

ON THE ENGLISH ADJECTIVES *PRESENT* AND *ABSENT*

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Abstract: The contribution briefly discusses the etymology and morpho-syntactic characteristics of the English adjectives *present*, *absent*, and the related issues such as the diachronic development of the adjectival and nominal suffix *-ent/-ant* in English, its relation to the nominal suffix *-ence/-ance/-ency/-ancy* and other formations. The article mainly focuses on contemporary patterns, but references to relevant historical data are also provided. Structurally, the English adjectives are present participle forms borrowed in the Middle English period from Latin. It seems that due to their origin, both adjectives are characterised by relatively high frequency, with *present* being more common than *absent*. In English both can function as attributive and predicative adjectives, and take part in word-formation processes. Similarly to other complementary adjectives, which are typically non-gradable, *present* and *absent* are not qualified with markers of degree, except when humorous effect is intended, as in *very present*, *somewhat absent*.

Keywords: *present*, *absent*, the English suffix *-ent*, the English suffix *-ant*, present participles, adjectives, nouns

Introduction

Among numerous English adjectives in *-ent*, *present* and *absent* are rather common. Similarly to other adjectives of the same structure, they show the characteristic present participle suffix *-ent/-ant*. A suffix of the same origin was used to derive agent nouns in Old English. However, in its oldest functions (to form present participles and agent nouns), the suffix *-ent/-ant* is no longer productive in English. It was replaced by other suffixes, e.g. *-ing* and *-er*. In modern English, *-ent/-ant* surfaces in adjectives, e.g. *present*, *absent*, nouns, e.g. *assistant*, *student*, and verbs, e.g. *to present*, *to absent*. All such formations were borrowed in the Middle English period or later, and their ultimate source was Latin. Adjectives in *-ent/-ant* typically have morphologically related nouns in *-ence/-ance/-ency/-ancy*. These variants are part of the present discussion, similarly to *-quence/-quency*, as in *eloquence*, *frequency*, which is not treated as a separate suffix. The suffix *-ment*, as in *argument*, *document*, on the other hand, has a different etymology, characteristics and is not incorporated into the study.

In the article, *present* and *absent* are considered in a diachronic and synchronic perspective. What is analysed initially is their etymology and structure. What follows is a discussion of their semantic and morpho-syntactic properties. The most characteristic patterns are illustrated with examples from dictionaries and sourcebooks. In some cases, dates of first attestations are provided. They are the ones accompanying the relevant headwords in OED.

The etymology and structure of *present* and *absent*

OED's earliest evidence for *present* is in *Ayenbite of Inwyt* (1340), and that of *absent* in *Statutes of the Realm* (from before 1325). In other words, the first attestations come from the Middle English period, which is typically dated from 1150 to 1500. That time witnessed the emergence of other related forms such as e.g. the noun *present* (around 1225), the verb *present* (around 1300), and the verb *absent* (before 1425).

Both, *present* and *absent*, are identifiable as borrowings of multiple origins (partly from French, partly from Latin), because their structure corresponds to Latinate present participles, but the adjectives were most likely borrowed indirectly through French (1ab).

- (1) (a) Middle English: via Old French from Latin *praesent*- 'being at hand', present participle of *praeesse*, from *prae* 'before' + *esse* 'be'. (OALD, *present*, *adjective*)
- (b) Middle English: via Old French from Latin *absens*, *absent*- 'being absent', present participle of *abesse*, from *ab*- 'from, away' + *esse* 'to be'. (OALD, *absent*, *adjective*)

The source verbs of the present participles were Latin *praeesse* 'be before, preside' and *abesse* 'be away, be absent', which are examples of *verba composita*, i.e. derived verbs composed of an indeclinable prefix, e.g. *prae* 'before', *ab*- 'from, away', and a conjugated form of a verb, in this case the verb *esse* 'to be'. Since Lat. *esse* was irregular, so was the paradigm of its compounds, c.f. Lat. *praeesse*, *abesse*, but *praesum* 'I am before, I preside', *absum* 'I am away, I am absent', etc.). The present participles of the two verbs in Latin were, respectively, *praesens* and *absens* (Wikarjak 1999: 88). The final *t* in the derivatives in English originates from the genitive case (2).

- (2) The Latin present participle was a 3rd declension adjective of the form *currens* (nominative), *currentis* (genitive): > English *current* ("running"). As *current* illustrates, the English derivative will regularly be the Latin participle base, which is the genitive form minus its final *-is* ending (Smith 2016: 193).

The suffix *-nt* in present participles, nouns and adjectives

The present participle suffix in Lat. *praesens*, *absens* is reconstructed as **-onts* (Sihler 1995: 616) on the basis of forms attested in other Indo-European languages such as Vedic, Old Church Slavonic, and Germanic. In other words, the original suffix marking the present participle is attested in older or extinct languages, but also in more contemporary ones. Within Germanic, for example, the former are represented by Gothic and Old English, the latter by German, e.g. Goth. *gibands* 'giving', and OE *lufiende* 'loving', *singende* 'singing', which correspond to Ger. *liebend*, *singend* (Sauer and Kirner-Ludwig 2021: 307).

In modern English the function of the present participle marker is carried by a different suffix: "The ending of the present participle OE {-ende} was replaced by the ending {-ing} in the course of Middle English; as a result, the {-ing} has three functions in Modern English, namely the present participle, the so-called gerund and the deverbal noun" (Sauer and Kirner-Ludwig 2021: 287).

The suffix *-ent* ceased to mark the present participle, but has survived as a formative element in nouns and adjectives. Such a development of the participial suffix is attested in various Indo-European languages: "Semantically, present participles and agent nouns have much in common: a 'dancing [one]' and a 'dancer' are functionally very similar. In a variety of IE languages, verbals in **-ont* routinely have some agentive role" (Sihler 1995: 614). Thus, it is not surprising that already in Germanic, the 'citation forms' of present participles and agent nouns overlapped and were indistinguishable, e.g. Goth. *gibands* 'giver'. In Old English, however, the two formations followed different declensions (Campbell 1959: 257).

OE *-end* functioned as an independent nominal suffix (see Mitchell and Robinson 2009, 59), and belonged to the most productive ones (Kastovsky 2006: 239). Since it was used to derive agent nouns, it is comparable to modern English *-er* (in fact, already in the Old English period, *-end* and originally denominal *-ere* were rivals). Nominal *-end* is attested in mostly masculine nouns of native origin, e.g. OE *āgend* 'owner', *hǣlend* 'healer, saviour', *wealdend* 'ruler', but it also attested in object nouns, e.g. *ġehæftend* 'prisoner', instrumental nouns, e.g. *(ġe-)bīcniend* 'forefinger', and feminine action nouns, e.g. *blinnend* 'rest, ceasing' (Kastovsky 2006: 239). It seems that the only survivor of the old group of nouns in *-end* into modern times is OE *frēond*, which is modern English *friend* (cf. Ger. *Freund* 'friend').

In contemporary English, *-ent* in adjectives and nouns, has a spelling variant *-ant*. Although the variants are attested in both word classes, it seems the suffix *-ant* is more common in nouns (3), whereas *-ent* is more common in adjectives. When their ultimate source is taken into consideration, the formations in *-ant* go back to the first conjugation of Latin verbs, and those in *-(i)ent* to the remaining ones (Smith 2016: 193).

- (3) (...) the suffix *-ant/-ent* appears chiefly with base verbs of Latinate origin. When approached from the formal point of view (i.e. as a suffix-shape), its major function is that of deriving deverbal adjectives (e.g. *depend* - *dependent*). But *-ant/-ent* has given rise, as well, to a considerable number of agentive nouns. The spelling-variant *-ant* is, in fact, much more common within this group (Szymanek 1998: 180).

In general, nouns in *-ant/-ent* are countable and refer to people in formal, technical or legal discourse or substances involved in biological, chemical or physical processes (Plag 2003: 87). Their meaning is either ‘person who VERBS’, e.g. *assistant*, *consultant*, *student*, or ‘something used for VERBing’, e.g. *coolant*, *defoliant*, *intoxicant* (Biber et al. 2021: 321).

In particular, such nouns may have roots that are not free morphemes (e.g. *merchant*). However, when they have morphologically related verbs, e.g. *complain* - *complainant*, *participate* - *participant*, the verbs are either unsuffixed, or have the form *X-ate*, with the sole exception of *deodorise* - *deodorant* (Aronoff 1981, 90). In some cases the verbal base may be subject to additional modifications, e.g. *oppose* - *opponent*, *study* - *student* (Szymanek 1998: 181).

Similarly, adjectives in *-ent/-ant* have roots that are not free morphemes in English, e.g. *ancient*, *recent*, or morphologically related verbs, e.g. *differ* - *different*, *comply* - *compliant*, *avoid* - *avoidant*. It is generally believed that “adjective-forming affixes that accept verbal bases typically prefer either a subject-referencing or an object-referencing interpretation” (Bauer, Lieber, and Plag 2013: 307). Since the suffix *-ent/-ant* permits a subject-referencing reading when it attaches to verbal bases, it can be paraphrased with ‘willing to VERB’, as in the case of *compliant* in *Students who are compliant do not dare to criticise*. Additionally, *-ent/-ant* and similar adjectival suffixes, e.g. *-ive*, *-ory*, can also receive an eventive reading (4), as in the case of *avoidant* in Bauer, Lieber, and Plag’s (2013, 310) example *Traumatized children had more intense play, play disruptions, repetitive play, avoidant play behaviour, and negative affect*.

- (4) (...) adjectives derived with them need not refer to one argument or the other, but can alternatively focus on the nature of the event denoted by the verbal base. Put more simply, such derived adjectives may receive interpretations paraphrasable as ‘characterized by VERBing’ or ‘pertaining to VERBing’ or ‘involved in VERBing.’ (Bauer, Lieber, and Plag 2013: 310).

On the other hand, “words derived with these affixes typically do not have fixed interpretations, but can vary between subject-referencing and eventive interpretations depending on context” (Bauer, Lieber, and Plag 2013: 309), with the effect that argumental readings of such adjectives may be vague, and when there is no

corresponding verb, impossible. What is more, it seems that non-argumental readings are more legitimate.

Adjectives in *-ent/-ant* typically have morphologically related nouns in *-ence/-ance/-ency/-ancy*. Occasionally, other suffixes are attested, but the examples are rather isolated, e.g. *fervent* - *ferventness* (first attestation in 1398), *ardent* - *ardentness* (first attestation in 1632). Such nominal formations are of low frequency. The suffix *-ness* is of Germanic origin. In Old English it was used to form nouns from adjectives and past participles, but in the later periods of English it was extended to any adjective or participle (regardless of their form or origin).

The nouns in *-ence/-ance/-ency/-ancy* show certain morphological peculiarities. "The distribution of the different variants is not entirely clear; several doublets are attested" (Plag 2003: 87). Sometimes the doublets seem to have identical meanings, e.g. *dependence*, *dependency*, *expectance*, *expectancy*, *frequence*, *frequency*, sometimes different ones, e.g. *consistence*, *consistency*. However, "*-ance/-ence* formations are interpreted as deverbal, *-ancy/-ency* formations as de-adjectival" (Plag 2003, 87). The above dichotomy is related to the semantics of the suffixes: nouns in *-ance/-ence* tend to refer to actions, e.g. *interference*, nouns in *-ancy/-ency* to states and characteristics, e.g. *consistency*, *solvency*. When their ultimate source is taken into consideration, all the variants go back to Lat. *-ntia*, that is the suffix *-ia*, which was added to present participle bases to form abstract nouns (Smith 2016: 195).

Plag (2003, 87) discusses the possibility that "a derivative like *dependency* could be analyzed as having two suffixes (*depend-ent-cy*) or only one (*depend-ency*)". The former analysis presupposes the existence of the corresponding adjective in *-ent/-ant* for each relevant noun, but since there are nouns such as *riddance*, *furtherance*, but not **riddant*, **furtherant*, it is possible to "assume the existence of an independent suffix *-ance*, in addition to a suffix combination *-ant-ce*" (Plag 2003: 87).

The claim is supported by historical data. In English some of such nouns have earlier attestations than their related adjectives (5ab). Although some examples in (5a) show that within a given word-family, the verb appeared first, e.g. *to avoid*, *to comply*, other examples are different, e.g. *to despond*, *to hesitate*. The cases in (5b) clearly show that the nominal suffix and its variants must have been analysed as independent of the adjectival *-ent/-ant*, because the nouns appeared earlier. The noun - adjective correspondences are numerous, but occasionally the morphologically related verb is lacking. This suggests that initially the *-ence/-ance/-ency/-ancy* nouns were derived from the related adjectives (which, in turn, were derived from verbs), but later the reverse direction became possible, and analogical adjectives were formed to the nouns.

- (5) (a) *to avoid* (c1375) - *avoidance* (a1398) - *avoidant* (1794)
to comply (1604) - *compliance* (1641) - *compliant* (1642)

to despond (1655) - *despondency* (1653) - *despondence* (1676) - *despondent* (1699)
to hesitate (1623) - *hesitance* (1601) - *hesitancy* (1617) - *hesitant* (1647)

- (b) *silence* (a1225) - *silent* (a1425)
presence (a1325) - *present* (1340)
absence (a1325) - *absent* (a1325)
arrogance (1340) - *arrogant* (c1405)
complacence (c1430) - *complacency* (1643) - *complacent* (1660)
(Dates from OED, individual lexemes correspond to lemmata in the dictionary)

Adjectives derived from nominal bases do not reference arguments (6). Their suffixes, e.g. *-esque*, *-like*, *-ish*, as in *picturesque*, *childlike*, *childish*, can be paraphrased with reference to the nominal bases, e.g. 'like NOUN' or 'resembling NOUN', hence *picturesque* 'resembling a picture', *childlike* 'like a child'. Similarly, e.g. *silent*, *present* can be paraphrased with reference to their derived, morphologically related nouns of the form *X-ence*, hence *silent* 'being characterised by silence', 'related to silence', *present* 'being characterised by presence', 'related to presence'.

- (6) Adjective-deriving affixes that attach predominantly or exclusively to nominal and adjectival bases are semantically rather different from affixes that take verbal bases, as their meanings obviously cannot depend on the referencing of base arguments. (Bauer, Lieber, and Plag 2013: 311).

The suffix *-ent/-ant* in e.g. *silent*, *present*, *elegant*, is different from *-esque*, *-like*, or *-ish*, because its semantic content depends on respectively, *sil-*, *pres-*, *eleg-*, but these are not nouns in English. As in the case of some other formations of Latinate origin, explaining the correspondence *silent* - *silence*, *present* - *presence*, *elegant* - *elegance* involves cross-formation, i.e. "a morphological rule in which both word-schemas in the correspondence exhibit a constant phonological element" (Haspelmath and Sims 2010, 50). For example, it is customary to paraphrase the nouns and adjectives as in (7a) by means of the corresponding verb, e.g. *X-ion* 'action of VERBing', *X-ive* 'prone to VERBing'. However, there are pairs for which the corresponding verb is lacking (5a), or of very low frequency and/or attested later than the noun (7b). In such cases, a third rule encompassing the relation between the noun and the adjective is needed "because there are word families that contain two derived forms, but not the root" (Haspelmath and Sims 2010: 166). Such an approach excludes the need to postulate an intermediate stage of deriving the corresponding verb in order to form the adjective (the case of those in (5a), cf.: "More common in English is the borrowing of a latinate derived form, whose stem is subsequently retrieved by back-formation. Such a case is the verb *aggress*, which was back-formed from the noun *aggression*" (Aronoff 1981: 27). Although it is a fact that the verbs *aggress* and *illude*

are recorded in English, the OED's dates of first attestation suggest that the verb *aggress* was not backformed. Aronoff's comment, however, is applicable to the diachronic development *illusion* - *illude* - *illusive*. According to OED (*aggress*, v., *illude*, v.), both verbs are characterised by low frequency of, respectively, about 0,1 and fewer than 0,1 occurrences per million words.

(7) (a) *to attract* - *attraction* - *attractive*
to suggest - *suggestion* - *suggestive*

(b) *to aggress* (?1570) - *aggression* (1611) - *aggressive* (1695)
to illude (1447) - *illusion* (c1340) - *illusive* (1679)
(Dates from OED, individual lexemes correspond to lemmata in the dictionary)

Taking into consideration historical data in (5) and examples of cross-formation in English, it seems plausible that some of the adjectives in *-ent/-ant* were derived from the corresponding nouns by analogy, which explains why the corresponding verb is lacking.

According to Biber et al. (2021, 528), adjectives in *-ent*, similarly to those in *-ive*, and *-ous*, are “moderately common”. They can be further subdivided on the basis of their frequency, cf.:

- (8) (a) over 100 times per million words – *different*, ***present***;
(b) over 25 times per million words – *ancient*, *apparent*, *confident*, *current*, *decent*, *dependent*, *excellent*, *independent*, *permanent*, *recent*, *silent*, *sufficient*, *violent*;
(c) over ten times per million words: ***absent***, *adjacent*, *consistent*, *convenient*, *efficient*, *frequent*, *innocent*, *intelligent*, *magnificent*, *persistent*, *prominent*, *subsequent*
(Biber et al. 2021, 529).

As shown in (8), *present* occurs over 100 times per million words, and *absent* - over 10 times per million words. Estimates of word frequency depend on different quantitative and qualitative parameters such as the size of the corpus, text types, genres, grammatical tagging, etc. Thus a source based on a different corpus is likely to provide other values. For example, OED derives its historical frequency measures from *Google Books Ngrams* (version 2). The data set based on a corpus of several million books printed in English between 1500 and 2010 was generated in July 2012. Thus OED's estimates per million words are related to modern written English. According to OED, the frequency of *present* is around 200 occurrences (see OED, *present*, adj. & adv.), that of *absent* is around 20 occurrences (see OED, *absent*, adj. & n.). Although the two sources quote different nominal values, the proportion is the same, and it can be safely acknowledged that in contemporary English *present* is approximately ten times more frequent than *absent*.

Semantic and morpho-syntactic characteristics of *present* and *absent* in English

Similarly to modern English participles, which “are frequently used as premodifiers to nouns” (Bauer, Lieber, and Plag 2013: 306), the adjective *present* can precede a noun, as in *the present members* ‘those who are members now’. Unlike typical English attributive adjectives, though, it can also be placed after the noun, as in *the members present* ‘those who are / were at the meeting’. “Before a noun, *present* refers to time; after a noun it means ‘here/there’, ‘not absent’” Swan (2005, 10). Similarly, OALD distinguishes attributive uses with senses referring to time (9a), and predicative uses with senses referring to spatial existence (9b).

(9) (a) [only before noun]

existing or happening now: *I am not satisfied with the **present** situation.*

(b) [not before noun]

(of a person) being in a particular place: *I wasn't **present** when the doctor examined him.*

(of a thing or a substance) existing in a particular place or thing: *The threat of force was always **present**.*

(OALD, *present*, adjective)

According to Biber et al. (2021, 515), “many predicative adjectives are common in a single register”. The adjective *present* is common in academic prose, most likely because of its Latinate origin. In the Middle English period, “Latin as a language of the church, scholarship, and partly law, normally acted only as a written source” (Kastovsky 2006: 250). Consequently, the tradition to use learned vocabulary in technical or academic texts is very long.

The adjective *absent* occurs in similar contexts, hence it can be used attributively (10a), or predicatively (10b). In the latter case, it is the opposite of *present*, and occurs with the preposition *from*. If the dependent preposition is expressed, it takes an object. According to OED (*from*, *prep.*, *adv.*, & *conj.*), in one of its senses, *from* denotes distance, absence, or remoteness, especially after words indicating the degree of distance and after *absent*, *apart*, etc. It seems, thus, that *absent* and *from* are in semantic harmony and one reinforces the strength of the other.

(10) (a) showing that you are not really looking at or thinking about what is happening around you: *an **absent** expression.*

(b) not in a place because of illness, etc.: *She was **absent from** work for two weeks.*

not present in something: *Love was totally **absent from** his childhood.*

(OALD, *absent*, adjective)

The relation between *present* ‘not absent’ and *absent* ‘not present’ is that of complementarity. It is “a relation of contradiction, in which the denial of one term is the assertion of its complementary term. X is not Y and Y is not X” (Brinton and Brinton 2010, 152). Since complementary terms denote opposite extremes, they are not scalar and cannot be qualified with *more / less* or *most / least*. In other words, they are normally non-gradable. In expressions e.g. *very present*, *somewhat absent*, in which such adjectives may be used for humorous effect, not the quality itself is referred to, but e.g. the behavioural characteristics associated with the quality (Brinton and Brinton 2010: 153). Similarly to other morphologically complex adjectives, which generally prefer the periphrastic / analytic degree variants, adjectives in *-ent/-ant* have no suffixal / synthetic degree forms (Bauer, Lieber, and Plag 2013: 115-116).

On a par with regular adjectives, *present* and *absent* can function as bases in word-formation processes. In chronological order, the most common derivatives and compounds in OED are *omnipresent* (1595), *ever-present* (1605), *co-present* (1817), *absent-minded* (1824), and *absent voter* (1867). However, there are forms that are not recorded in the dictionary, e.g. *unpresent*, and *unabsent*. The reason why they are not incorporated into the dictionary is most likely their extremely low frequency. Estimates from *Google Books Ngrams* are that both have fewer than < 0,1 occurrences per million words (own calculations), with *unpresent* being more common than *unabsent*.

Conclusions

Among numerous English adjectives in *-ent*, *present* and *absent* are rather common. The former used predicatively is especially frequent in academic prose, which is most likely due to its origin. Both adjectives were borrowed in the Middle English period from Latin, and show a characteristic present participle suffix *-ent/-ant*. The suffix was used to mark present participles in various daughter languages, including Germanic. In the course of the Middle English period, the reflex of the participial *-ent/-ant* was replaced by the suffix *-ing*, but the *-ent/-ant* formations survived into modern English mostly as adjectives and nouns. In other words, many of the survivors have been borrowed in the Middle English period and later. On the other hand, the earlier formations, such as agent nouns formed with the suffix OE *-end*, were generally lost in English, as the suffix itself ceased to be productive.

Since the adjectival suffix *-ent/-ant* attaches to verbal bases, it permits the subject-referencing and eventive readings. However, adjectives in *-ent/-ant* typically have morphologically related nouns in *-ence/-ance/-ency/-ancy*. All the variants go back to Lat. *-ntia*, (participial *-nt-* + *-ia*) added to form abstract nouns. In English, some such nouns have earlier attestations than their related adjectives, and

the related verb is lacking in the word family. On the one hand, it shows that the nominal suffix *-ence/-ance/-ency/-ancy* became independent of the adjectival suffix *-ent/-ant*. Also, diachronic data suggest that although initially such nouns were derived from the morphologically related adjectives, later the reverse direction was possible, and adjectives in *-ent/-ant* were derived from the corresponding nouns due to analogy. Cross-formation can be found in other lexemes of Latinate origin in English.

Syntactically, the adjectives can be used attributively and predicatively. Despite the common origin and semantic complementarity, *present* and *absent* developed unique characteristics. The former can precede or follow the noun it modifies (with a difference in meaning), the latter is often used with a dependent preposition *from* that strengthens the idea of distance and remoteness. That both adjectives are rather common diachronically and synchronically is witnessed by their productivity in word formation processes.

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