


The prosody of the Old English prefix *ge-*

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This paper reports a study on the prosodic behaviour of the Old English (OE) prefix *ge-*, proposing that this provides evidence for a prosodic analysis in terms of trochaic feet.

OE orthographic division is often incongruent with the division into morphosyntactic units as found in Modern English. Function words, for example, often group together, while compounds are often divided into two words. One possible explanation is that these groupings reflect prosodic units (Nübling 1992, Fleischer 2009), which might be an artefact of the *scriptio continua* where the written text was seen as a representation of oral communication (Frey 1988, Parkes 1992, Treitler 1984). Similarly, Lahiri and Plank (2010) discuss the trochaic foot as the driving force behind prosodic structuring and provide several historical and modern West Germanic examples.

The unstressed OE prefix *ge-* (most likely [jə]) is very common across word categories. In verbs, *ge-* often indicates a participle with a resultative meaning (McFadden 2015). *ge-* was lost on the way to Modern English, but is still productive in, e.g., German. In OE, *ge-* is frequently separated from the following verb, either to stand by itself, or to be attached to the preceding word. Example (1) shows a sample excerpt from the Parker/Winchester Chronicle (Corp. Chris. MS 173, facsimile by Flower and Smith 1941).

(1) 

and him with **ge**-fuhton and hie **ge**-fliendon
'... and they fought with them and put them to flight' (year 917)

A first survey looked at the four possible orthographic distributions of *ge-* in the Parker Chronicles with regard to previous word category (lexical or function word (including non-comparable adverbs like *there*, *here*)).

Type of division	Total	Prec. function word	Prec. lexical word
1. word <i>ge</i> – verb	215	72	139
2. word – <i>ge</i> verb	40	35 (15 are 7)	5
3. word – <i>ge</i> – verb	87	77 (21 are 7)	10
4. word <i>ge</i> verb	43	18	24

Table 1: Distribution of *ge-*, including preceding word type

Table 1 shows a preference of *ge-* to attach to preceding function words. A majority of these are members of the verbal complex (VC; 46 cases of, e.g., auxiliaries) or sentence-initial adverbs (29 cases); the rest are subject or object pronouns or stranded prepositions.

The cluster within the VC allows for variation: in 17 out of 46 cases *ge-* does not attach to the previous material. Clustering as such is not surprising as the VC can be assumed to form a prosodic phrase (e.g., following MATCH theory, Selkirk 2011). In contrast, the attachment of *ge-* to a sentence-initial adverb seems to be close to obligatory: only 2 of 29 cases are not attached. This position cannot be explained via MATCH. However, this is a typical Wackernagel position and the data seems to point towards a prosodic (clitic-like) placement of *ge-* in the second position, incidentally also often forming a trochaic foot.

Further indications for trochaic feet come from attachment patterns. In a correlation test for some of the scribes (147 *ge*-occurrences), a chi-square test showed a significant relationship between the (non-)attachment of *ge-* to the previous word and the following verb stem: if *ge* attaches to the previous word, it is more likely to detach from the following verb stem ($\chi^2=11.57$, $df=1$, $p<0.001$). This pattern essentially adds weak material to the previous prosodic unit and allows for the next unit to have a strong start, as illustrated in (1): (7him with *ge-*) (fuhton) (7hie *ge-*) (fliendon).