Activity 7.1 - *The Fox and the Wolf*

Impersonal verbs

There are three examples of an **impersonal** syntactic construction which is now archaic. The verb has no subject, and in the examples in the text the initial pronoun is in the dative case.

him were leuere	to him (it) were more pleasing	= he would rather
him wes loþ	to him (it) was loth	= he was loth, unwilling
him wes wo	to him was woe	= he was woeful

Spelling of voiced fricative consonants

OE		*The Fox & the Wolf*
fox	⟹	vox/wox
fus	⟹	wous (= vous)

The spellings *vox/wox* = [vɒks] and *wous* = [vuːs] illustrate the voiced pronunciation of the consonants <f>, <s> and <th> at the beginning of a word in southern dialects of OE and ME. This is still a feature of SW dialectal accents today.

   In the three OE words *næfre, leofra, ofer eall*, the <f> represented a voiced [v] because it was conditioned by its neighbouring voiced sounds (compare MnE spelling of [s] and [z] as <s> in *cats* and *dogs*). In Text 39 letter <u> is written for the [v] consonant in *neuere, leuere, oueral*.

Vowels

- OE <æ> ⟹ <e>

nǣfre	⟹	neuere
ǣror	⟹	erour
strǣte	⟹	strete
wæs	⟹	wes
næs	⟹	nes
þænne	⟹	þen
but þæt	⟹	þat

Generally, OE long [æː] became ME [ɛː], and short [æ] became [a], or [ɛ].

- OE <u> ⟹ <ou>

ut	⟹	out
hundred	⟹	oundred
hus	⟹	hous
fus	⟹	wous (= vous)
hungor	⟹	hounger

The spelling <ou> for [uː] was adopted from the French, but the pronunciation was unchanged.

- **shift of OE [ɑː] to [ɔː]**

gan	⟹	go
wa	⟹	wo
nan	⟹	none
swa	⟹	so
nawþer	⟹	nouþer
laþ	⟹	loþ
an	⟹	one
strac	⟹	strok

This is evidence that the poem could not have been written in a northern dialect.

- **smoothing of <ea> to <a>**

healf	⟹	half
ofer eall	⟹	oueral
weall	⟹	wal/walle

- **smoothing of <eo> to <e> or <o>**

leofra	⟹	leuere
heold	⟹	hoeld

- **[e] + [j] or [ɣ] ⟹ /eɪ/**   wey *fr* weg
  ofsei *fr* ofseh

The final consonant has been lost, and the vowel has become a new ME diphthong, like MnE RP *way*.

- **elision of medial consonant**   wimmen *fr* wifmenn

- **reduction of suffix**   mete/meten *fr* metan
  leuere *fr* leofra
  wiþinne *fr* wiþinnan
  aquenche *fr* acwencan

The reduction and eventual loss of inflections is most important because it changes the grammar of the language.

   The pair of rhymes *strete/mete* [strɛːtə] [mɛːtə] (*fr* OE strǣt/mete), is evidence of,

(i)   the **shift** of one vowel - /æː/ > /ɛː/, and
(ii)   the **lengthening** of the other - /ɛ/ > /ɛː/ - open syllable in disyllabic word, so that both OE vowels fell together in ME.

Spelling

- **<qu-> for OE <cw-> & <ch> for OE <c> = [tʃ]**

    acwencan ⇒   aquenche

Both these spellings are also from French writing.

- **<y> for <i>, but rhymed with *aquenche***

    drync   ⇒   drunche

    ofhyngred ⇒   afingret

We would expect *afhungred*.

The spelling *hoeld* probably represents [hoːld]. Elsewhere in the poem *god* (MnE *good*) is spelt *goed*, and rhymes with *blod* (MnE *blood*).

- **<o> for <u>**

    wude   ⇒   wode

Other features of *The Fox & the Wolf*

So far we have discussed some of the evidence of changes in pronunciation which can be deduced from the patterns of spelling in the manuscripts. One important development, the reduction of many unstressed suffixes to <e>, pronounced /ə/, was not simply a sound change. The loss of inflections leads to, and is a part of, a change in the grammar. Other features of ME grammar can be seen in these two texts.

Grammatical changes

The following three examples of a construction which is found in OE also, but which is no longer in MnE, occur in *The Fox and the Wolf*. A literal translation is also given:

    him wes wo   to-him was woe
    him wes loþ   to-him was hateful
    him were leuere to-him were more pleasing

There is no subject to the verb. In MnE we have to supply one, the "dummy subʒect" *it,*

        it was hateful/pleasing to him.

The ME *him* is the old dative case, so in MnE we have to add the preposition *to* to give the same meaning. This is called an **impersonal** construction.

As in OE and most MnE dialects still, the **double** or **multiple negative** was used:

        He **nes neuere** in **none** wise ...
        He **ne** hoeld **nouþer** wey **ne** strete ...

This text also shows the development of the indefinite article *a/an* from the OE numeral *an*, which at first meant *one* only. Examples of both uses occur, with variant spellings:

Him were leuere meten **one** hen ...	= **one** hen
half **an** oundred wimmen ...	= half **a** hundred women
he ofsei **ane** wal ...	= he saw **a** wall
Wiþinne þe walle wes **on** hous ...	= **a** house

Vocabulary

All the vocabulary of *The Fox and the Wolf* is derived from OE. There are changes of meaning in apparently familiar words which sometimes cause difficulty in reading if we are unaware of the change. For example *mete* in both OE and ME meant *food* in general. This meaning survives in the MnE collocation *meat and drink*.

(The vocabulary is listed in the *Word Book*.)