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THE SEMANTIC SHIFT IN THE ADJECTIVE *ILL*

Rafał Molencki

In this article I trace the semantic development of the adjective and adverb *ill* in English, whose history strongly corroborates LEECH's (1981) semantic transfer rules and TRAUGOTT's (1989, 1995) theory of subjectification. The illustrating language material comes from the electronic versions of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) and *Middle English Dictionary* (MED) and the source references are marked according to the conventions of their lexicographers. The modern translation of the medieval examples is my own.

The adjective *ill* appeared in English in the early 13th c. as a Norse loanword and it did not acquire its modern prototypical sense of 'sick, unwell' until the Early Modern English times. The original sense of the Norse adjective *illr* was 'bad', as in the following quotation from the Old Icelandic *Snorra Edda*:

(1) **Skaði's Marriage** 100: *ulfa þytr þóttumk **illr** vesa hjá sœngvi svana* (quoted after GORDON, 1957: 100). '*The wolves' howling seemed to me to be bad as compared with the seabirds' singing*'.

The same sense (often contrasted with the adjective *god* 'good') is also found in the earliest English uses of the adjective in the *Ormulum*:

(2) **?c1200 Orm. (Jun 1)** 54: *3a þa þatt wærenn gode menn, 3a þa þatt wærenn **ille***. '*Both those that were good men and those who were bad*'.

The word *bad(de)* of obscure origin (cf. OED, MED) is not attested in English until the late 13th c. The usual adjective corresponding to modern *bad* in Old English was *yfel* and it continued to be used in Middle English, e.g.

(3) **a1425(?a1400) RRose (Htrn 409)** 4899: *Youthe...makith hym love **yvell** company*. '*Youth makes him love evil company.*'

In Middle English the word *ill* commonly occurred in collocations with nouns like 'devil, spirit', the sense approaching modern 'sinful, wicked', as in:

(4)   **a1300 *Hit bilimpeð* (Corp-O 59)** 23: *Ne let þu neure cumen vs ne3, þene feond þe is swo **ille***. '*Don't you ever let come near us the fiend that is so wicked.*'

The 'ill angel' simply meant devil, e.g.

(5)   **a1450(?1348) Rolle *FLiving* (Cmb Dd.5.64)** 91/59: *I fynd writen of a reclues...til þe whilk þe **ill awngell** oftsythes aperde in þe forme of a gode awngel*. '*I find a story about a recluse, to whom the ill angel often appeared in the form of a good angel.*'

When referring to human actions the word *ill* corresponded to modern 'vicious, immoral' and was mostly used attributively before the noun that it modified:

(6)   **a1325(c1250) *Gen. & Ex.* (Corp-C 444)** 3576: *Moyses cam ner and sag...ðis calf and ðis **ille** lages*. '*Moses came near and saw this calf and these vicious laws.*'

(7)   **a1450(?1348) Rolle *FLiving* (Cmb Dd.5.64)** 97/10—27: *Þe synnes of þe hert er þir: **ill** thoght, **ill** delyte...**ill** suspecion...**ill** drede, **ill** lufe...joy of **ill** dede*. '*The sins of the heart are there: bad thought, bad delight, bad suspicion, bad fear, bad love, joy of bad deed.*'

The word was also used in similar senses as an adverb:

(8)   **?a1475 *Ludus* C. (Vsp D.8)** 32/105: *Now, Caym brother, þou dost ful **ill***. '*Now, Cain brother, you act very wickedly.*'

(9)   **c1450(a1425) *MOTest.* (SeldSup 52)** 5694: *Þer elders war angerd **yll***. '*Their parents were severely irritated.*'

The impersonal construction *me paid/liked ill* simply meant 'I did not like', e.g.

(10)   **1451—1500 *Tundale* (Wagner)** 1012: *Þat sight **liked** Tundale **ille***. '*Tundale did not like that sight.*'

Another common phrase was *think ill* (=be distressed with something):

(11)   **c1450 *Alph.Tales* (Add 25719)** 282/1: *Þis hermett **thoght ill** þer-with, bod he sayde noght*. '*The hermit was distressed with it, but he said nothing.*'

In Middle English the word *ill* was also used as a noun synonymous with 'evil', e.g.

(12)   **(a1382) *WBible(1)* (Bod 959)** Gen.2.9: *Also þe tree of lyf in þe mydyll of paradise, & a tree of cunnyng of good & of **ylle***. '*Also the tree of life in the middle of paradise and a tree of knowledge of good and evil.*'

Through subjectification (cf. TRAUGOTT, 1989, 1995), the word *ill* later acquired more subjective senses of 'malicious, unkind':

(16)   **a1500 *Now 3ee that will* (Cmb Ff.1.6)** 71: *[She was] Soo well assuryd in here hert That none **il** worde from here scholde stert*. '*She was so well assured in her heart that no malicious word would start from her.*'

'difficult':

(17)   **?a1400(a1338) Mannyng Chron. Pt. 2 (Petyt 511)** p. 181: *Þat castelle was fulle strong, & **ille** for to wynne*. '*The castle was fully fortified and difficult to seize.*'

and also 'deficient, incompetent':

(18) **(c1390) Chaucer *CT. Rv.* (Manly-Rickert)** A.4045: *I is as **ille** a millere as ar ye*. '*I am as bad a miller as you are*.'

The adverbial *ill* often preceded past participles of different verbs gradually becoming a kind of prefix, usually hyphenated. (cf. Present-day English *ill-famed*, *ill-informed*, etc.). Here are some examples of the original medieval formations:

(19) **c1450(a1425) *MOTest*. (SeldSup 52)** 5792: *God wyll not take offerand of **yll gottyn** thyn*g. '*God will not take the sacrifice of a thing gained by evil means*.'

(20) **a1500(1422) Yonge *SSecr.* (Rwl B.490)** 226/35: *Tho men..that haue the flesshe of the brestis lytill and dry bene **ille-ymanerite** and bene lykenyd to apys*. '*Those men who have the flesh of their breasts small and dry are rude and are similar to apes*.'

Another new sense of later Middle English *ill* was that of 'harmful, dangerous', which was the first step towards the usual modern meaning of the word. Witness the following example:

(21) **c1450(c1350) *Alex. & D.* (Bod 264)** 157: *Dredful dragonus drawen hem þiddire, Addrus and ypotamus and oþure **ille** wormus*. '*Dreadful dragons drew them there, adders, hippopotamuses and other dangerous worms*.'

When the word came to modify the medical conditions of humans, the semantic path was paved for approaching the sense of 'sick':

(22) **?a1450 *Macer* (Stockh Med.10.91)** 182: *Þis drieþ vp þe **ille humourez** of þe stomak*. '*This dries up the harmful fluids of the stomach*.'

The noun *humour* was borrowed into English in the mid-14th c. and originally meant 'body fluid' (hence the adjective *humid*) and only in the modern period did it acquire the abstract sense through a similar subjectification process.

In the 14th c. *ill* was often used with reference to pain:

(23) **a1325(c1280) *SLeg. Pass.* (Pep 2344)** 1432: *Ne spak he nou3t a word a3en, ak soffrede þe peynes **ylle***. '*He didn't say a word again, but suffered severe pains*.'

And towards the end of the Middle English period one can observe the first clear instances of the modern sense 'sick, diseased', invariably used in the predicative position only:

(24) **a1500(a1460) *Towneley Pl.* (Hnt HM 1)** 123/231: *A sekenes...haldys me full haytt...full sore am I and **yll***. '*A disease holds me very hot... I am in great pain and ill*.'

Early Modern English witnesses the increasing frequency of such occurrences of *ill*. What is interesting is the reference of the adjective to different parts of the body (as in (26), (27) below):

(25) **1575 G. Harvey *Letter-bk.* (Camden)** 168: *I am yet as **il** almost as ever I was. But as soone as I shal recoover mi helth...*

(26) **1628 Winthrop Let. 7 Apr. in** *Hist. New Eng.* **(1853)** I. 420: *My hand is so ill as I know not when I shall be able to travel.*

(27) **1660 Pepys** *Diary* I. 127: *My eye was very red and ill, in the morning.*

(28) **1687 A. Lovell tr.** *Thevenot's Trav.* i. 227: *There was one little Child ill of the Small-pox.*

However, it was not until the turn of the 19th c. that the present prototypical sense began to dominate. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (s.v. *ill*), which presents the semantic development of subsequent entries in the chronological order, lists the usual modern sense of *ill* as late as the sense No 8. Its full definition is "Of health or bodily condition: Unsound, disordered. Hence, of persons (formerly, also, of parts of the body): Out of health, sick, indisposed, not well". Other modern dictionaries, both British and American, usually start their definitions of *ill* with the meaning 'of bad health', taking into account the frequency of occurrence. Other senses, which are historically earlier, are given much less prominence. Except for some fixed phrases such as *ill will*, *ill fortune*, *ill luck*, the attributive *ill* meaning 'bad' sounds very formal and old-fashioned to most native speakers of Present-day English.

The adverbial *ill* appears to be a little more common, especially in such fixed phrases as *speak ill* of *somebody*, *be ill at ease* and *ill afford*. But the most frequent use of the adverb *ill* is the hyphenated *quasi*-prefix attached to past participles of numerous verbs, e.g. *ill-advised*, *ill-behaved*, *ill-bred*, *ill-conceived, ill-disposed*, *ill-equipped*, *ill-fated*, *ill-gotten*, *ill-informed*, *ill-treated* (cf. the Middle English examples (19), (20) above).

As for the syntactic behaviour, the Present-day English adjective *ill* is predominantly used in the predicative function, as the subject complement, which is observed, e.g., in QUIRK et al. (1985: 432) and SWAN (1995: 267). LEECH and SVARTVIK (1994: 220) claim that 'health-adjectives' (*faint*, *ill* and *well*) are "predicative-only". What is more, *ill* is so rarely followed by the prepositional complement that some pedagogical grammars proscribe the structure *ill with* (*some disease*). However, it looks that more and more native speakers find nothing wrong in the construction. I have managed to google out numerous instances of the phrase including the headline.

(29) **USA** *Today* **Oct 25, 2004**: *Chief Justice Ill with Cancer.*

Likewise, *ill* appears to be increasingly found in the attributive position in the sense 'sick', which until recently was regarded ungrammatical by most prescriptive grammarians though ALEXANDER (1993: 63) admits that "*he's an ill man* is also sometimes heard". The ambiguity of the word *sick* (*ill* vs. *nauseous*) and its different usage in British and American English must have brought about the need for the rise of an unambiguous multifunctional adjective that would mean 'unwell' in all possible syntactic contexts, without the earlier selectional restrictions. In Present-day English *ill* as a modifier is particularly

common when it is modified by such adverbs as *terminally*, *critically*, *chronically*, *mentally*, etc. Witness the following examples from recent newspapers:

(30) **Guardian Feb 12, 2007**: *Terminally **ill woman** seeks right to die.*

(31) **Kids' Health July 2005**: *Taking care of a chronically **ill child** is one of the most draining and difficult tasks a parent can face.*

The examples as above have paved the way for the appearance of the adjective *ill* used as a modifier on its own, e.g.

(32) **Oregonian Nov 20, 2007**: *Cornelius blood drive will help **ill girl**.*

(33) **Saginaw News May 19, 2008**: *Coast Guard rescues **ill man** off freighter in Lake Huron.*

Similar instances are not yet very common, and they mostly occur in newspaper headlines, but they are the first signs that the old sense of the attributive *ill* (='bad', 'evil', 'vicious') is gradually fading away from the native speakers' lexicon in favour of the sense 'unwell', which until very recently was considered correct only in the predicative position.

The history of the adjective *ill* in English shows that the word became polysemous in Late Middle English. In the modern period one of the marginal senses 'of bad health' became very expansive and in the 19th c. began to dominate. Under the circumstances, the other polysemes, including the original etymon meaning 'bad', became much rarer and in Present-day English they are stylistically marked as formal and/or old-fashioned. The development supports the rules of semantic transfer as presented by LEECH (1981) and nicely illustrates TRAUGOTT'S (1989, 1995) process of subjectification.

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