

## The heavy road to decompositionality: notes from a dying adverb

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This paper analyzes the now-extinct adverb *eft* ‘again’ in Old and Middle English (OE, ME).

**1. Background:** Decompositional adverbs have played a key role in addressing the syntax-semantics interface due to ambiguities tied to structure (e.g. von Stechow 1996, Beck 2005). For instance, *again* shows an ambiguity between a restitutive and a repetitive reading:

(1) *Ann closed the door again.* [PSP: The door had been open before./A. had closed it before.]

More recently, their behavior has been studied diachronically (s. Beck et al. 2009 for 19<sup>th</sup> c. *again*, Gergel & Beck to appear for EModE). It has moreover been observed that the ratio of repetitive and restitutive readings of *again* is not stable, or random, when considered over larger periods and in larger historical corpora (e.g. Gergel 2011). Rather, the proportion of repetitive readings of *again* increases significantly at the expense of restitutive readings.

**2. Work conducted/methods:** At the center of the current work are the PPCME2 and YCOE corpora of ME and OE, Kroch & Taylor (2000), Taylor et al. (2003). (In EModE, *eft* was already only rarely or archaically available – the PPCME, Kroch et al. 2006, has only 2 tokens.) **2.1** We have exhaustively extracted the occurrences of *eft* and its variant (simplex) forms from the PPCME2 and matched them against a sample consisting of a somewhat larger number of occurrences in OE texts from the YCOE. The YCOE contains by far more instances of *eft* than the PPCME2. The restriction was made to keep the samples closer in size and based on practical considerations; we will discuss results based on two selections – one focusing on individuals, i.e. Alfredian and Ælfrician data, and one on broader OE data populations. The present claims are based on the detailed evaluation of more than 700 tokens together with their contexts. **2.2** The categorization of the tokens fell into three major classes. As with *again*, there were repetitive and restitutive readings of *eft* (the latter are a.k.a. ‘counterdirectional’; cf. Fabricius-Hansen 2001, the label often depending on the analysis – for first descriptive purposes, this did not matter; but s. § 3). Furthermore, we have taken into account temporal readings, which do not normally appear with *again*. The label with which an occurrence was categorized w.r.t. to the three major readings was decided, primarily, on the basis of the local context, i.e. (i) did the event hold before; (ii) was only the result state positively given in preceding context and is (usually after a counterdirectional event) the state restored (cf. pairs in ModE *turn off/turn (back) on again*); (iii) is there a narrative sequence which makes *eft* (often preposed) mostly compatible with a temporal reading, ‘afterwards’?

(2) *Efterward me ssel þerne mete eft chyewe /ase þe oxe þet...* (CMAYENBII11.2146)  
afterward one shall this food again chew/ as the ox that... [repetitive reading]

(3) *ðe feorðe time wes ðoa ha misde hire sune. & eft him ifunde.*  
the fourth time was at-that-when he missed her son and again him found.  
(CMANCRIW1,II.62.651) [restitutive /counterdirectional reading; cf. ‘miss/find’]

(4) *Eft ða þa Iulianus ... wearð to casere gecoren,...* [temporal reading]  
afterward when Julianus was to emperor chosen (coelive,+ALS[Agnes]:394.1990)

In cases in which only one reading could be ruled out, we noted any of the three possible pairwise ambiguities. A few examples had to remain unclear. Philological translations were consulted in the extant cases, but we documented our decisions on the basis of the primacy of the contexts studied in each individual case; translations could not always be ‘followed’ (e.g. they crucially do not disambiguate simply by translating *eft* via *again*).

**3. Findings and analysis:** Two main observations emerged from the data inspected. One is that the readings of *eft* do not undergo a continuous development, but rather a sequence of at least two distinct trajectories. The proportion of repetitive readings increases, e.g. in the ME

period, even if the overall incidence of the adverb declines continuously. Second, the restitutive/counterdirectional readings are already clearly available in OE and we find a range of counterdirectional predicates modified by *eft*.

We take such findings to be relevant for the debate surrounding the representation of *again*. A key issue is whether a genuine restitutive analysis (von Stechow) can be upheld for the historical stages under investigation, or whether a (lexical) counterdirectional analysis (e.g. Fabricius-Hansen) is better suited to fit the data. We claim that a counterdirectional analysis fits the data more appropriately at least at the early stages. A prediction of the purely restitutive analysis would be that we are dealing with the same semantic entry that is required by repetitive readings, but applied structurally lower (scoping only over the result state). If this possibility (of using the same adverb with lower scope) had been available in OE, then we would not expect the relatively low incidence of restitutive readings at the earliest stages compared to the repetitive ones, which should have been able to be ‘recycled’ by being applied low. Furthermore, we find non-local, e.g. topicalized instances of *eft* which are interpreted counterdirectionally/restitutively. This would be, again, unexpected under the simplest assumptions for a structural analysis (i.e. if the underlying analysis was the unique repetitive entry transferred to a low position), but the fact is consistent with a lexical theory, i.e. if the underlying analysis of the relevant examples is a counterdirectional one.

- (5) *Eft to- 3anes wintre heo hebbeð þenne alle leues fallen...*  
again towards winter she ebbeth, when all leaves fall.... [translation based on Morris 1873; previous context: world flowed in summer; (CMTRINIT,177.2426)]

We cannot exclude (at this point) the possibility that a genuine restitutive analysis may have become available to speakers e.g. in the course of the ME period with a broader range of lexical-decomposition predicates. But such a possible development was cut off at the latest by the gradual disappearance of the adverb and its replacement by *again* altogether. Following a related study, we suggest that *again* underwent first steps towards a decompositional adverb through a cyclical development from counterdirectional contexts of *eft* (*eft* → *eft+again* → *again*). The development bears several hallmarks of a cyclical development (Jespersen 1917). *Eft*, often used as a particle in several derivations may have been perceived with weak properties in ME and reinforced by *again*, originally a preposition and - at its first developmental stages as an adverb: predominantly found with a meaning similar to *back* (cf. *back again* today, though the properties are partly distinct here).

In a nutshell: Although the early English adverb *eft* shows ambiguities (properly) including the repetitive vs. restitutive/counterdirectional readings, we explore the hypothesis that it was only apparently decompositional in the relevant contexts. It seems to have had distinct (cd.) rather than *bona-fide* restitutive readings (cf. partly similar developments with *again*, e.g. Gergel & Beck t. a.).

**Selected references:** Beck, S., P. Berezovskaya & K. Pflugfelder. 2009. The use of ‘again’ in 19th-century English versus Present-Day English. *Syntax* 12. | Fabricius-Hansen, C. 2001. *Wi(e)der* and *again(st)*. In C. Féry and W. Sternefeld (eds.), *Audiat Vox Sapientiae: a festschrift for Arnim von Stechow*. | Gergel, R. 2011. *Again*: on the trajectory of structural visibility. Paper at the 13<sup>th</sup> DiGS conference. | Gergel, R. & S. Beck. to appear. Early Modern English *again* - A corpus study and semantic analysis. *English Language and Linguistics*. | Kroch, A. & A. Taylor. 2000. Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English, second edition. University of Pennsylvania. | Taylor, A., A. Warner, S. Pintzuk & F. Beths. 2003. The York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose. Oxford: Oxford Text Archive.