

The aim of this project is a multi-faceted analysis of changes in the use, meaning and distribution of *ge-*, one of the early English prefixes (i.e. the smallest meaningful linguistic units attached to the beginning of words). The analysis will draw on data from the earliest stages of English, i.e. between the fifth and fifteenth centuries AD, which are referred to as Old English (5th C to 11th C) and Middle English (11th C to 15th C) respectively. These two developmental periods of English are considered separate languages because of how different they are from each other, as well as how different either of them is from modern English.

The prefix *ge-* derives from Proto-Indo-European, the ancestor of all Indo-European languages, and originally meant 'together'. It is a linguistic element common in the languages from the Germanic language family to which English also belongs. The prefix *ge-* occurred frequently in Old English and marginally in Middle English, but eventually disappeared from the language completely, due to intensive phonological and morphological changes that took place after the Middle English period. When still a productive morpheme, *ge-* co-occurred most often with verbs, which is why it has been traditionally associated with the function of changing the grammatical aspect of a verb from imperfective to perfective, or of its lexical aspect from atelic to telic. However, there are also data clearly indicating that the prefix was used in imperfective and atelic contexts. Therefore, despite extensive research conducted over the past 150 years, the complete range of functions and meanings of the prefix in question remains a mystery. A number of factors has contributed to this situation. Firstly, the majority of the available literature on the subject has dealt with this issue in a fragmentary manner, focusing on particular properties of the prefix in combination with a particular part of speech at a particular historical moment, without truly exploring how these properties may have influenced one another over time. What is more, no study has been proposed which presents ME data pertaining to the prefix *ge-* in a comprehensive and systematic way (probably due to its low frequency in this period). Lastly, the potential of corpus-based methods, which consist in analysing large collections of texts, has not yet been exploited in research on the prefix.

The proposed project aims to fill this research gap by utilising corpus-based tools and adopting a theoretical framework based on actual language use (usage-based model), which concentrates on authentic language data, and language itself is understood as a cognitive skill. This model views language change as a change in use motivated by the needs of language users. This approach differs significantly from more traditional, normative linguistics, which tends to analyse linguistic phenomena in isolation from contextual information. The project will contribute to a better understanding of the roles played by the prefix in the two developmental stages of English studied, while at a more general level, it will illustrate the dynamic mechanisms of language change, thereby making a significant contribution to the state of the art of English historical linguistics.