

## A Study of 'Very' in *The Canterbury Tales* and *King James Bible* from the Morphological and Semantic Points of View

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### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to investigate 'very' in *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400) and *King James Bible* (1611) from morphological and semantic points of view.

*The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (1340?-1400) is written in East Midland dialect of Middle English, and *King James Bible* is written in Early Modern English. In Present-day English we often use *very* as an adverb but in the Middle English period, Chaucer often used *very* as an adjective and there were various word forms in Chaucer's works. However, in Early Modern English, it is often used as an adverb. Therefore, we notice the different usages of *very* between *The Canterbury Tales* and *King James Bible* and this paper tries to observe how *very* changes with regarded to forms and meanings in the history of English. As a matter of fact, we are able to see a number of various forms of *very* in Chaucer's works and *King James Bible*.

Middle English Dictionary shows that 'When *verrei* adj. precedes another modifier, it is difficult if not impossible to distinguish (a) the situation in which both of the two function as adjectives modifying the noun, from (b) that in which the modifier nearest the noun forms a syntactic compound with it (which compound is modified by *verrei*) and from (c) that in which *verrei* functions as an adverb modifying the adjective immediately following; some examples. of (a) and (b) now in this word may = (c) and belong to *verrei* adv.'

First, let us look at examples of *The Canterbury Tales*.

#### • *The Canterbury Tales*

##### (1) Type used as an adjective

ME: He was *verray*, parfit gentil knight. (*General Prologue*, 72)

PDE: He was a *true* and perfect noble man.

The *verray* in this sentence is an attributive adjective, and modifies *gentil knight* to-

gether with the next adjective *parfit* .

ME: For he was Epicurus owene sone, That heeld opinioun that pleyn delit was *verray* felicitee (*General Prologue*, 336-338)

PDE: For he was Epicurus' own son, who was of opinion that a pure delight was a *true* happiness.

The *verray* in this sentence is an attributive adjective that modifies the noun *felicitee*.

ME: By *verray* ligne, as of the stok roial,  
And now I am so caytyf and so thral,  
That he that is my mortal enemy,  
I serve hym as his squire poverty. (*The Knight' s Tale*, 1550-1554)

PDE: By his *true* lineage, such as of the royal stock,  
And now I am so humble and so base that  
I serve him as his poor squire, who is my mortal enemy.

The *verray* in this sentence is an adjective and modifies the noun *ligne*.

ME: Penitence, with certeyne, is *verray* repentance of a man  
That halt himself in sorwe and oother peyne for his giltes.  
(*The Parson' s Tale*, 85)

PDE: Penitence, under particular conditions, is the *true* repentance of anyone who experiences sorrow and other suffering for the wrongs he has done;

The *verray* in this sentence modifies *repentance of a man*.

(2) Type used as an adverb

ME: The roote of this tree is Contricioun, that hideth hym in the herte of hym  
That is *verray* repentaunt, right as the roote of a tree hydeth hym in the erthe.  
(*The Parson' s Tale*, 113)

PDE: The root of this tree is contrition, which hides in the heart of him who is *truly* repentant just as the root of a tree hides itself in the earth.

The *verray* in this sentence is an adverb and modifies adjective *repentant*.

ME: For, as seith Seint Ysidre, "He is a japere and a gabberre and no *verray* repentant that eftsoone dooth thyng for which hym oghte repemte." (*The Parson's Tale*, 90)

PDE: For as Saint Isidore says, 'he is a joker and a gossiper and not *truly* repentant who does a thing again for which he would have to repent'.

The *verray* in this sentence is an adverb and modifying adjective *repentant*.

### (3) Examples of a *verailly*

ME: And eek it is nat likely al thy lyf

To stonden in hir grace; namoore shal I;

For wel thou woost thyselfen, *verrailly*, (*The Knight's Tale*, 1172-1174)

PDE: And it is not also likely for you to stand

In her favor all your life; no more shall I

For, *certainly*, you yourself know it

The *verrailly* in this sentence is a sentence adverb modifying *For wel thou woost thyselfen*. *Verrailly* is almost used as an adverb and there is no examples adjectival usage as far as my research is concerned in *The Canterbury Tales*. In OED, there are only two examples, 'True, very. Obs. rare. a1340 R. Rolle Psalter cxxxix. 8 Lord, verralyest lord, noght as men ere lordis. c1425 Lydgate Assembly of Gods 1285 Morpheus, That hym before warnyd of the verryly tyde.'

• The frequency and type of word -forms about *verily*

verrailly	25
verrayly	4
verrayliche	3
verily	2
verrailly	1
verely	1
verreily	1
verelye	1

*Verrailly* is the most used form in *The Canterbury Tales* however, there are three examples Old English adverbial suffix *verrayliche* and there are two examples Present-day English – ly suffix type. There are 8 patterns, that is, word form of *verrailly* and we might say that it was not established the spelling in Chaucer’s English period.

• The frequency and type of word -forms about *very*

verray	167
verrey	36
verrai	2
verraye	3
verreie	1
verry	2
verrely	2
very	2

The above-mentioned list explicitly shows that *verray* is most frequently used in this period, but word form of the *very* in the Present-day English was used in only 2 examples. According to OED, modern word form of the *very* appeared for the first time in ‘1484 Caxton tr. *Subtyl Historyes & Fables Esope* vi, He..is a *very* fole.’. However, we can find modern word form *very* in *The Canterbury Tales* twice while there are 167 *verray* word form’s examples.

Mustanoja discusses that “*Very*, from the OF adjective *verrai*, has been used in English as an adjective since the 13th century. It is rare at first, but becomes commoner in the writings of Wyclif and Chaucer. Chaucer often uses it before nouns, either in the original sense ‘true, real’.

In these examples *verray* is obviously an adjective, co-ordinate with the following attributive adjective, but frequent occurrence in this syntactical position ( there are many cases of this kind in Chaucer’s writing alone) seems to have provided a starting-point for the development of this adjective into an adverb.” In spite of Mustanoja’s opinion, we find that it is sometimes impossible to distinguish between adjective and adverb concerning *verray* in the Middle English period.

• *King James Bible*

(1) Type used as an adjective

EME: And Isaac saide vnto Iacob, Come neere, I pray thee, that I may feele thee, my sonne, whether thou bee my *very* sonne Esau, or not.

(*King James Bible*, "Genesis" Chapter 27, 21 )

PDE: Isaac then said to Jacob, 'Come close and let me feel you, my son, to see whether you are my *genuine* son Esau.'

The *very* in this sentence is an adjective and modifies noun *sonne*.

(2) Type used as an adverb

EME: And God saw euery thing that hee had made: and behold, *very* good. And the euening and the morning were the sixth day.

(*King James Bible*, "Genesis" Chapter 1, 31)

PDE: So it was; and God saw all that he had made, and it was *very* good. Evening came, and morning came, a sixth day.

The *very* in this sentence is an adverb and modifies *good*. This kind of example is most frequently used in the Present-day English.

EME: And the LORD said, Because the cry of Sodome and Gomorrah is great, and because their sinne is *very* grieuous:

(*King James Bible*, "Genesis" Chapter 18, 20)

PDE: So the Lord said, 'There is a great outcry over Sodom and Gomorrah; their sin is *very* grave.'

The *very* in this sentence is an adverb and modifies the following adjective *grieuous*.

EME: And there was no bread in all the land: for the famine was *very* sore, so that the land

of Egypt and all the land of Canaan fainted by reason of the famine.  
(*King James Bible*, "Genesis" Chapter 47, 13)

PDE: There was no bread in the whole country, for *very* severe was the famine, and Egypt and Canaan were laid low by it.

The *very* in this sentence is an adverb modifies the following adjective *sore*. *Very* is often used as an adverb in *King James Bible*.

### (3) Examples as a *verily*

EME: And whosoeuer shall giue to drinke vnto one of these litle ones, a cup of cold water onely, in the name of a disciple, *verily* I say vnto you, hee shall in no wise lose his reward. (*King James Bible*, "Matthew" Chapter 10, 42)

PDE: And, if any one gives but a cup of cold water to one of these lowly ones because he is a disciple, I tell you that he shall *assuredly* not lose his reward."

The *verily* in this sentence is a sentence adverb modifying *I say unto you*. We found *verily* is often used as sentence adverb in *The Canterbury Tales* and *King James Bible*. In OED, there is only two examples used as an adjective. 'True, very. Obs. rare. a1340 R. Rolle Psalter cxxxix. 8 Lord, verralyest lord, nought as men ere lordis. c1425 Lydgate Assembly of Gods 1285 Morpheus, That hym before warnyd of the verryly tyde.'

### Conclusion

As we have already mentioned, *very* is used as an intensifying adverb from the 15<sup>th</sup> century downward while its main usage is an attributive adjective, meaning the 'true', 'real' or 'genuine' in the Middle English period. Because of this reason, the origin of word of *very* is a loan word from Old French adjective *verrai*. In the latter half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it starts to be used as an intensifying adjective, and means 'just' or 'complete', being preceded by the definite article, and we still find the exemplary sentence, that is, *This is the very book that I have been looking for* in Present-day English. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, it is generally used as an intensifying adverb and until the latter half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it is much more frequently used than 'full', 'right' and 'much' which are looked upon as intensifying words until then. Thus *very* has undergone its sense-development in the history of the

English Language, while 'full', 'right' and 'much' are often used as an adjective in Present-day English. In other words, we can find that in Middle English *verray* is most commonly used as an attributive adjective while it is sometimes used as an intensifying adjective, meaning 'complete', and this intensifying adjective *verray* in Middle English is succeeded by Early Modern English and leads to *very* in Present-day English, which is most typically looked upon as an intensifying adverb in Modern English.

This conclusion is one of the most interesting points that we have considered as the sense-development of *very* in the history of the English Language. In this paper, I have only focused on *very* in *The Canterbury Tales* and *King James Bible*. However, we could also recognize other intensifying adverbs, such as *full* or *verily*, in Middle English and Early Modern English respectively. I also have to consider significance and role about intensifying adverbs after *King James Bible* for the topic of future.

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