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The *ge-* prefix: Its Function and Fate in English and German

The Germanic prefix *ge-* is present in both Old English and Old High German, but in the modern languages the situation is very different. In Modern English only a few traces survive, whereas many German dialects, including standard German, retain the prefix. In Old English, as is still the case in Modern German, *ge-* could be attached to nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Its disappearance is therefore puzzling. Conversely, if the loss of the prefix in English was inevitable, then its retention in German is puzzling. In general, we lack a clearer understanding of Germanic *ge-* as a whole.

Across the older Germanic languages, the function and meaning of *ge-* were probably largely the same, though opinions divide on what those were. Part of the difficulty in determining the function of *ge-* is that it could be affixed to several different parts of speech, and thus had multiple, differentiated functions within a language. According to Wright (1958), Gothic used *ga-* to construct collective nouns. With verbs, the prefix was added to give a perfective meaning. In Old High German, the case was the same (Michels 1979). However, in Old Saxon verbs, Cathey (2000) argues that the prefix “was so common as to become essentially obligatory on the past participle.”

As with the function of *ge-*, there is also some dispute as to what its meaning really is, or used to be. Most commonly accepted as the roots for *ge-* are IE **ko-* or **kom*, ‘near, at, with’. Alternatively, Lindemann (1970: 36) suggests Go. *ga-* was rather a reflex of PIE **gho-*, its meaning instead being that of “a highly deictic morpheme stressing the progression of an action from one point forward to another...”

Previous researchers (e.g. Lindemann 1970 and Stanley 1982) have considered limited aspects of the issue – such as only one or very few dialects, or just prenominal or preverbal *ge-* for example – which prevents the development of a comprehensive analysis. Concerning the situation in English, the general consensus at present indicates that *ge-* disappeared after becoming a meaningless morpheme. However, the possibility of phonological weakening should not be discarded out of hand; the transformation of OE *ge-* into *i-* in ME warrants investigation. And finally, a third factor must be considered, namely influence from Old Norse.

This paper studies the prefix in the contexts of both English and German, synchronically and diachronically. Results from the narrower confines of previous studies, as well as research on *ge-* in older and current forms of English and German, including the standard languages, allow for an extensive comparison of a number of different variables. This comparison considers the three major factors that may have played a part in the disappearance of *ge-* from English vs. its retention in German. Further research is required to determine how these factors play out in German under similar conditions, but findings thus far suggest that more than one of the above factors played a role.

References

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