

5: Old English Adjectives

Sightreading

Ælc Cristen man sceal cunnan his paternoster and his credan.

Ic mæg mid handum swa fela wundra gewyrcean.

Ic eom Godes cempa, ne mot ic na feohtan.

Heo cuðe Godes æ.

Oft ic þe bæd þæt ic moste to þe faran.

Hit ne mihte eall mancyn gedon gif he sylf nolde.

Þæt witon boceras, þe þæt leden cunnon, þæt we na ne leogað.

Adjectives: Strong Versus Weak

When declined weak, adjectives have many forms that end in *-an*.
(The same goes for weak nouns.)

	Masc. Sg.	Plural
Nom.	gōda	gōdan
Acc.	gōdan	gōdan
Gen.	gōdan	gōdra
Dat.	gōdan	gōdum

Accordingly, they are less helpful in identifying case and number. Look to the first modifier and/or the noun instead.

- ▶ þām gōdan cyninge

German Adjectives

German adjectives come in three declensions, which are really permutations of strong and weak, plus one uninflected form:

- ▶ **Uninflected:** in *predicative* (i.e. post-head) position and unconnected speech
 - ▶ Der König ist **gut**
 - ▶ **Gut!**
- ▶ **Strong:** beginning the noun phrase; following an indication of quantity
 - ▶ **Guter** König!
 - ▶ **Gute** Menschen sind selten.
 - ▶ Ein bisschen **guter** Wille
- ▶ **Mixed:** following the indefinite article or a possessive adjective
 - ▶ Ein **guter** König
 - ▶ Mein **guter** König
 - ▶ Meine **guten** Könige
- ▶ **Weak:** following other modifiers (notably articles)
 - ▶ Der **gute** König

Old English Adjectives

Old English adjectives come in uninflected, strong, and weak, but with a different distribution:

- ▶ **Uninflected:** headless/unconnected speech
 - ▶ Gōd!
- ▶ **Strong:** beginning the noun phrase; in predicative position
 - ▶ Gōde cyningas
 - ▶ þā cyningas sindon gōde
- ▶ **Weak:** following any prior modifiers; in address
 - ▶ se gōda cyning
 - ▶ Mīnes fæder gōda cyning
 - ▶ Eala gōda cyning!

German Versus Old English Adjectives

Syntactic Context	German	e.g.	Old English	e.g.
Unconnected/headless	Uninflected	<i>gut</i>	Uninflected	<i>gōd</i>
Predicative	Uninflected	<i>gut</i>	Strong	<i>gōd</i>
Preceded by indefinite	Strong	<i>guter</i>	Weak	<i>gōda</i>
Preceded by possessive	Mixed	<i>gute(r)</i>	Weak	<i>gōda</i>
Preceded by genitive construction	Mixed	<i>gute(r)</i>	Weak	<i>gōda</i>
Preceded by anything else	Weak	<i>gute</i>	Weak	<i>gōda</i>
First word in phrase	Strong	<i>guter</i>	Strong	<i>gōd</i>
Address	Strong	<i>guter</i>	Weak	<i>gōda</i>

Old English: Strong Adjective Declension

Gōde cyningas	First word in phrase
Þā cyningas sindon gōde	Predicative position
Gōd!	Unconnected
Hwæt is gōd?	Predicative position
Hwæt is gōd willa būtan gōdnys?	First word in phrase

(Red indicates differences from German usage.)

Old English: Weak Adjective Declension

Se gōda cyning	Preceded by demonstrative
Ān gōda cyning	Preceded by indefinite
Mīn gōda cyning	Preceded by possessive
Þāra Seaxna gōda cyning	Preceded by genitive construction
La gōda cyning!	Address

(Red indicates differences from German usage.)

Old English Adjectives: Strong and Weak

Always strong:

- ▶ Possessive adjectives (*mīn*, *his*, *ēower*):
Gyt ne cōm mīn tīd; ēower tīd is symble gearu.
- ▶ *Ōþer* (“second, other”):
Ic gebyre mīnne ōþerne hlāford.

Always weak:

- ▶ Comparatives:
Hige sceal þē heardra
- ▶ Ordinal numerals other than *ōþer*:
Mæg wæs his āgen þridða and hē feōrða sylf.

Adjectives: Strong and Weak

<i>Strong</i>	Masc.	Neut.	Fem.	<i>Plural</i>	Masc.	Neut.	Fem.
Nom.	til	til	tilu	Nom.	tile	tilu	tile
Acc.	tilne	til	tile	Acc.	tile	tilu	tile
Gen.	tiles	tiles	tilre	Gen.	tilra	tilra	tilra
Dat.	tilum	tilum	tilre	Dat.	tilum	tilum	tilum

<i>Weak</i>	Masc.	Neut.	Fem.	<i>Plural</i>
Nom.	tila	tile	tile	tilan
Acc.	tilan	tile	tilan	tilan
Gen.	tilan	tilan	tilan	tilra
Dat.	tilan	tilan	tilan	tilum

Comparison

- ▶ Comparative adjectives always decline weak;
- ▶ Superlatives decline according to context.

Positive	Comparative	Superlative
blind	blindra	blindost
hwæt	hwætra	hwatost
hālig	hāligra	hālgost
eald	ieldra	ieldest
geong	gingra	gingest
hēah	hīerra	hīehst
lang	lengra	lengest
sceort	scyrtra	scyrtest

Comparison

Irregulars:

Positive	Comparative	Superlative
gōd	betra	betst
gōd	sēlra	sēlest
yfel	wiersa	wierst
micel	māra	māest
lȳtel	lāssa	lāest