

IS IT THE EDITORS' TASTE OR THE WORD'S LIFE?

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ABSTRACT

Though not a very frequent term and hardly common in Present Day English, *abed* can be found in earlier periods of the language. The adverb, as many others beginning with the prefix 'a' was written as two separate words before 'a' became a prefix. Originally 'a' comes from the OE preposition *on*, which explains its meaning as different from the indefinite article 'a'.

The present paper analyses the presence of *abed* from a diachronic perspective in several corpora. The use of some of the literary instances found in such corpora will be analysed in the different editions of their literary sources. For this reason, the survey allows to explain the evolution of the term not only in relation to historical linguistic aspects, but also according to the tastes of the different editors and their times.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present study is an attempt to trace the evolution of the term *abed* as well as the possible influence that the different editors' choices may have had on this evolution throughout the history of literature. In this sense, it is first necessary to reach a full definition of the term of analysis. This answers questions of primary importance for the study like "Where does 'a' come from?" "What is 'a' in *abed*?" or "Did 'a' experience an evolution from Preposition to Prefix?" Hence, a preliminary approach to the history of *abed* turns essential. Several dictionaries and grammars have been checked for this purpose (Lowth, 1775 & Skeat, 1874; Johnson, 1775 & Wallis, 1653; Duncan, 1731 & Kersey, 1702). With this intention, also, the use of *abed* in *The Helsinki Historical Corpus* has been analysed.

Historically speaking, no real consensus was found when comes to consider 'a' in *abed* to be either a prefix, a preposition, or a particle (Aickin, 1693; Stein, 2007; Nevalainen, 1999: 355; Duncan, 1731; Aickin, 1693/ 1967; Murray, 1795; Wright 1857). Thus, besides *The Helsinki Historical Corpus*, contemporary British and North American corpora like *The British National Corpus*, *The Time American Corpus*, and *The Brigham Young University Corpus of Contemporary American English* have been used in search of answers. Not in vain, a possible evolution of 'a' in *abed* from preposition to prefix has not been clearly traced yet either.

Finally, the electronic database *English Literature Online* has been used to try to see the possible editorial influence on the evolution of *abed* through the analysis of different editions of original works by Edmund Spenser (*Astrophel*, *The Shepheardes Calendar*, *The Teares of the Muses*), Sir Philip Sidney (*Arcadia*, *Astrophel and Stella*, *The Psalms of David*), or John Gower (*Confessio Amantis*). At the same time, all of these texts had been previously selected thanks to the *English Literature Online* electronic resource.

2. TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF ABED

According to the *OED* (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989) the adverb / adjective *abed* seems to be an archaic or obsolete form, with the exception of the meaning "confined to bed (by illness)", which seems to have been a later expansion from the more physical meaning of being literally 'in bed'. The *OED* also points out that *abed* comes from the combination of the Old English form 'on', which originally indicated position, and the noun 'bed', where 'on' would have evolved into 'a' by a process of phonological reduction and it would only have been in the last three centuries the two words would have been

written as one single word. However, as will be seen, despite not being one of the most frequent words in English, it is still used in present day English not only when the discourse is intended to remain archaic, but in every day common language.

In order to analyse how this word was formed and the evolution of uses and meanings it has undergone, dictionaries and grammar books as well as corpora corresponding to older periods of the English language were analysed. Many lexicographers and grammarians seem to agree in the sense that *abed* is a combination of the original Old English preposition 'on' and the noun 'bed'. They include Lowth (1775) and Skeat (1874). However, there are others like Johnson (1775) and Wallis (1653) that state that the (today) prefix 'a' comes from the form 'at'. There are some others like Duncan (1731) or Kersey (1702) who seem to connect the prefix 'a' to the preposition 'in', either referring to the meaning of *abed* as 'in bed', or indicating that the prefix 'a' "is a worn-down, proclitic form of the Old English preposition 'on' or 'an'. It absorbed the preposition 'in' in West Saxon (Newmann, 1943: 278). This could explain the presence of 'in bed' in the corpora with the same meaning as *abed*.

As for the type of element 'a' in *abed* is, different opinions have been found. Nowadays, it is considered by most linguists a prefix added, in this particular case, to the noun 'bed'. It would enclose the meanings of 'in', 'on', 'to' and 'at' (Stein, 2007), which means that it would include the ideas of location and direction. However, in the specific word we are dealing with in this paper the meaning would be basically locative (with metaphorical extensions), except for the expression 'to bring *abed*'.ⁱ

However, there are other opinions. For example, also in Present Day English, Marchand indicates that "this 'a' is not a true prefix,

because it does not function as a determinant of the combination it forms” (in Nevalainen, 1999: 355). It is certainly clear that it retains the meaning of the original preposition and it does not bring about any changes to the word it is attached to.

Along the history of the English language, this ‘a’ has been considered an inseparable preposition (Duncan, 1731), that is, it is a preposition that is never used but in composition. Aickin (1693/ 1967) also refers to ‘a’ as a preposition used in composition. On the other hand, Murray (1795) mentions that there are some adverbs derived from nouns with the addition of the particle ‘a’, as *abed*. Finally Wright (1857) in his dictionary states that ‘a’ is frequently prefixed to words in composition, without clearly stating whether it is a prefix or not.

These differences in agreeing on what this ‘a’ is, are due to the fact that it does come from an original preposition, which along the history of the language has experienced several processes of phonetic reduction and it has been losing stress as it has got closer to the word it was accompanying (which at the same time was complementing it) until the two separate words became one and were slightly more grammaticalized. This process of evolution can be seen both in the corpora and in the different dictionaries and grammars, as explained above.

Even though there seems to be a tendency to spell the term *abed* with a hyphen in between ‘a’ and ‘bed’, that is as *a-bed*, until the very end of the 18th century, we can also find the form *abed* already as one single word as back as at the end of the 17th century (Aickin, 1693). It is very important to take into account this apparently small difference because it implies to what extent *abed*

was understood as one single element or as two separate ones forming a prepositional phrase.

It is also interesting to point out that this must have been a frequent word both in the 17th and 18th centuries as most dictionaries (if not all) and grammar books include it in their lists of words or their explanation of the prefix / preposition 'a', whereas in contemporary grammar books such as Downing and Locke (1992) it is not included within the 'a-prefixed' words or it is simply recorded as archaic in dictionaries, which in fact contrasts in a way with what was found in the present day corpora, as indicated above.

3. *ABED* IN HISTORICAL CORPORA

After having analysed what the situation was like in dictionaries and grammar books at different times of the history of the English language, our impression was that we were not going to find the term *abed* as we can find it today until the last periods of Early Modern English.

However, in *The Helsinki Corpus of the English Language* we can already find three examples of *abed* as one single word—one of *abed* and two with the form *abedde*—in Middle English, whereas in the Early Modern English period only one example of *abed* as one word could be found, although there was another example of *A bed* as two separate words but with the same meaning as *abed*.

In the three periods that the corpus covers, that is Old, Middle and Early Modern English forms such as 'in bed(de)' or 'on bed(de)' can be observed, except for the last period, where only 'in bed' could be found.

In order to see the tendency of the evolution of *abed* in later periods, we also checked *The Corpus of Early English Correspondence*

Sampler (CEECS), a corpus of letters written between 1470 and 1680, where there were only examples of ‘in bed(de)’. As for the period of Late Modern English, *The Corpus of Late Modern English Prose* (a collection of letters from 1860 to 1919) was used. There appeared no examples of *abed* at all in this period, whereas there are a few instances of ‘in bed’.

The summary of the examples found in the different historical corpora are shown in the following table.

	Old E Helsinki Corpus	Mid E Helsinki Corpus	EME Helsinki Corpus	CEECS 1470-168 0	Late Mod E Prose 1860-191 9
In bed	Present ⁱⁱ	Present	Present	Present	Present
On bed	Present	Present	0 examples	0 examples	0 examples
Abedde	0 examples	2 examples	0 examples	0 examples	0 examples
A bed	0 examples	0 examples	1 example	0 examples	0 examples
Abed	0 examples	1 example	1 example	0 examples	0 examples

4. ABED IN PRESENT DAY ENGLISH CORPORA

Three different corpora were used to analyse the presence of the term *abed* in Present Day English. *The British National Corpus (BNC)*, which includes texts of the period between 1980 and 1993, *The Brigham Young University Corpus of Contemporary English (COCA)*, whose texts date from 1990 to 2007 and *The Time Corpus of American English*, a collection of texts extracted from Time magazine between 1923 and 2007. All three corpora are available online, which facilitates the research process. The reason why these corpora were used was mainly to find out if there were any differences between British and American English nowadays. The number of examples found in the corpora is shown in the following table.

BNC	COCA	Time American Corpus
21	143	195

The results found in the corpora can be misleading if only the number of instances is taken into account. First of all, it should be pointed out that the size of the corpora is not the same, while the *BNC* and *The Time American Corpus* contain 100 thousand, the *COCA* contains more than three times more, that is a total of 360 thousand. Also, the increase in number in the two American corpora as opposed to the British one is due to the fact that in the American corpora the term *abed* is more frequently present as a proper noun, whereas many less instances of such a proper noun were found in the British corpus. Finally, the distribution of meanings also varies, including both 'being literally in bed' and 'being in bed because of sickness'. The distribution of all these meanings and uses can be seen in the following table.

	Proper Noun	Adv or Adj	In bed	Sick
<i>BNC</i>	23,81%	76,19%	26,66%	73,33%
<i>COCA</i>	71,33%	28,67%	91,66%	8,33%
<i>Time</i>	60%	40%	61,75%	38,25%

As for the distribution of uses, in relation to British or American English, we cannot conclude for sure that this term is more frequent in one than in the other variant of the English language.

Nevertheless, some significant differences have been observed in relation to differences in meaning, which could explain the fact that the only meaning that is not considered to be obsolete nowadays as referred to in the *OED* is the one that is more salient in *The British National Corpus* and not in the American corpora. While in British English *abed* seems to be more frequently used when referring to 'being sick', in America the term *abed* seems to retain a more literal meaning, that is, simply 'being in bed'. The metaphorical extension that is found in Present Day English seems to be less popular in

American English, although it is also present. Once again, as with many other examples of the English language, American English seems to retain the older meanings of words, which in British English are being lost and therefore, considered obsolete.

5. ABED IN ENGLISH LITERATURE ONLINE

English Literature Online is actually a database of literary texts from all periods of time. It is not commonly called a corpus thus, but it could be considered one since Meyer says that “a corpus (in his book) will be considered a collection of texts or parts of texts upon which some general linguistic analysis can be conducted” (2002: preface XI). Besides, it has proved to be a very useful tool that can be used as a corpus of literary texts in this particular study. Also, *English Literature Online* is a very wide collection of literary works and, as such, it is easy to use when dealing with older periods of the language since it is possible to look for all the different variant spellings of a word without having to enter all those spellings one at a time.

Thanks to this corpus, several instances of *abed* could be located in different literary texts by authors like Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, and John Gower. These authors and their following works were selected for the present study: *Astrophel*, *The Shepheardes Calendar*, *The Teares of the Muses*, *Arcadia*, *Astrophel and Stella*, *The Psalms of David*, and *Confessio Amantis*. Thus, all the instances of *abed* found in the originals could be located and analysed in later editions from different periods of time. As mentioned already, the analysis was intended to provide information about a possible evolution of *abed* regarding literary and editorial tastes.

As the following tables show, five instances of *abed* were found in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*. All of them were located in two

later editions dating from 1857 and 1968, respectively. Only two uses of *abed* were found in Sir Philip Sidney's *The Psalms of David*. However, both Sidney's *Arcadia* and *Astrophel and Stella* showed one single example. This is also the case for Edmund Spenser's three selected works.

<i>Confessio Amantis</i>, 1483	1857	1968
<i>Abed</i>	<i>A bedde</i>	<i>Abedde</i>
<i>A bedde</i>	<i>A bedde</i>	<i>Abedde</i>
<i>A bed</i>	<i>A bedde</i>	<i>Abedde</i>
<i>Abedde</i>	<i>Abedde</i>	<i>Abedde</i>
<i>A bedde</i>	<i>A bedde</i>	<i>Abedde</i>

<i>Psalms of David</i> 1823, copy of original manuscript	1873	1923
<i>a bed</i>	<i>A-bed</i>	<i>A bed</i>
<i>a bedd</i>	<i>A-bed</i>	<i>A bedd</i>

<i>Arcadia</i>, (<i>a bed</i>-1598)	<i>Astrophel & Stella</i> (<i>a bed</i> -1591, 1598)
1725: <i>a bed</i>	1725: <i>a-bed</i>
1891: <i>a bedde</i>	1873: <i>a-bed</i>
1912: <i>a bedde</i>	1904: <i>abed</i>
—	1922: <i>a bed</i>
—	1931: <i>a bed</i>

<i>Astrophel</i> (<i>a bed</i> - 1595)	<i>Teares of the Muses</i> (<i>abed</i> - 1591)	<i>Shepherdess Calendar</i> (<i>abedde</i> - 1579)
1792: <i>abed</i>	1792: <i>abed</i>	1732: <i>abedde</i>
1879: <i>abed</i>	1879: <i>abed</i>	1792: <i>abed</i>
1882: <i>abed</i>	1882: <i>abed</i>	1879: <i>abedde</i>
1908: <i>abed</i>	1908: <i>abed</i>	1882: <i>abed</i>
—	—	1908: <i>abedde</i>

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Conclusions

As has been observed despite the different opinions of the origin of 'a' in the word *abed*, if we follow present day terminology and attend to general opinions on morphological features, we could conclude that 'a' should be considered a prefix, which changes the category of the word it is attached to, as 'bed' is a noun and *abed* functions as an adverb or an adjective. As for its origin, it seems quite clear that 'a' derives from a preposition.

However, we cannot conclude whether it was only one original preposition or different ones that were reduced to the same form, what seems clearer though is that this prepositions could be 'in' and / or 'on', since these are the two we find more frequently in the historical corpora. Nevertheless, the fact that *abed* is already present in Middle English whereas in later periods we find more often the prepositional phrase 'in bed', could make us think that the origin of 'a' is not 'in', but 'on', as if it had been 'in' the phrase 'in bed' may have disappeared altogether.

What we can conclude, on the other hand, is that *abed* may not be such an archaic form as it is presented nowadays (*OED*) and its meanings have been expanded by metaphorical or metonymic extension to others which dictionaries have not mentioned so far and it may be time for them to include these meanings in the entry of *abed* instead of simply referring to the obsolete or archaic meanings of this term.

As for the editorial use of the term, it is enough to say that only those editors who try to reproduce what they think the originals should be in order to sound "archaic" include variations. Those can be

found in the editions of *Confessio Amantis*, *The Shepheard's Calendar* and *Astrophel and Stella*. However, whereas the variations in *Astrophel and Stella* could be due to metrical reasons, those in Spenser's work tend to reproduce the same archaic tone that characterizes Spenser's own style.

Some indication of direction can also be inferred within the more metaphorical sense, 'to give birth'.

The term 'present' is used in this table to indicate that there were quite a few number of examples, but since the number of these examples is not thought to be relevant for the present study, such a number has not been included here.

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