Study of Prefixes in Old English, Old High German and Gothic

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Abstract— In this paper, we explore the meaning(s) of the *on-* prefix in Old English its corresponding prefixes in Gothic and Old High German. To do so, we compare and analyze the uncompounded (without prefix) and compounded (with prefix) meanings of strong Verbs listed in the book 'Vergleichendes und etymologisches Wörterbuch der germanischen starken Verben' (a dictionary of Germanic Verbs and their forms in its daughter languages) and put forward possible meanings of the prefix and their possible sources. We observed three major meaning clusters:

- 1) The prefix denoted a reversal or weakening of the original uncompounded meaning
- 2) The prefix denoted a the action being done in a face-to-face capacity, to either positive or negative effect
- 3) The prefix indicated a relationship between the action done and the doer of the action.

These results enable an in-depth study of the prefixes that are derived from the original Proto-Germanic language.

I. INTRODUCTION

² The Germanic languages are a subfamily of the Indo-European family of languages. The last common ancestor of the Germanic languages, called Proto-Germanic (PGmc.), is reconstructed from the attested languages by the comparative method [3] [5]. The descendants of PGmc. fall into three clear groups: East Germanic (EGmc.), West Germanic (WGmc.) and North Germanic (NGmc.) [10]. Among these, the major focus of our study is on the WGmc. languages, specifically Old English (OE) and Old High German (OHG). The Gothic language is included in this study despite being an EGmc. language because it preserves certain prefixes from the PGmc. language more clearly, which make it ideal for studying the changes in meaning and structure that have occurred to yield the forms of the prefixes in Old English and Old High German, in the larger context of the Germanic language family. The prefix(es) that are present in Old English and Old High German reflect a merger of various different prefixes that were originally distinct in the PGmc. language and were preserved in the descendant language of Gothic.

In the next section, we begin with an in-depth look at our languages of study, prefixes and WGmc.

Fig. 1. The relationship between languages.

Germanic	Gothic	Old English	Old High German
en-	in-	on-	in(t)-
and-	and-	on-	in(t)-
und-	und-	on-	in(t)-

TABLE I

PREFIX CORRESPONDENCES ACROSS RESEARCHED LANGUAGES

II. BACKGROUND

The West Germanic (WGmc.) language family is the largest member of the three branches of the Germanic Language family (by native speakers) [1] [4]. Members of the WGmc. family include Old English and Old High German (attested between ca. 700–1100 AD) [4], which are the parent languages of Modern English and Modern High German, respectively. The various members of the West Germanic family are hypothesized to be mutually intelligible till the 7th century after which they are believed to have diverged into separate languages (some of which still maintain a degree of mutual intelligibility). Gothic (attested from around 350 AD) [4], on the other hand, is the only East Germanic language for which a sizable literature exists. It is extinct and has no surviving daughter languages. As we see in Figure 1, since Gothic is both the earliest well-attested Germanic language and the one most divergent from the others, it provides a useful context in which to explore Old English and Old High German, and the evolution of the prefixes across time.

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Category Description	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
Proto-Germanic Verb	Bend-a-	Kweþ-a-	Haf-ja-
Meaning	binden (to bind, tie, bond)	sagen (to say, speak, utter)	heben (to lift, raise)
OE uncompounded meaning	to tie, bind, fetter, fasten, restraint	to say, speak, name, call, proclaim, summon, declare	to heave, raise, lift
Prefix + Verb (OE)	onbindan	oncwēðan	onhebban
OE compounded meaning	to untie, unbind, loosen, release	to answer, resound echo, protest	to raise up, erect, lift up
OHG uncompounded meaning	to tie up, tie, wrap around, join, combine, tie together	to say, speak, talk, tell, explain, determine, testify, assert, call	to raise, take, set, lighten exaggerate, rise, lift, open up
Prefix + Verb (OHG)	in(t)bintan	inquedan	intheven
OHG compounded meaning	to unbind, unwind; release, untie; deliver; put away, free	to answer, correspond, face, repeat, behave yourself	to hold in an upright position
Gothic uncompounded meaning	to tie one with something	to say, commend, tell, speak	to raise, lift, increase, elevate
Prefix + Verb (Gothic)	and-bindan	and-quīpan	and-hafjan
Gothic compounded meaning	to solve, dissolve, release from, explain, loosen	to say goodbye, dismiss, come together, speak with	to reply, answer
Meaning Proposed (OE)	To reverse or weaken a prior action	Against, opposite, facing the root verb or being in a face-to-face interaction	To identify a relationship between action and doer
Meaning Proposed (OHG)	To reverse or weaken a prior action	Against, opposite, facing the root verb or being in a face-to-face interaction	To identify a relationship between action and doer
Meaning Proposed (Gothic)	To reverse or weaken a prior action	Against, opposite, facing the root verb or being in a face-to-face interaction	Against, opposite, facing the root verb or being in a face-to-face interaction

TABLE II

EXAMPLE 1: ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES OF 3 MAJOR MEANING CLUSTERS

Category Description	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
Proto-Germanic Verb	Dō-, Dæ	Nem-a-	Slæp-a-
Meaning	tun (to do, make)	nehmen (to take, adopt, use)	schlafen (to sleep)
OE uncompounded meaning	to do, make, act, perform	to take, assume, undertake, accept, get, obtain	to sleep, be motionless, inactive
Prefix + Verb (OE)	ondōn	onniman	onslāpan, onslæpan
OE compounded meaning	to undo, open	to receive, take	to go to sleep, sleep
OHG uncompounded meaning	to do, make, create, act, work	to take, seize; take away, tear away, snatch, grasp, pick up, accept, bring	to sleep, fall asleep
Prefix + Verb (OHG)	in(t)tuon	intneman [8]	in(t)slāfan
OHG compounded meaning	to undo, unfasten, open, reveal, uncover, emerge	to take on, assume	to go to sleep, fall asleep, pass away
Gothic uncompounded meaning	-	to take, accept	to sleep
Prefix + Verb (Gothic)	-	and-niman	-
Gothic compounded meaning	-	to recieve, record	-
Meaning Proposed (OE)	To reverse or weaken a prior action	Against, opposite, facing the root verb or being in a face-to-face interaction	To identify a relationship between action and doer
Meaning Proposed (OHG)	To reverse or weaken a prior action	Against, opposite, facing the root verb or being in a face-to-face interaction	To identify a relationship between action and doer
Meaning Proposed (Gothic)	-	Against, opposite, facing the root verb or being in a face-to-face interaction	-

TABLE III

EXAMPLE 2: ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES OF 3 MAJOR MEANING CLUSTERS

Category Description	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
Proto-Germanic Verb	Lūk-a- (2)	Læt-a-	Fenþ-a-
Meaning	schließen (to close, conclude)	lassen (to let)	finden (to find, locate, discover)
OE uncompound meaning	to lock, close, enclose, fasten, shut up	to let, allow to remain, leave behind, leave undone	to find, meet with, discover, obtain, consider
Prefix + Verb (OE)	onlūcan	onlætan	onfindan
OE compounded meaning	to unlock, open, unfold, reveal, disclose	to permit, let go, relax	to find out, learn, perceive, notice, observe, discover
OHG uncompound meaning	to close	to let, let come; leave behind, leave, refrain; set free, let go	to find (again); encounter, discover, behold, recognize
Prefix + Verb (OHG)	in(t)lūhhan	in(t)lāzan, intlāzen	intfindan
OHG compounded meaning	to open, unlock, open up	to relax, give way, release, let go	to find out, feel, perceive; find, know
Gothic uncompound meaning	to close, lock	to let, make a loud scream	to recognize, realize, find out
Prefix + Verb (Gothic)	-	and-letan, and-letnan	-
Gothic compounded meaning	-	to release, to be released	-
Meaning Proposed (OE)	To reverse or weaken a prior action	Against, opposite, facing the root verb or being in a face-to-face interaction	To identify a relationship between action and doer
Meaning Proposed (OHG)	To reverse or weaken a prior action	Against, opposite, facing the root verb or being in a face-to-face interaction	To identify a relationship between action and doer
Meaning Proposed (Gothic)	-	Against, opposite, facing the root verb or being in a face-to-face interaction	-

TABLE IV
EXAMPLE 3: ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES OF 3 MAJOR MEANING CLUSTERS

The correspondences between the prefixes of Gothic, Old English and Old High German have already been researched, and are presented in Table I [7].

As we can see from Table I and Figure 1, the many prefixes present in Gothic (and presumably in its sister languages) have undergone a merger to become one prefix in Old English *on-* and Old High German *in(t)-*. However, though the prefixes all appear similar, they maintain multiple meanings from their different sources. It is these meanings that we tried to research and shed light on in our procedure.

III. PROCEDURE

PGmc. verbs and their descendants (if any) in the daughter languages were initially sourced from Elmar Seebold’s *Vergleichendes und etymologisches Wörterbuch der germanischen starken Verben* [7]. Seebold lists the attested forms under each PGmc. verb. Out of all the verbs listed, those used with the *on-/in(t)-* prefix were extracted. The meaning of both the uncompound (without prefix) and compounded (with prefix) verb for Old English was referenced from Clark Hall and Meritt’s ‘*A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*’ [2]. For Old High German, Schützeichel’s ‘*Althochdeutsches Wörterbuch*’ [6] was used to find the meaning of the compounded and uncompound verbs and Streitberg’s *Die Gotische Bibel* was used for the same purpose while researching the Gothic language [9]. Since book *Vergleichendes und etymologisches Wörterbuch der germanischen starken Verben* [7], ‘*Althochdeutsches Wörterbuch*’ [6] and *Die Gotische Bibel* [9] were in German, the translation of the verbs to English was cross referenced by Google

translate, Cambridge German - English Dictionary and Duden German Dictionary. Then a possible meaning for the prefix was hypothesized.

IV. EXAMPLES

The examples are presented in multiple tables. In Tables II, III and IV we provide examples of the three clusters of meanings exhibited by OE *on-* and OHG *in(t)-* and state the hypothesized meanings for the prefixes of the example verbs³. These example(s) have been chosen for their ability to reflect the larger data pool well.

For the entire list of analyzed verbs and the raw data, please refer to the appendix.

V. DISCUSSION

As we can see from the table, there are three major meaning clusters. For the study, 106 possible compounded/uncompound Strong Verb sets were found in Old English, Old High German, Gothic or a combination thereof. The meanings of the prefixes in OHG and OE were relatively consistent. The three major ones generally seen in OE and OHG were:

- 1) To reverse or weaken a prior action
- 2) Against, opposite, facing the root verb **or** being in a face-to-face interaction
- 3) To identify a relationship between action and doer

However, in the Gothic set, only examples of meaning 1 and 2 are found, strongly indicating that the source of the third merged meaning ‘identifying a relationship between

³The corresponding Proto-Germanic verbs are written in the notation used in Elmar Seebold’s *Vergleichendes und etymologisches Wörterbuch der germanischen starken Verben*

the action and doer' has entered the languages of OE and OHG at some point after the splitting of the *PGmc.* into *EGmc.* and Northwest Germanic, **or** has evolved from an already preexisting prefix in PGmc. and Gothic into the ones seen in OHG and OE. To more accurately determine the sources of the meanings of these prefixes, further research is required. Another aspect of the results that may be a topic for further research is whether one meaning is more prevalent than the others. However, the fact that our sample contains only strong verbs, and that cognates do not exist for all words across all three languages, makes it hard for this study to determine conclusively whether one meaning is more prevalent than the others.

VI. CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

We can see from the data provided that the meanings of the *on-/in(t)-* prefix fall into three major clusters. These meanings probably correspond to distinct prefixes present in PGmc. or maybe even its parent language, that have merged together into the *on-/in(t)-* prefix in Old English and Old High German.

These results pose some interesting questions. First, based on these results, we can with a reasonable degree of certainty identify the sources of two of the three prefix meanings as the PGmc. language itself. This conclusion is possible because logically, if the same meaning of the same prefix is present in both WGmc. languages and an EGmc. Language, the only point in history both these meanings can originate from is the PGmc. language.

Examples of the third prefix meaning cluster "to indicate a relationship between action and doer" do not exist in Gothic, but do in Old English and Old High German. This indicates that the source of the prefix is not PGmc., but some point in history after the split into East Germanic and Northwest Germanic. To determine the exact source, further research is needed.

In addition, further research is also needed into other meaning clusters that may be present in the prefixes of Old English, Old High German and Gothic, especially when it comes to weak verbs, which were not focused on in this study.

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VII. APPENDIX

The complete set of data is included in the appendix which can be accessed by going to the following link:

- https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/127hlrNU9XIW194vN_7yeMoCPIVs_4SF9wTcGa68n8sM/edit?usp=sharing