

Esaúl Ruiz Narbona

**Transitivising Mechanisms in Old English**  
Preverbs versus the Deverbal Causative  
Formation



## English and Beyond

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Preliminaries

One of the aspects on which this study focuses is the functions, effects and meanings of certain common Old English prefixes, such as *be-*, *for* or *ge-*, that are commonly attached to verbs in this language, as is also the case with other sister languages. As stated in several standard grammars of Old English and other Germanic languages, e.g. Quirk and Wrenn (1957: 109-119) or Krahe and Meid (1967: 36-9), dictionaries such as Bosworth and Toller (1898) and its supplement by Toller (1921), Clark-Hall (1960) and *DOE* (2018), as well as different works on Old English verbal prefixes as de la Cruz (1975), Hiltunen (1983: 47-53) and Brinton (1988: 199-212) to name a few, Old English verbal prefixes such as *ā-*, *be-* or *for-* add different meanings and nuances to the different verbs they can be attached to.

These works highlight three meanings or functions. The first one I will comment on is perfectiveness, i.e. the capacity to turn durative aspect, actions with no specific endpoint, for instance *writan* ‘to write’ into perfective aspect, that is, actions portrayed as having a precise endpoint as in *āwritan* ‘to write out, to write down’. The second major effect of verbal prefixes discussed in the literature is related to the idea of affectedness of the object. The previously mentioned authors emphasise the idea that prefixes such as *for-* often convey connotations of destruction or negativeness of the object as can be seen in the case of *forbærnan* ‘burn up; consume by fire; burn down, burn to death; inflame (caus.; intr.)’ in comparison with its unprefixed counterpart *bærnan* ‘burn (caus.; intr.)’. Lastly, the third major function scholars relate to these prefixes is its transitivity effect. Some of the prefixes under study in this work are said to turn the intransitive base verbs they attach to, e.g. *hweorfan* ‘turn, change (intr.); go’ into transitive ones, for instance *behweorfan* ‘attend to; prepare (food, body for burial), embalm; treat, deal with’.

This last transitivity function is perhaps the most important one in this work since it has directly affected the selection of verbs under analysis. The object of study are verbs that stand in an inchoative-causative alternation and are found preceded by some of the aforementioned prefixes on which more details will be given in the following paragraphs.

When reviewing the literature on Old English, it is easy to find studies that focus on the different processes of simplification undergone by this language up to the present day, with special emphasis on nominal morphology: loss of gender and case system and its possible relationship with a fixed word order (Traugott (1972), Lass (1997), Hickey (2002), Pintzuk (2002), Allen (2006), Fischer & van der Wurff (2006)). Nevertheless, the processes of morphological simplification undergone by English are not limited to the aforementioned ones. They affect other structures such as modal verbs, Plank (1984) or the expression of the inchoative-causative alternation,

see Haspelmath (1993) or Poppe (2009). As it is known, this is one of the main semantic alternations that determine the expression of verbal arguments, Levin (1993). It is also a crucial component of the lexical representation system used in the Role and Reference Grammar approach from which this study has benefited in that each of the *Aktionsart* types that serve as the basis of logical structures has a causative counterpart, and also a fundamental aspect of the lexis and syntax of English clauses.

Regarding the inchoative-causative alternation, García García (2012) carried out a study about morphological causatives in the history of English. She highlights the effects that the loss of productivity of this formation may have had and also points to different lines of research. The term morphological causative refers to verbs such as *set*, originally derived from *sit* by means of the Germanic *\*-ija* suffix. This suffix was attached to the *a*-grade of a strong non-causative verb such as *\*set-* ‘to sit’ (intransitive), and added a causative meaning as in *\*sat-ija*, ‘to set’ (transitive). These two verbs, *sit* and *set*, exemplify what is known as a causative opposition.

In Old English the formal relationship between the members of a causative pair is opaque and unsystematic (see Brinton and Traugott (2005: 153) or García García (2012: 135). This favours the gradual dissolution of causative pairs that entails both semantic and syntactic changes.

Concerning the latter, focus will be laid on cases in which the causative opposition disappears because one or the two members of the causative pair change their valence. This process affects oppositions in which the base verb is an intransitive verb that takes on the valence of its derived causative, becoming thus transitive as well. Derived causatives can also be affected, resulting in originally causative verbs acquiring an intransitive valence. The Old English causative pair *meltan-myltan* may illustrate this:

(1.1)

a. *myltan* ‘melt’ (transitive and intransitive) < Proto-Germanic *\*maltija-* ‘melt’ (transitive).

b. *meltan* ‘melt’ (usually intransitive) < Proto-Germanic *\*melta-* ‘melt’ (intransitive).

In the example above, the original causative (*myltan*) has acquired an intransitive valence frame. Verbs resulting from this process can be either intransitive or transitive with no morphological marking. They are labile verbs (Haspelmath 1993, Dixon 2000: 33-41). The labile use of Present-day English *melt* is illustrated in (1.2) below. In sentence (1.2a) it functions as an intransitive verb, whereas in (1.2b) it functions as a transitive one.

(1.2)

a. *The snowman melted*

b. *The sun melted the snowman*

Labile verbs are extraordinarily frequent in Present-day English in comparison with other related languages as highlighted by Haspelmath (1993) and Poppe (2009). For instance, most of the unmarked causative oppositions in English such as the ones in (1.3) and (1.5) are expressed by means of a morphologically marked causative alternation in German, exemplified in (1.4) and (1.6). In (1.6), the opposition is causative, i.e. the causative member is derived from the non-causative one, in this case by means of the *-jan* suffix, while in (1.4), an anticausative marker, *sich*, used to derive the non-causative member of the causative opposition, serves to distinguish the causative from the non-causative counterpart. This latter mechanism is rather widespread in modern European languages as exemplified by Spanish in (1.6) and (1.7) respectively.

(1.3)

a. *The man opened the door*

b. *The door opened*

(1.4)

a. *Die Tür öffnete sich*

The.NOM door opened ANTICAUS

‘The door opened’

b. *Der Mann öffnete die Tür*

The.NOM man opened the.ACC door

‘The man opened the door’

(1.5)

a. *The Titanic sank*

b. *An iceberg sank the Titanic*

(1.6)

a. *Die Titanic versank*

The.NOM Titanic sank

‘The Titanic sank’

b. *Ein Eisberg versenkte die Titanic*

A.NOM iceberg sank.CAUS the.ACC Titanic

‘An iceberg sank the Titanic’

(1.7)

- a. *La puerta se abrió*  
The door ANTICAUS opened  
'The door opened'
- b. *El hombre abrió la puerta*  
The man opened the door  
'The man opened the door'

(1.8)

- a. *El Titanic se hundió*  
The Titanic ANTICAUS sank  
'The Titanic sank'
- b. *Un iceberg hundió el Titanic*  
A iceberg sank the Titanic  
'An iceberg sank the Titanic'

The tendency towards labile verbs displayed by Present-Day English can be traced back to Old English, as Hermodsson (1952: 129) points out. In fact, blurred causative oppositions are one of the main sources of labile verbs, though not the only one, see García García (2012: 138fn36).

According to García García (2012: 140), out of the 57 Old English surviving causative pairs, 13 of them show signs of labilization. These are the verbs that form the backbone of the present study. They are an interesting and profitable object of study for several reasons. First, they allow the assessment of the effects of prefixes on transitivity on verbs that can already function as transitive and intransitive, contrary to what is the case with the previous literature on prefixes, which only focus on some clear selected examples of unprefixated intransitive-only and prefixed transitive-only pairs. This can contribute to a better understanding of both the transitivity capacities of prefixes on the one hand, and of the causative formation on the other. Of course, the concepts of valence and transitivity are intimately linked to causativity, since this is defined as a valence-adding operation that modifies the valence of the original non-causative clause, changing an intransitive clause into a transitive one more often than not (see chapter 2, section 2.5 for more details). As mentioned above, that is one of the functions often attributed to verbal prefixes as well. Therefore, the selection of labile verbs standing in a causative alternation may be a fruitful object of analysis in connection with prefixes because they allow the study of how both transitivity mechanisms interact, if at all, and to assess to what extent the causative formation, already in decline in the Old English period, might have been overridden by the much more widespread prefixes. This topic has attracted little attention so far in Old English

research, cf. Visser (1963: 97-100) and Lindemann (1970: 30). However, it may allow for the exploration of new research lines that may offer unexpected insights concerning Old English word formation patterns.

So far, the idea of transitivity has only been discussed in connection with valence, basically the number of participants in a clause. However, as authors such as Hopper and Thompson (1980) point out, the notion of transitivity goes beyond an action involving two participants that is effective in some way. In their article, they develop a multifactorial approach to transitivity in which transitivity is divided into different parameters that conform what they call Cardinal Transitivity. Interestingly for the purposes of this study, in addition to participants, basically the notion of traditional transitivity, i.e. whether a clause has just one or two participants, some other parameters included in Cardinal Transitivity are aspect, whether the action is seen as having an endpoint or not, and affectedness of the object, i.e. to what degree the object in the clause is affected. These are, as explained above, the main effects and meanings often associated with prefixes in the literature. Thus, the selection of verbs in this work does not only allow for the study of the interaction of prefixes and the causative *-jan* formation in relation to traditional transitivity, but it makes it possible to widen the scope and analyse the effects of verbal prefixes in connection with the notion of Cardinal Transitivity and its different parameters.

All in all, this work is directly connected to topics of relevance in current linguistics such as valence or transitivity, Hopper and Thompson (1980), Haspelmath (1993), Abraham (1997), Nichols and Barnes (2004), Comrie (2006), Naess (2007), Plank and Lahiri (2009)) and how these may change (Hermodsson (1952), Visser (1963), Bammesberger (1965), Suzuki (1989), Kulikov (2001) and (2009), Narrog (2009), van Gelderen (2011), Óttosson (2013), Cennamo et al. (2015)), and other topics of interest such as the function and meanings of prefixes (de la Cruz (1975), Hiltunen (1983), Brinton (1988), Martín Arista (2012), McFadden (2015). Furthermore, several works have concentrated on the study of *-jan* verbs from van Hamel (1931), Prokosch (1939: 151-3) or Bammesberger (1965) to García García (2005, 2012) and Óttosson (2013). The great number of studies related to the topics addressed in this work highlights the fact that morphological causatives are promising objects of study, since there exists a current debate within linguistics about topics related to them that do not only concern causatives from a diachronic point of view, but also topics that are of interest to general linguistics.

## **1.2 Main objectives**

The present study has two main objectives. The first one of them concerns the effects of prefixes on transitivity understood as a multifactorial notion consisting of several parameters, only one of which is participants. Special emphasis will be laid on the parameters related to aspect, whether the clause in question presents an inherent

endpoint or not, affectedness of the object and, of course participants, since as mentioned above, these are the parameters of transitivity scholars discuss in connection with Old English verbal prefixes. Not only will individual parameters be taken into account. This study aims at providing insightful results concerning all parameters as a whole, or in other words, it aims at analysing the effects and functions of prefixes on what I have called Total Transitivity, i.e. the notion of transitivity considering each of the parameters of Cardinal Transitivity.

This work presents certain methodological differences as compared with previous studies on this subject. First of all, I have used statistical analysis, which has not been employed in previous work on prefixes, in cases where it was possible. Through the use of statistics, it is intended to offer a new perspective and shed a new light on issues that have never before been analysed under that angle. Secondly, a major difference is the fact that my analysis is based on a corpus of examples including all major Old English texts, from wisdom poetry to the Bible, rather than being based on previously processed data by other authors or dictionaries. The main reason behind this choice is, naturally, to make an analysis that is as accurate as possible bearing in mind the actual use of Old English in a variety of texts. Additionally, my study includes only a selected group of verbs, verbs standing in an inchoative-causative alternation that show signs of lability. One could argue that this is not a comprehensive study of prefixes due to this limited number of verbs. However, this corpus is considered representative enough. On the one hand, it includes the more frequent and commonly discussed prefixes such as *ā-*, *be-* or *ge-*. On the other, the corpus covers a wide range of examples. It could be argued that the analysis is biased, as examples are limited to certain verbs, namely the aforementioned 13 labile pairs from causative oppositions. However, these are as representative as any randomly selected group of verbs. Perhaps, it is even more so due to the fact that this particular corpus is based on labile verbs. As mentioned above, this group of verbs has the advantage that it allows for the assessment of the influence of prefixes on transitivity in a way that is not possible in corpora that only include verbs that present no valence variation.

Additionally, the selection of this precise group of verbs allows for the investigation of a further topic, the second objective of this work, namely the interaction of two transitivity forces: on the one hand, verbal prefixes, and on the other, the causative formation. The second main aim of this study is thus, to assess to what extent causativity interacts, if at all, with prefixes as a transitivity mechanism and to try to shed light on the role prefixes might have had in the dissolution of the causative formation, a topic little explored so far as mentioned above. Thus, it is expected that the analysis carried out in this piece of research will shed some light on questions that have not been investigated in depth so far, such as whether the rather

widespread prefixes do take over the role of transitivity force in lieu of the much more restricted causative suffix *-jan*.

### 1.3 Overview of contents

Once the main objectives of this work have been put forth, an overview of the main contents will be provided. The rest of this study is divided into four chapters. In what follows, details will be given regarding the exact contents of each of them.

Chapter 2 focuses on the theoretical background and offers an overview of the main concepts that underpin this study. The first concept that is introduced is that of valence. This is followed by an outline of cardinal transitivity as well as the closely related prototypical transitivity hypothesis. Section 3 concentrates on the concept of *Aktionsart*. It describes what is meant by this term and explains the different tests used in this work in order to determine the *Aktionsart* of the clauses under analysis. Additionally, a succinct explanation of the ways *Aktionsart* may interact with aspect is provided. Section 2.4 consists of an overview of the main meanings and functions of the different Old English prefixes taken into account in this study. The next subsection deals specifically with causativity as a valence-changing operation and offers information regarding the different types of causative derivation together with a historical overview of Old English morphological causatives. Lastly, the final section introduces the concept of lexicalization.

The third chapter, “Methodology” explains the methodological tools that have been employed in this work. The first subsection gives details about the design and compilation of the corpus of examples under analysis. This is followed by a detailed account of how the text selection was carried out. A list of the texts included in my corpus is also provided. Finally, the methodology of the analysis to which every of the examples of the corpus has been subject is described.

The longest chapter in this study is chapter 4, entitled “Effects of Verbal Prefixes on Transitivity and their Interaction with the Causative Formation”. This chapter concentrates on the analysis explained in the previous chapter and discusses the data and the results they provide concerning the objectives of this study, i.e. to assess the role of prefixes under analysis in relation to transitivity and their interaction with the causative alternation as a transitivity force. With one exception, this discussion has been carried out prefix by prefix in alphabetical order.

The last chapter compiles the conclusions drawn from the analyses provided throughout the previous chapter. First, the results related to the effects of prefixes on transitivity are analysed. This is followed by the results regarding the interaction of causativity and prefixes as transitivity mechanisms. Thus, it serves as a final statement of the results obtained in this study. Additionally, some of the main problems that had to be faced in the completion of this work are discussed, as well as

the solutions used in order to solve them or at least mitigate their impact. Lastly, a final subsection pointing to further research lines is included.

This final chapter is followed by the references section. This is in turn divided into primary sources, on the one hand, including the complete reference of all Old English texts that conform the corpus used in this work; and secondary sources, previous work cited throughout this study, on the other. This is followed by an appendix that compiles the results of each of the parameters of transitivity that each of the verbs under analysis displays.



# English and Beyond

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