

The Old English distribution and subsequent loss of preverbal *ge-*

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Old English had a prefix *ge-*, which frequently appeared on verb forms but which has proven extremely difficult to characterize. It was particularly common in past-participial forms, yet was never obligatory with them (the way its cognates became obligatory in German and Dutch) and was also regularly found on other forms. It is a matter of debate and controversy whether it served as a true derivational prefix, creating new lexical verbs, or more as an inflectional prefix, creating new (aspectual?) forms of existing lexemes. Much older work on the subject and on the cognate prefixes in other old Germanic languages explored the possibility that *ge-* played a perfectivizing role similar to the verbal prefixes found in the Slavic languages, but the parallel remains incomplete at best. Adding to the questions, the *ge-* prefix was lost in the course of the Middle English period, even though most of the other unstressed verbal prefixes have survived into the present day.

While the distribution of *ge-* and the other verbal prefixes was reasonably well studied in the past, it has received very little attention in recent decades. However, I would argue that now is an excellent time to return to it. For one thing, it is just the sort of problem that can be profitably approached with the tools of modern parsed and annotated electronic corpora. For another, our theoretical understanding of verbal structure and aspect has greatly improved in recent years. In this talk I will lay out the fundamental issues involved and the puzzles presented by Old English *ge-* and discuss the prominent traditional approaches to it. I will then present initial from a corpus study on its appearance in Old and Middle English, proposing a preliminary analysis of its syntactic and semantic status.