On the Third Person Singular Present Indicative Ending -*s*

—— Origin and Development ——

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the third person singular of the present indicative has the ending-s and we usually use it not knowing the reason for its existence. In OE and ME, all persons in the present had inflectional endings but only the third person singular ending-s has been preserved to this day.

I shall show here the historical transition of verbal inflectional endings. The OE verbal endings in the present were inflected thus:

Table I (a)

	Singular	Plural
1.	-e	
2.	-(e)st	-ath
3.	-(e)th	

Table I (b)

ex. help

	Singular	Plural
1.	helpe	

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2. help(e)st   helpath

3. help(e)th

In ME, each dialect had its own inflectional form, but the earlier features were mainly preserved:

Table II (a)

Singular	Plural
1. -e	
2. -est, -es	-es, -is
3. -es, -eth	

Table II (b)

ex. help

Singular	Plural
1. helpe	
2. helpest, helpes	helpes, helpis
3. helpes, helpeth	

The two tables show us that verbs in earlier days had inflectional endings in all persons, but nowadays, only the third person singular has an inflectional ending:

Table III

ex. help

Singular	Plural
I help	we help
you help	you help
he helps	they help

We notice the fact, by comparing the older inflectional endings with the present one, that the third person ending-<u>th</u> in older English was replaced by -<u>s</u>.

Joseph M. Williams offers five observations on the adoption of the third person -<u>s</u>.

1. The third person -<u>s</u> allowed poets more rhymes than -(e)<u>th</u> endings.

2. A regular sound change changed final /θ/ as in *wreath* to /s/: kiss(e)ð > kisses.

3. /θ/ is a difficult sound to pronounce in conjunction with other consonants and was simplified to /s/.

4. The -<u>s</u> ending is an analogical extension of the third person <u>is</u>.

5. It was borrowed from Danish.   (Williams, pp. 263-4)

The five observations will be discussed in detail in chapter-II, III and IV. In chapter I, an inquiry into the problem of when the third person ending-<u>s</u> was employed will be made.

C.L.Wrenn says:

> Northern influence is seen in the accidence in the ending of the third person singular in-<u>s</u> or -<u>es</u> of verbs, which replaced the Southern and South Midland ending -<u>th</u> or -<u>eth</u> in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries... (Wrenn, 1952, pp. 120-1)

That is to say, Wrenn takes the opinion that the third person singular ending-<u>s</u> (1) originated from Northern dialect and (2) was introduced into standard English in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

H.Sweet also has the same point of view:

> The main innovation in the MnE verb-inflections was the

introduction of the Northern -s̲ in the 3rd pers. sing. pres. indic. -*he calls*- which was introduced into Standard English through the medium of the Midland dialect. (1960, p.383)

O. Jespersen gives an even more detailed explanation about the origin and the time when the third person ending-s was first employed:

> If the s̲ of the third person singular comes from the North, this is true of the outer form only; the 'inner form', to use the expression of some philologists, is the Midland one, that is to say, s̲ is used in those cases only where the Midland dialects had th̲, and is̲ not extended accordingly to the northern rules. (1967, p. 192)

And as for the time:

> this (the exclusive use of the -th̲ ending) remained the usual prac-
> tice till late in the 16th century,···.   (1967, p. 188)
> in the Northern dialect of the tenth century s̲ was substituted for
> ꝥ ...   (1967, p. 187)

Sweet and Jespersen have the same opinion as Wrenn that the third person singular ending-s̲ originated from Northern dialect and the former two scholars add that the third person ending -s̲ was introduced into St. E. through the medium of the Midland dialect.

On the other hand, Wyld gives a contradictory opinion:

> On the whole it seems probable that the -es̲ form has nothing whatever to do with the Nthu. dialect, but has been developed quite independently in the South through the influence of, and by anal-
> ogy with, the common Auxiliary is̲.   (1968, p. 257)

In order to clarify the problem, an extensive research by Mossé and Moore on the dialectal distribution of -th̲ and -s̲ in ME will be helpful.

First, Mossé divides England into three parts: North, Midlands and South, and shows the distribution of the verbal inflectional endings in each dialect.

Table IV

		North	Midlands	South
ind. sg.	1.	-(e)	-e	-e
	2.	-es	-est, (-es)	-(e)st
	3.	-es	-es, -e	-e

And he also illustrates the dialectal distribution areas of the third person ending-s.

(1952, p. 77)
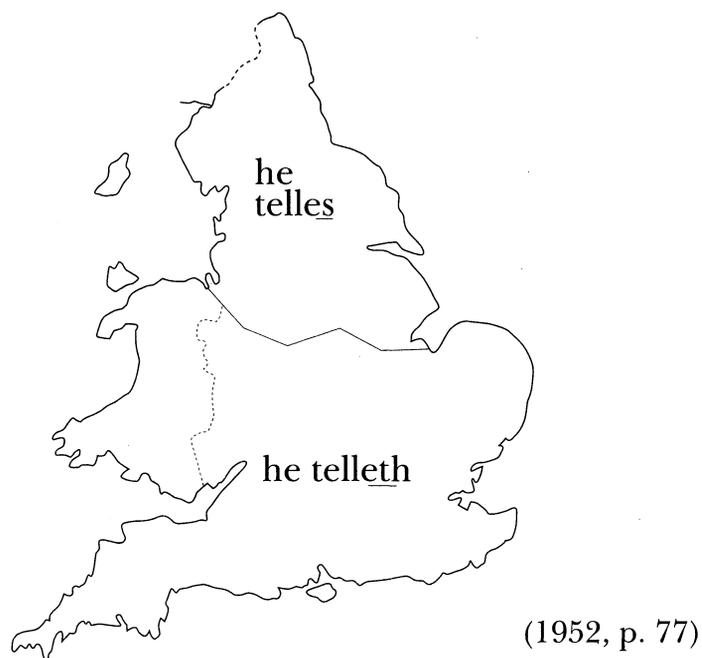
Figure I

Secondly, Moore gives another map, also classified by district.
The dotted line in this map is of great significance as regards the spreading course of the third person ending-s.

ENGLISH

NORTHERN

N.E.
MIDLAND

WEST
MID-
LAND

S.E.
MIDLAND

WALES

KENTISH

SOUTHERN

(1951, p.112)

MIDDLE ENGLISH DAILECT AREAS

Figure II

Moore explains as follows:

> The dotted line constitutes the southern limit for the -(e)s inflection
> in the third person singular, present indicative of verbs. Although
> this inflection was destined to become established as the regular
> inflectional form in the Standard English, it had not yet attained
> such status in the South East Midland dialect as employed by
> Chaucer and his contemporaries, ...   (1951, p. 115)

The inflectional ending of the third person in each dialect is shown
in the following table.

Table V

North.	N.E.Mid	S.E.Mid	W.Mid	South.	Kent.
-es	-es	-est	-es -eth	-eth	-eth

(pp. 116-7)

As far as Mossé and Moore are concerned, it seems certain that -s form was introduced earlier in Northern districts than in the Southern districts. To sum up these scholars' opinion, the ending-s spread from North to South. However, looking at Moore's Table V, we notice the fact that the ending-s did not appear in the South East Midland dialect in ME in spite of the fact that the West Midland dialect had already employed the ending-s in the same period. This is the reason why Wyld says that the -es form was introduced quite independently in the South.

We cannot decisively say which of the two incompatible theories is justified, but, everything considered, it seems to us that Wyld's view is highly reliable on the ground that we can not find definite evidence in the S. E. Midland dialect. In whatever way it is clear that the third person ending-s might came to be the accepted form in Standard English. We are convinced that the Southern dialect had a good reason for needing the ending-s independently from the Northern dialect.

In this chapter, we saw the ending-s first appeared in the Northumbrian dialect of the tenth century and was popularized in all districts by about the sixteenth century and got to a question what is the factor that replaced the ending -th with -s. In the following chapters, we will extend our research on the third person ending-s bringing this question into focus along with Williams' opinions shown in INTRODUC-TION.

CHAPTER II

AN INQUIRY INTO WILLIAM'S OPINION 1

OPINION 1   The third person-s̲ allowed poets more rhymes than -(e̲)th̲

endings.

What does Williams' comment mean? Williams seems to insist on the syllabic

difference of rhyme in the use of -(e̲)th̲ and -s̲.

That is to say, the word *come* is monosyllabic when the third person ending-s̲

is used *-comes-*, but is dissyllabic when the ending-(e̲)th̲ is used *-cometh-*. Poets

used the ending-s̲ in order to reduce the number of syllables in their poetical

lines.

Erik Holmqvist also notes:

> early -s̲ forms were evidently borrowed from Northern poetry and
>
> were used for the sake of the rime.   (1922, p. 159)

We can understand the reason why poets allowed the ending-s̲ in

place of the -(e̲)th̲.

From what place of the language did the third person ending-s̲

originate? Is it colloquial or literary?

Wrenn says on the subject that the third person ending-s̲ was intro-

duced first in the literary and then in the spoken language. (1952, p. 121)

He takes the point of view that the ending-s̲ originated from literary

works. Jespersen says that it was first introduced by poets, though his

opinion is a little vaguer than that of Wrenn. On the contrary, these two

scholars, who maintain the theory that the ending-s̲ is of a colloquial origin

are Wyld and Charles Barber.

Wyld states:

> It has been suggested that the -s̲ forms of the 3rd sing. passed into

prose literature from the poetical writings, and from prose literature to colloquial speech. This now appears to me highly improbable... But it is hard to believe that what was destined to become the only form in the colloquial language should have come into that form of English primarily from poetry. It is more likely that the use of the -s forms in poetry is quite independent of third introduction into colloquial English.   (1956, p. 335)

Barber also affirms that:

It seems likely that, in the Early Tudor period, the third singular-es was a colloquial form.   (1976, p. 239)

These two hypothesis are quite contradictory. Which is more appropriate, the former (Wrenn and Jespersen) or the latter (Wyld and Barber)? Nowadays, the latter (-s forms are of colloquial origin) is commonly accepted and it seems proper to take into consideration the theory of Wyld and Partridge.

Wyld says:

It is evident that the number of persons who read poetry must at any time be very small in comparison with the population as a whole; and poetical diction, in so far as it differs from that of ordinary life, can exercise but a slight influence upon the colloquial language at large. If the -s forms of the 3rd Sing. Present gained currency primarily from poetical and then from prose literature, it would be difficult to explain how, in a comparatively short time, they attained such universality of usage, ...   (1956, p. 335)

And Partridge says:

Literature and the ability to read were not yet sufficiently widespread to exert so strong an influence on current speech.

(1953, p. 155)

Jespersen is of the viewpoint that the third person ending -s̲ originated from literature and says that it was first introduced by poets. This is true in the one respect that poets are likely to accept new words into their works as Joseph Williams says in his theory 1. However, we can expect that these new words were already used in colloquial language when poets employed them. In other words, it is more likely that the third person ending-s̲ spread from the colloquial to the literary language.

In addition, we would like to consider how the third person ending-s̲ spread in literature.

Bambas refers to this issue in connection with Spenser's usage in his research; "Spenser prefers s̲ in poetry... in his prose t̲h̲ predominates even much more than s̲ does in his poetry." (1947, p. 184) Barber says; "Round about 1600, when both -e̲t̲h̲ and -e̲s̲. occur frequently, there is still a tendency to use -e̲s̲ in less formal styles of writing, especial in plays, while -e̲t̲h̲ is more likely to occur in formal prose... -e̲t̲h̲ was more formal and dignified." (1976, p. 240)

In truth, though Ben Jonson used -s̲ forms in 20% of all instances in his *The English Grammar*, he never used -t̲h̲ forms in his play *The Alchemist*.

Ex.

1) Hitherto we have declared the syntax of a noun: the syntax of a verb followe̲t̲h̲, being either of a. verb; with a noun, or of one verb with another. (*The English Grammar*, 1692, p. 85)

2) Otherwise it varie̲t̲h̲ from the common rule. (*The English Grammar*, 1692, p. 81)

3) That makes̲ it, sir, he is so. But I buy it. My venter brings it me. He, honest wretch, A notable, superstitious, good soule, Has worne his knees bare, and, sir, let him Do it alone, for me, still. (*The Alchemist*, 1616, II, II, 1. 1. 100-104)

4) Sir, as he likes̲, his sister (he saye̲s̲) shall come. (*The Alchemist*, 1616, III, IIII,

1. 13)

CHAPTER III

AN INQUIRY INTO WILLIANS' OPINIONS 2 and 3

OPINION 2 A regular sound change changed final /θ/ (as in *wreath* to /s/;

kisseð > *kisses*.

Williams thinks that the reason why the ending-t͟h was replaced by the -s͟

is a sound change. He mentions the word *wreath*, so I looked it up in

Everyman's English Pronouncing Dictionary, which says:

Table VI

wrea|th, -ths   ri:θ, -ðz [-θs]

wreath|e, -es, -ing, -ed   ri:ð, -z, -ɪŋ, -d

As far as we see from this table, we cannot find /s/ in pronunciations

of -t͟h at the end of the word, *wreath*. This leads us to the question of

whether Williams' theory 2 is proper or not. If not, are there any good

reasons for the replacement of -t͟h by -s͟?

As for the phonetic transition of -t͟h to -s͟, Charles Barber provides a

comment by quoting William Camden's account concerned with -t͟h:

> By about 1600 there are clear indications that people often wrote
>
> -et͟h but expected it to be read as -es. William Camden, in his
>
> *Remains of a Greater Worke* (1605), gives an account of Sir Thomas
>
> Smith's proposed spelling reforms, where the following sentence
>
> occurs:
>
> Z; he would have used for the softer S, or eth, and as d͟iz for
>
> dieth, l͟iz for lies. In other words, Smith wanted the letter Z to be
>
> used as the regular spelling for /z/; but Camden himself clearly uses

the spelling <u>eth</u> and <u>es</u> indifferently to represent the allomorph [-z] (dieth, lies). (1976, p. 239)

Though Barber adds later that this does not mean that -<u>eth</u> was ever heard in the spoken language, the fact that -<u>eth</u> was pronounced -<u>es</u> has a close relation to Joseph M.Williams' theory 2.

These two scholars seem to touch upon the phonetic transition of -<u>th</u> to -<u>s</u>, which, however, must be examined more carefully.

Bohumil Trunka shows us in the following the relevant features of English phonemes by making correlated bundles of oppositions that are represented in all the four relevant localizations.

Table VII

Labial	Dental-alveolar	Postalveolar	velar-glottal
p b	t d	t d	k g
f v	θ ð	ʃ ʒ	h

In dental- alveolar consonants, there is a correlation of voice between /t/ and /d/, /θ/ and /ð/. And /t/ and /θ/, /d/ and /ð/ are in a correlation of constriction. It seems certain that if the phoneme /θ/ has a possibility of changing itself into another one, the possible range is only in the Dental-alveolar group; /t/, /d/, /ð/.

There are some other scholars who have studied /θ/ phonetically. Sapir says that /θ/ is not near to /s/, but near to /ð/ in English. And moreover, he declares that /θ/ can be changed into /t/, as /ð/ into /d/, but it cannot be changed into /s/.

Arisaka also says that /θ/ in the primitive Germanic changed into /t/ in Danish, Swedish and Irish English. And Yasui says that the spelling <u>th</u> for the sound /t/ originated from Latin.

These scholars deny the transformation from -th to -s. We must then look for a better reason why the ending-th was replaced by -s. Here we would like to consider why the ending-th was replaced by -s.

It seems to us that the -th was inappropriate as a verbal ending, because th(/ð/) plays two important roles besides verbal ending: th(/ð/), when used at the beginning and the middle of words, has two big functions, one is equvalent to "demonstrative" and the other to "comparison, contrast in a wider sense".

The former is found in; this, that, these, those, there, then, the, and the latter is in; father, mother, brother, whether, than, etc.

Th(/ð/), when used at the end of words, has various functions in addition to verbal ending.

We picked up words which have -th at their ends in Walker's *THE RHYMING DICTIONARY* and classified them according to their parts of speech in order to consider the functions of -th.

Table VIII

part of speech	noun	adj.	adv.	verb	others
number	153	7	7	5	3

The above table tells us that 91.4% of all words had nominal meaning and these nouns can be analyzed in more detail according to their construction

(1) noun   : mouth, health

(2) adjective + -th : depth > deep, truth > true

(3) verb + -th   : growth > grow, stealth > steal

(4) ordinal number : hundredth, ninetieth

The words which have -th as ending have these four characteristics, among which the third must be especially referred to; we must, for example, pay attention to the word *growth*. This word has two functions, one is as 'noun' and the other is as 'verb + the third person ending-th'. It can confuse us to distinguish between noun and verb.

As mentioned above, two reasons tell us that the ending-th is not appropriate for a verb ending:

> (I) the ending-th is a characteristic noun formative suffix ···(1)
>
> (II) the difficulity of distinguishing between noun and verb ···(3)
>
> So it has to be replaced by another letter in order to form the third person ending.

In this chapter, we examined the ending-th phonetically and pointed out its inappropriateness as a verbal ending.

Then we will show here Williams' opinion 3.

OPINION 3. /θ/ is a difficult sound to pronounce in conjunction with other consonants and was simplified to /s/.

This is also the phonetical view about the third person ending, so we would like to include it in this chapter.

It seems doubtless that the pronunciation of /θ/ is not so easy for us who study English as a foreign language. However, Lord says:

> The English [θ] and [ð] are not difficult for the English speaker;
> in fact they seem to be quite natural, for English people when more
> than a little drunk tend to affricate their plosives, saying "puth ith
> thown" (for "put it down").   (1966, p. 85)

The opinions of Williams and Lord seem contradictory, but the point we have to take notice of is the fact that Williams refers to the difficulties of the pronunciation when /θ/ is connected with other consonants and

Lord touches upon the question of the sound /θ/ itself.

Here we will give our view on the pronunciation of /θ/. That is to say, the pronunciation of /θ/ itself is not so difficult, but it becomes difficult when connected with another consonant.

Then if a great number of verbs end with consonants, it goes without saying that -th added to the verb stem is difficult to pronounce, and th is felt to be inappropriate as the verb ending.

We picked up all verbs from Walker's *THE RHYMING DICTIONARY* and considered the word-ending sound.

Table IX

	Vowel & Diphthong	Consonant													
Phonetic Sign	a: ui: ə ɔ: i u ə: i: u: uə ei au ɛə ai ou iə	b	d · t	f	g · ŋ · dʒ	k · tʃ · ʃ	l	m	n	p	s	v	z	θ · ð
Number	1019	87	1918	47	248	624	621	175	427	195	479	121	470	12
Total	1019 (15.8%)	5473 (84.2%)												

This table shows us that only about 15.8% of all verbs end with a vowel phonemes, and most of the verbs end with a consonantal phoneme. This result gives us a good reason why the ending-th is not appropriate to a verbal ending. Here, let us examine the opinion of Robert Lord again. He says that an English man, when (more than a little) drunk, often pronounces "puth ith thown" (for "put it down"). About the word *puth*, the letter before -th is the vowel, u. The sound before -th in *ith* is a vowel, i.

And as for *thown*, th- is put at the beginning of the word,

After all, th- before and after a vowel, and th itself are not so difficult to pronounce, but the pronunciation of th when connected with another consonant is difficult.

We can infer that it is especially difficult to pronounce when the ending-th is put at the end of the word's end with t and th. So we will show some examples in *THE RHYMING DICTIONARY*.

ex.

- verbs end with t: eat, doubt, overact, greet, lift,

   lament, consent, count, shoot, etc.

- verbs end with th: bequeath, lath, smooth, tooth, unearth,

   worth, south, etc.

Finally, we would like to refer to the auxiliaries *hath* and *doth* which were prevalent till about the middle of the eighteenth century. Though the ending-th did not appear in prose or plays, *hath* and *doth* was still used:

Table X

The Alchemist

Form	Hath	has	doth	does
Number (%)	16 (25.8)	46 (74.2)	16 (45.7)	19 (54.3)

(Ben Jonson, 1610)

The Tempest

Form	Hath	has	doth	Does
Number (%)	20 (76.9)	6 (23.1)	11 (44.0)	14 (56.0)

(Shakespeare, 1611-2)

ex.

- Your eld'st acquaintance cannot be three hours:

Is she the godness that hath sever'd us,

And brought us thus together?

(*The Tempest*, V.1. 11. 186-88)

-Hee'll throw away all wordly pelfe about him;

Which that he will performe, shee <u>doth</u> not doubt him.

(*The Alchemist*, III.V.11. 17-8)

Why were they maintained longer? Many scholars mention that *hath* and *doth* lingered because of their frequent use. We think, of course, this is a very important fact, but three more reasons will be added. First, because of their auxiliary character, they must be included in a different category from other main verbs. And the second is concerned with the phonetic reason: the sound before -<u>th</u> (*hath*, *doth*) are vowels. Moreover, when a verb the stem of which ends with a consonant is employed with the subject of the third person singular at the end of a rhymed line the third person ending-<u>th</u> is extremery troublesome and inappropriate.

CHAPTER IV

AN INQUIRY INTO WILLIAMS' OPINION 4

OPINION 4 The -<u>s</u> ending is an analogical extension of the third person *is*.

Wyld also says that the -<u>es</u> form has been developed by analogy with the common auxiliary *is*. (1968, p. 239) As for Wyld's opinion, we can infer that it is logical to derive the third person ending-<u>s</u> from the common auxiliary is because *is* is frequently used as a common auxiliary verb. A language has its own system, and when some change occurs in the language, it must be carried out within the range of the system.

We can see an example of analogical extension within the range of the system in the development of the possesive pronoun *its*. In OE and ME,

the possessive case of the third person neuter was *his*, but this is the same form as the possessive case of the third person present masculine. Because of difficulty in distinguishing one from the other, the neuter possessive case *his* must be changed.

The replacement of the earlier neuter possessive case *his* by the new form *its* can be shown as in the figure below:

Table XI

OE and NE

person		nominative	objective	possessive
1.		ic	mē, mec	mīn
2.		þū	þē, þec	þē
3.	masculine	hē	him	his
	neuter	hit	hit	his

PE

person		nominative	objective	possessive
1.		I	me	my
2.		you	you	your
3.	masculine	he	him	his
	neuter	it	it	its

The replacement of the third person possessive case *his* provides a model of an analogical extension within the range of a language system. Generally speaking, the third person: noun, verb, or pronoun, is used very frequently, so it plays a very important role in the development of the language. Williams and Wyld seem to give their theories based on the frequent use of the auxiliary *is*.

Then how about Curme's theory? If the third person ending-s emerged by analogy of the second person singular -est(-es), one problem occurs.

Table XII

person	be	verbal ending
1.	am	-e
2.	are	-est(-es)
3.	is	-es, -eth

Phonetically, -th(/θ/) can be changed into t (cf. Chapter III), when we consider that the third person ending-s was introduced by the analogy of the second person ending-est, it should be natural to have a question why the -th did not change to -t. It can be explained as follows: when compared with t, s seems to be pronounced more easily than t where s is combined with other phonemes. Moreover, the second person singular ending did not remain because it was used less frequently than the third person ending.

To sum up, we come to the conclusion that the common auxiliary *is* executed stronger influence on the change of -th to -s. However, every change occurs for various reasons, so we can not deny the influence of the second person singular completely.

Though there is a difference in the degree of influence, we must take into consideration both auxiliary *is* and the second person singular-est as the cause of the change from -th to -s of the third person ending.

CONCLUSION

In the previous chapters, we made a brief survey of the third person

ending-s̲ from various aspects based on Williams' view. The third person ending-s̲ was first introduced into English in the tenth century and accepted into Standard English in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It took a very long time for the new ending-s̲ to replace earlier ending-t̲h̲. Bambas refers to this:

> The old -t̲h̲- forms did not quickly disappear with the acceptance of -s̲ but survived in good use, not only in liturgical writing but in all types of prose, until at least the mid-seventeenth century.
>
> (1947, p. 187)

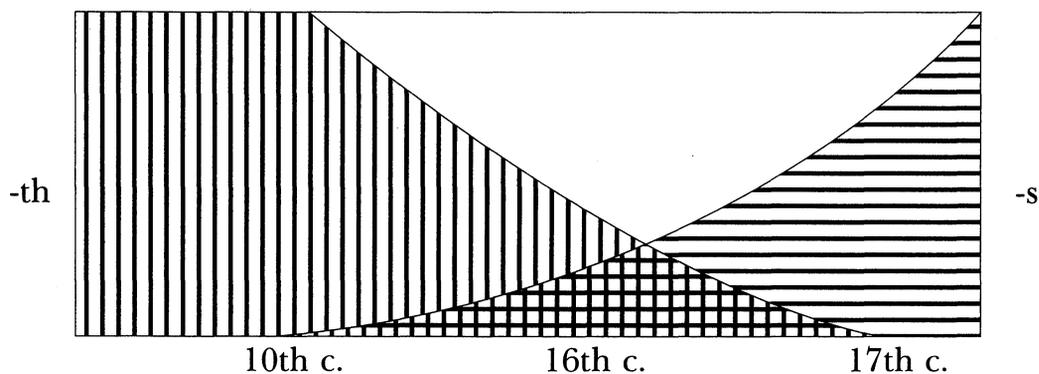We would like to illustrate the process of replacement:

Figure III

The substitution of the ending-s̲ for -t̲h̲ proceeded gradually in Standard English.

Though many scholars insist that the ending-s̲ was ascribed to Northern influence and reached London through the medium of the Midland dialect, we are of the same opinion as Moore that, while admitting the northern influence, the ending-s̲ developed in the south independently. (cf. Chapter I)

The problem whether the -s is colloquial or literary in origin was discussed in Chapter II. It is impossible to believe that the ending-s originated from

literature. We cannot consider that the language of literature exerted such a great influence upon the spoken language because in the period of OE and ME the number of persons who could read literary works must have been very small.

This credible idea was first issued by Wyld, but his following statement: "the -s forms in poetry is quite independent of their introduction into colloquial English." (1956, p. 335) seems to the authors an overstatement. Because the poets are prompt to introduce new words and new usage from colloquial language, it is appropriate to think that the third ending-s found its way first into both poetry and prose through the influence of colloquial language. As for more formal prose, the earlier ending-th was retained much longer, till about the eighteenth century, because of its solemnity.

We also know that the change from the ending-th to -s was not based on a simple sound change. There is no possibility of the sound th(/θ/) being changed into /s/ in Germanic. Every language has its phonetic pattern, and sound change occurs in the range of its phonetic pattern. /θ/ can be changed into /t/ in English, but this goes against the general tendency of English. Since pronunciation generally changes economically, the change th(/θ/) to /s/ seems improbable because the sound /t/ needs more muscular activity than /θ/. Arisaka shows a reliable theory referring to Saussure that the degree of difficulty of pronunciation must be inquired into from not only physiological but also psychological aspects. (1969, p. 235)

That is to say, the ending-th changed into -s because the ending-th began to be felt inappropriate to a verbal ending: this is a psychological aspect of the transition from -th to -s.

However, it is doubtless that th(/θ/) is pronounced only with difficulty when it is combined with another consonant. This phonetic condition has an effect on the change from -th to -s, because many verbs end with consonantal

phonemes.(cf. Chapter III)

Lastly, why was /s/ having no common phonetic features with /θ/ accepted? We arrived at the conclusion that /s/ was introduced partly because of the common auxiliary *is*, partly because of an analogical extension from the second person singular -(e)st.

Through our research on the third person ending-s, we could make a small step toward understanding the theory of linguistic change. Linguistic change takes place by no means instantaneously but gradually over several centuries.

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