i>	58	31 (53.5%)	27 (46.5%)
<i>Gregory's Chronicle (M4)</i>	1	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)
<i>Caxton's Reynard the Fox (M4)</i>	8	7 (87.5%)	1 (12.5%)
<i>Siege of Jerusalem (M4)</i>	1	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)
total	1417	932 (65.8%)	485 (34.2%)
average frequency of use		62.5	37.5

The results suggest that both the bare infinitive and the *to*-infinitive are found with the infinitive suffix *-n* in LME prose texts. Following my hypothesis, the bare infinitive presents more

¹⁵ I have decided to combine the *to*- and the *for to*-infinitives and will not investigate them further in this paper. There are some discrepancies between the two forms. If they are divided, there are 403 instances of the *to*-infinitive (83.1% of the data) and 82 of the *for to*-infinitive (16.9%). The *to*-infinitive is generally the more common form. It is found more often with infinitives in LME, particularly with the *-e* and the *-θ* endings. It is also more frequent with the *-n* ending than the *for to*-infinitive. However, despite those results, the average frequency of use suggests that some texts again impact on the results as the *to*-infinitive has an average of 47.1%, whereas the *for to*- has one of 19.6%.

occurrences of the *-n* ending in these texts than the *to*-infinitive. It consists of 65.8% of the data, with an average frequency of use per text of 62.5%. On the other hand, the *(for)* *to*-infinitive with the *-n* ending is found in 34.2% of the data (average frequency of use of 37.5%). As observed previously, the general data obtained and the results per text present some discrepancies. Although the bare infinitive is the most common marker used with the *-n* ending, some texts, even with very few instances of *-n*, appear to have slightly more instances with the *(for)* *to*-infinitive.

As Table 5 gathers the results from M24, M34 and M4, some discrepancies or further similarities between these texts might be reflected in these results. The two files from the M24 period both present rather similar frequencies of the *-n* ending. They contain 5 and 4 instances, which corresponds to 0.8% and 0.5% of their data. Similarly, the infinitive markers are found in more or less the same proportion in the data. *Rolle's Treatises* consists of 40% of bare infinitive and 60% of the *to*-infinitive, whereas *Rolle's Epistles* consists of half instances of the bare infinitive and the other half of the *(for)* *to*-infinitive (50% for both markers). Their combined results present 5 *(for)* *to*-infinitives and 4 bare infinitives with the *-n* suffix, respectively with frequencies of 55.6% and 44.4%. In the six M34 files found here, the distribution of the bare and *to*-infinitives appears to be equivalent as well. There are 26 instances of the suffix *-n* with the bare infinitive (48.1%) and 28 of the *(for)* *to*-infinitive (51.9%) out of 54 instances of the *-n* ending. Variation among the texts can again be observed, as some of them favour the *-n* ending with the bare infinitive (*Gaytryge's Sermon*, *ME Sermons* and *Hilton's Chapters*), whereas the others prefer the *(for)* *to*-infinitive (*Mirk's Festial*, *Book of Vices and Virtues* and *Mirror of St. Edmund*).¹⁶ Both M24 and M34 texts therefore present rather similar results.

In the seven M4 texts, there are 1354 occurrences of the *-n* inflection: 902 instances with the bare infinitive (66.6%) and 452 examples with the *to*-infinitive (33.4%). The discrepancy between the two infinitive markers appears to be more important in the files from this sub-period. However, as observed previously, one of the texts contains a substantial amount of data, which highly impacts on the data set: *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In Table 5, this text is responsible for a majority of the occurrences found with both infinitive markers: 1283 instances out of 1417. *The Book of Margery Kempe* has 861 examples of the *-n* ending with the bare infinitive (60.8% of the data for all sub-periods) and 422 of the *(for)* *to*-infinitive (29.8% of the data for all sub-periods), which corresponds in total to 90.5% of the entire data set. If omitted, the new results for these markers are as follows: 71 *-n* ending with bare infinitives and 63 with the *(for)* *to*-infinitives out of 134 instances, respectively 53.0% and 47.0% of the data. In contrast to the frequencies from Table 5, the difference between these markers is reduced without this text and suggests that additional factors might also influence the decision to use the *-n* ending with a certain infinitive marker.

The Book of Margery Kempe contains the majority of the *-n* data in M4, with 1283 instances (94.8% of the data; n=1354). If it is removed, the new results for both infinitive markers in M4 are as follows: 41 *-n* instances with the bare infinitive and 30 with the *(for)* *to*-infinitive, respectively, 57.7% and 42.3% of the data (n=71). The bare infinitive retains its higher frequency of use with the *-n* ending, even without this text. The difference between the two markers remains slightly more significant in M4 than in M24 and M34. Even without the second text with the highest frequency of the *-n* inflection from both P4 and M4, *The Book of Robert Reynes*, similar results are obtained: 10 bare infinitives (76.9%; n=13) compared to 3 with the *to*-infinitive (23.1%; n=13). This might suggest a form of coexistence of the two variants with the *-n* suffix until M4, during which the bare infinitive is preferred with this

¹⁶ *Mirk's Festial* contains a larger data set than other M34 texts, with a slight preference for instances with the *to*-infinitive. However, even if removed, the results remain similar to the ones described here, suggesting that M34 texts select the *-n* ending with both variants.

inflection. Although, due to the results obtained, more than a coexistence, there appears to be a slight preference for the *to*-infinitive with the *-n* suffix in M24 and M34.

Overall, the *-n* inflection is used with all ME infinitive markers until the end of the Middle English period, despite some variation in their frequencies depending on the text. Following the results obtained by Drobnak, the bare infinitive is found with the *-n* suffix more frequently than the *to*- and *for to*-infinitives, but the results seem to suggest that the choice of the infinitive marker might not be sufficient to explain the late occurrences of the infinitive inflection *-n* in LME texts.

Another prospective study of this topic could focus on the nature of the grammatical function in which they are used or even the preference of certain verbs, both lexical and auxiliary, for one option. As described in the literature, the bare infinitive becomes restricted to certain verbs by the end of the ME period. Some discrepancies in these specific contexts regarding the *-n* inflection might occur. In the files studied in this section, the bare infinitive with the *-n* suffix was mostly conserved in the position after modal verbs, primarily after *shall* (or its past tense, *should*), or even *may* and *will* (often in their respective past forms). *The Book of Margery Kempe*, particularly, reflects this high ratio after modals. Other auxiliaries were almost absent from my data, and only a few instances of *do* + infinitive + *n* were present.

Although the data set presents the decline of use of the infinitive *-n* ending, in favour of other suffixes, some open issues persist. These remaining questions concerned primarily the few works from P2 in which the first significant decline of the *-n* suffix was observed and the late occurrences from P4. However, there are some additional factors which could have influenced, or explained, these results. First, the infinitive inflections were counted and classified manually, which might have induced errors in the data set. Secondly, this paper did not analyse all the texts, or even all infinitives, in detail. Moreover, only ME prose texts were considered in this paper. Verse texts from the Middle English period, which are largely found in P2, might have provided additional answers to the development of the infinitive suffix during the gap between P1 and P2, providing potential explanation to the significant decline at the time.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper studied the decline of the infinitive suffix *-n* and its spelling variants over time in 55 prose texts from the PPCME2 corpus. Similarly to the development of inflectional morphology during the English Middle Ages, infinitives gradually lost their endings, notably the *-(e)n* suffix, by 1500. However, neither this inflection ending, nor other variants, such as the ME *-e* ending were entirely lost in prose by the end of the Middle English period. These results emphasized the non-linear decline of the *-n* infinitival inflection due to the data of some sub-periods. Although the *-n* suffix was progressively lost by the end of the ME period, several prose texts still presented late occurrences of the inflection, with most of them occurring in one single text, *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Only few residues persisted in other LME text samples. Variation in the use of the suffix among the texts characterises each sub-period.

External and internal variables presented some additional insight into the evolution of this infinitive inflection, although they were not necessarily conclusive. Further study might provide answers to the remaining uncertainties observed in some periods from my data, in particular M2, M4, M23 and M24. The analysis of the language of several files in more depth might explain the behaviour of certain texts regarding the evolution of the *-n* inflection and of the infinitive in general. In particular, the strikingly high frequency of *-n* in *The Book of Margery Kempe* at a very late stage would merit further investigation. Furthermore, other linguistic or non-linguistic factors might have to be examined in order to determine whether there is an

influence on the use of the *-n* suffix. Finally, a more detailed analysis of the *-e* ending, which can still be found with certain verbs in PDE (*come, make*) may also shed some further light on the decline of infinitival morphology in English.

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