

Morphological Change of “-y”

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〈Abstract〉

This paper aims to examine previous treatments of morphological change of -y as a spelling and also to present an alternative. My first alternative is that -y→-ie occurs in the inflectional morphology when -y is after a consonant. My second alternative is that -y → -i occurs in the derivational morphology when -y is after a consonant. My analysis seems to capture both generality and simplicity, while previous treatments do not.

“-y”의 형태론적 변화

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〈요 약〉

본 논문의 목적은 철자 -y의 형태론적 변화에 대한 종래의 연구를 검토, 비판하고 대안을 제시하는 데 있다. 대안의 하나는 -y↔-ie는 굴절형태론(inflectional morphology)에서 일어난다는 가설이고, 또 하나의 대안은 -y↔-i는 파생형태론(derivational morphology)에서 일어난다는 가설이다. 이 분석은 종래의 연구가 포착하지 못하고 있는 일반성과 간결성을 포착하고 있다고 본다.

1. Introduction

1.1. This paper aims to examine previous treatments of morphological change of -y as a spelling and also to present an alternative.

1.2. My alternative is a modest but significant one in that it shows our necessity of more abstract morphological knowledge in deciding how -y changes.

1.3. The order of development of this paper is as following:

1. Historical background
2. Grammarians' view
3. Problems

4. General view of morphology
5. My alternative
6. Conclusion

2. Historical Background

2.0. In order to make our question clearer we had better turn to the history of the English language. To our pity, however, history does not reveal much about our question, -y/-i or -y/-ie. Next two are insufficient but indispensable historical traces about -y's change.

2.1. Thomas Pyles (1964, p.44) states:

The letter *y* was exclusively a vowel symbol in old English, having the value of Modern

French *u* or German *ü*; the consonantal value of the letter as used since Middle English times was indicated in Old English. Later pronunciation of the Old English vowel without lip rounding caused it to fall together with *i* so that *y* might be used for both vowel and consonant. In other words, Middle English scribes used *y* for one of the values of *ȝ* (called yogh) and also, for the sake of legibility, as a variant of *i* in the vicinity of stroke letters, for example *myn homcomynge* 'my homecoming'. Late in the Middle English period there was a tendency to write *y* for long *i* generally. *Y* was regularly used in final position.

Thomas Pyles (1964, p.146) states elsewhere:

The Old English vowels *ē*, *ī*, *ō*, and *ū* remained unchanged in Middle English as in Old English *fēt*-Middle English *fēt*, *feet* 'feet'; Old English *rīden*, *rȳden* 'to ride'. Old English *y* was unrounded to [i:] in the Northern and the east Midland areas.

2.2. G.L. Brook (1958, p.76) states:

Another Old English letter which remained in use long after the pronunciation it represented had changed was *y*. In Old English this letter presented a front close rounded vowel, but in Middle English in the Northern and East Midland dialects it was unrounded to [i]. Hence during the Middle English period *y* is often used as a spelling to represent [i] whether long or short, as in *mythe* beside *mihte* 'might', *wys* beside *wis* 'wise'. In the later Middle English period some scribes tried to restrict the spelling *y* to express [i:] keeping the spelling *i* for the short vowel. Another tendency was to use the spelling *y* next to letters like *n*, *m* and *u*, where *i* might lead to confusion.

Middle English scribes, like many people today, often failed to distinguish clearly between letters made up of short minims and therefore *n* is liable to be confused with *u* and *m* with *in*. The use of *y*, when it was available as an

alternative spelling, lessened the likelihood of confusion.

2.3. Now we can naturally derive some important facts from the above historical observations.

1. The change in pronunciation of *y* caused the letter *y* to fall together with *i* and even to use for *i*.
2. *Y* was regularly used in word-final position.
3. *Y*'s replacement for *i* was also used for visual aid, that is, in order to avoid *i*'s confusion with similar letters.
4. *Y* and *i* were interchangeable.

Later the above points will be rather helpful to solve our question. However, let us notice that from the historical point of view, *-y* is exclusively related to *i*. This fact is well reflected in the modern grammarians' treatments of this issue. This point will be explicated in the next chapter.

3. Grammarians' View

3.0. Now let us look into some modern grammarians' view of our issues. Of course they differ from historical sources not in essence but in degree. And yet it is also useful to understand to what extent they are alike, how they are different, and how they are related to each other.

3.1. Otto Jespersen (1933, p.64) states:

Instead of writing *ii* it became usual to write *y*. This letter, which in Old English served to denote the rounded vowel corresponding to [i] (=French *u* in *bu*, German *ü* in *über*) has become a mere variant of *i* used preferably at the end of words, while *i* is used in the beginning and interior of words; hence such alternations as *cry*, *cries*, *cried*; *happy*, *happier*, *happiest*, *happiness*; *body*, *bodiless*, *bodily*, etc. But *y* is kept before such endings as

are felt more or less as independent elements, e.g. citywards, ladyship, twentyfold, juryman. After another vowel *y* is generally kept, e.g. plays, played, boys; cf., however, laid, paid, said (but lays, pays, says: too much consistency must not be expected.) In some cases homophones are kept apart in the spelling: die (with dies, but dying, because it is avoided) —dye, flies (=light carriages); but otherwise flies (substance and verb). Further, *y* is written in many originally Greek words: system, nymph, etc. Before a vowel, *y* is used as non-syllabic [i], i.e. [j], e.g. yard, yellow, yield, yole, yule, beyond.

Jespersen (1933, p.198) states elsewhere: After a consonant *-y* is changed into *-ies*; flies, ladies, babies. But after a written vowel *y* is retained: boys, days; thus also generally in proper names: Henries, Pollys.

Jespersen(1933, p.219) also states about comparative and superlative of adjective: The regular way of forming them is by adding the endings *-er* and *-est* to the ground form, which is called positive, e.g.

Positive	Comparative	Superlative
small	smaller	smallest

Merely orthographic peculiarities are seen when *y* after a consonant is changed into *i*;

Positive	Comparative	Superlative
dry	drier	driest
happy	happier	happiest

3.2. R. W. Zandvoort(1957, p.336) deals with final *y*: words in a consonant-symbol *-y* into *ie* before *s* (not before *'s*) and (c)d: cry-cries-cried;also soliloquy-soliloquies.

Before other endings *y* after a consonant symbol is either changed into *i*, or retained. It is changed before the endings of the comparative and superlative (dry-drier-driest); before the adverbial ending *-ly* in adjectives of more than one syllable(merry-merrily); before the ending of ordinals in-*eth*(twenty-twentieth);

and in derivatives in-*ness* from adjectives of more than one syllable (holy-holiness). *-y* after a consonant symbol is retained in derivatives in-*ness* from monosyllabic adjectives(shy-shyness); in derivatives in-*ist*, *-like*, *-ship*, *-ward(s)* (copyist, lady-like, ladyship, citywards): sometimes in those in *-fied*(countrified or countryfied).

In adverbs from monosyllabic words in *-y* both *y* and *i* are found in dryly (drily) and slyly (silyly); the others occur only with *y*(e.g. coyly, shyly), but daily is always and gaily is usually spelt with *i*.

On the otherhand, *ie* changes into *y* before *-ing*: die *-dying*, lie *-lying*.

3.3. Quirk et al. (1972, p.108) treat *-y*:

In base ending in a consonant *+y*, the following changes occur before the *-s* and *-ed* inflection:

(Consonant+)	<i>-y</i>
→	{ <i>-ie</i> before <i>-s</i> : carry-carries
	{ <i>-i</i> before <i>-ed</i> : carry-carried

The past of the following two verbs has a change *-y*→ *-i* also after a vowel:

lay-laid
pay-paid

In bases ending in *-ie*, the following change occurs before the *-ing* inflection.

-ie→*-y* before *-ing*: die-dying
lie-lying

Quirk et al. (1972, p.173) also treat *-y* as nouns:

-y→	{	after vowel: days
		in proper nouns:
		the two Germanys,
		the Kennedys
	{	in stand-bys, lay-bys
	{	Otherwise after consonant:
		spy-spies

Quirk et al.(1972, p.292) treat *-y* as adjec-

tives: In bases ending in a consonant+y, final y is changed to i:

angry angrier angriest
early earlier earliest

3.4. There are some characteristics common to the above treatments.

1. Y after a consonant becomes either *i* or *ie* before endings.
 2. Historical sources show that y/i is not directly concerned with either derivations or inflections.
 3. Contemporary treatments show that y becomes *i* or *ie* both in derivations and in inflections.
 4. *ie* becomes y before -ing.
 5. Quirk et al. only attempt to formulate regularities of y's change.
 6. They don't use the notion of morpheme.
- 3.5. Unlike historical approaches, contemporary treatments show that -y becomes either *i* or *ie* according to their occurring environments. Nevertheless, a lot of problems remain to be solved. In the next chapter I will explicate the problems involved in their treatments.

4. Problems

4.0. Now let us see the below table in order to understand the differences of their treatments clearly. The table shows us what are the problems. Let us examine one by one.

4.1. Is y→y right?

Of course there are a lot of words in English which support y→y. However, Jespersen's notion of independent elements is vague. Perhaps it seems to mean free morpheme. But-ship of ladyship is bound morpheme. Moreover, many derivational words show that y→i is right. Look at the examples.

city+bank→citibank

handy+work→handiwork

Therefore another explanation is required.

4.2 Is y→i right?

4.2.1. Jespersen, Zandvoort, and quirk et al. agree about formation of comparative and superlative of adjectives. They may be right. But note that another explanation is possible.

<TABLE>

	Jespersen	Zandvoort	Quirk et al.
y→y	before independent elements: ladyship, juryman	derivation; copyist, lady-like	
y→i	1) comparison: happy- happier-happiest 2) derivation: happiness, bodily 3) verb form: cry-cries-cried	1) comparison: dry-drier-driest 2) derivation: holy-holiness 3) ordinal: twenty-twentieth	1) comparison: angry-angrier-angriest 2) past form: carry-carried
y→ie			1) present form: carry-carries 2) plural form: spy-spies
y→ies	plural form: lady-ladies		
ie→y		before-ing: lie-lying	before-ing: die-dying

That is, $y \rightarrow ie$ is possible, because there is a rule that if the base ends in *e*, -r and -st are added to the base. Look at the following examples.

able-abler-ablest
 sure-surer-surest
 early-earlier-earliest

For a moment let us reserve the definite answer.

4.2.2 Jespersen and Quirk et al. agree about making of past and past participle form of verb. They are not wrong in that -ed is added to the base ending in *i*. Look at the example.

ski-skied-skied

However, the same logic as in the case of adjective is applied and another solution is possible.

That is, $y \rightarrow ie$ is possible, because there is a rule that if the base ends in *e*, -d is added to the base. Look at the following examples.

cry-cried-cried
 skate-skated-skated

4.2.3. According to Jespersen, *i* occurs before -es which is present verb inflection.

cry-cries

But note that the base ending in *i* gets -s inflection. Look at the example.

ski-skis

Therefore Jespersen's argument is logically contradictory. There exists no rule which -es is added to the base ending *i*. Look at the example.

*ski-skies

I wonder if Quirk et al. knew this contradiction. Anyway, Quirk et al. use $y \rightarrow ie$ to make present form and avoid such contradiction as Jespersen's.

4.2.4. According to Zandvoort, $y \rightarrow i$ occurs before the ending of ordinals in -eth.

It is remarkable that he uses $y \rightarrow i$ in the forming of ordinals. And yet how can he explain -e in -eth?

There is no rule that -eth is attached to the cardinal in order to make it ordinal. Look at the example.

ten-tenth
 *ten-teneth

In a word, his treatment is ad hoc.

4.3. Jespersen and Quirk et al. agree about formation of plural form. But $y \rightarrow ies$ does not explain anything. They did not use the plural morpheme, -es.

4.4. Zandvoort and Quirk et al. agree that $ie \rightarrow y$ occurs before -ing. I think they are right. But they didn't state whether $ie \rightarrow y$ is related to $y \rightarrow i$ or $y \rightarrow ic$. However, this is an important point in that it shows any possibility of interchangeability of *y* and *ie*.

4.5. Up to now we dug out problems out of their treatments. Our observations shed light on our solutions. Before jumping to a conclusion, let us see briefly what morphology is in the next chapter, because we have mentioned morpheme or morphology in several places.

5. General View of Morphology

5.0. Before we suggest our solution to the problems presented in the last chapter, we need general view of morphology.

We have already seen that grammarians did not use the basic notion of morpheme. Morphological knowledge, however, will be essential to solving our question. The following mostly originates from Dorothy Siegel (1979).

5.1. Morphology is the study of the word formation processes of language. Word formation takes place in two distinct realms. Inflectional morphology treats the generation of words by the syntactic component of the gram-

mar. Derivational morphology is the study of word formation processes which occur in the lexicon. Each of these morphological processes is governed by constraints which are characteristic of the components in which they arise.

5.2. All inflectional features are introduced by the syntactic component of the grammar. Inflectional features such as perfect aspect (-en), progressive aspect (-ing), the gerundive (-ing), and tense (+past, -past), are generated by the phrase structure rules. They include the plurality of a count noun and comparative and superlative form of adjective. One characteristic of inflectional morpheme is that it does not cause a change in grammatical class.

5.3. Derivational morphemes are lexically introduced. In the lexicon, there are rules which attach morphemes to stems and words to form new words. The words *probity*, *vacuous*, and *potable* are lexically derived from the stems *prob*, *vacu*, and *pot*.

5.4. The distinction between derivational and inflectional morphology has strong semantic, phonetic, and syntactic support. The meaning of a syntactically derived word is compositional. If one knows what *solve* and *past* mean, one also knows what *solved* means. The meaning of lexically derived words, on the other hand, are not compositional. *Solution's* semantic relationship to *solve* is not the same as *vacation's* semantic relationship to *vacate*. Phonetic and syntactic differences between the two are omitted here because they are not directly related to our issues.

6. My Alternative

6.0. Their common weak point is that they analyze regular phenomena irregularly. Therefore they fail to capture both generalization and simplicity. My alternative is expected to capture both generalization and simplicity.

6.1. My first alternative is that $-y \leftrightarrow -ie$ occurs in the inflectional morphology when $-y$ lies after a consonant. Look at the following examples.

- 1) *cry-cries* (present form)
- 2) *cry-cried-cried* (past and past participle)
- 3) *baby-babies* (plural form)
- 4) *dry-drier-driest* (comparative and superlative form)
- 5) *lie-lying* (present participle and gerund)
- 6) *twenty-twentieth* (ordinal)

Note that once $y \rightarrow ie$ occurs, the inflectional morphemes, $-s$, $-d$, $-s$, $-r/-st$ (in this order) are added to their each base in the examples above. There is no contradiction in this analysis.

And also note that $ie \rightarrow y$ in the present participle and gerund shows interchangeability of $-y$ and $-ie$.

6.2. My second alternative is that $-y \leftrightarrow -i$ occurs in the derivational morphology when $-y$ lies after a consonant. Look at the examples.

happy-happiness-happily
deny-deniál
body-bodily-bodiless
city+bank→citiábank
handy+work→handiwork

We can make sure that my second alternative is empirically good.

6.2.1. There are some examples in which $-y$ is retained. Look at these examples.

copy-copyist
lady+like→ladylike
baby+sit→babysit

This fact requires some more explanation. It seems to me that there is a strong tendency to retain $-y$ in a compound word. But note that word formation rules do not apply every time the speaker of a language speaks. These rules make up new words which may be added to the speaker's lexicon. We can think of them as once-only rules. Therefore the apparent

counterexamples just reflect the nature of these rules.

The following examples co-exist because of another linguistic motivation, which shows interchangeability of y/i in another way.

tire (American)—tyre (British)
gipsy (British)—gypsy (American)

However, note that these examples are not directly related to the morphological change.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Which is better, $y \leftrightarrow i$ or $y \leftrightarrow ie$, might be a minor question. But through this analysis we argue that more abstract morphological knowledge is necessary to understand y's change. And through this analysis we make sure that generality and simplicity are very useful as a measure of evaluation about the adequacy of any grammar.

7.2. Last but not least, pedagogical implication must be considered. As you know, $y \rightarrow i$ is widely taught and learned in our school. To

be sure, my alternative is more consistent, more effective, and more economical.

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