The Specific Function of the Prefix *be*- in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints**

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1. Introduction

During the Old English period, various kinds of prefix were to be found. In this paper I shall examine the prefix *be*-. Although most handbooks provide an explanation about meanings and functions of the prefix, they have not as yet been investigated in significant detail. One of the problems is that a compound verb with the prefix *be*- does not alter the meaning of a corresponding simplex, such as *becuman*, which generally means "come". We may argue that the prefix *be*- does not change the original meaning in terms of grammaticalization. However, the question then arises: had all of the compound verbs of *be*- lost their specific meanings simultaneously in Old English times due to grammaticalization?

This paper will therefore analyze the specific function of the prefix *be*-. The textual source for analysis will be Ælfric's proses contained in *Lives of Saints*, which was written in late Old English times, i.e., when Old English became independent of the translation of Latin and thus began to establish its own nature.

2. Previous Studies

2.1 Clark Hall, Mitchell, and OED

The majority of previous studies and dictionary entries concerning the prefix *be*- in Old English have focused on its meanings and functions. Clark Hall has observed that the prefix *be*- has the following notable elements:

> 1. specializes the meaning of a transitive verb. (as in behon, besettan). 2 makes an intr. verb transitive. (beswincan, beðencan). 3. is privative (bedælan, beliðan). 4. does not alter the meaning (becuman). (33)

This explanation is of some general interest regarding the functions and meanings of the prefix *be*-. Most of scholars have, therefore, followed him. A noteworthy aspect of this analysis is the attempt to account for the meaning and/or function of *be*- in *becuman*, which he describes

as having the same meaning as *cuman* "come". Furthermore, he does not give an explanation of the meaning of the prefix itself.

A similar remark is made by Mitchell, who noted that *be-* has three meanings or functions:

> 1 In some words *be-* is the same as the prep. "about", e.g. *be-gan* "surround" and *be-ridan* "ride round, surrond". 2 Sometimes it is a deprivative, e.g. *be-dælan* "deprive" and *be-heafdian* "behead". 3 It can make an intransitive verb transitive, e.g. *be-ðencan* "think about" and *be-wepan* "bewail". (58)

His comments provide some insight into the meanings and functions of the prefix. Following him, *be-* itself means "about", which seems to spread through the group of the compound verbs including *be-*.

Concerning his argument, the *OED* describes the original meaning as follows:

> The original meaning was "about" . . . With verbs, various sense of "about" are often distinctly retained, as in *be-bind, be-come* (come about), *be-delve* . . ., the notion of "all about, all round, over" or "throughout", naturally intensifies the sense of the verb; whence, *be-* comes to be more or less a simple *intensive*, as in *befall*, . . .[1]

This explanation shows the original meaning while noting wide range of usages of the prefix *be-*. The *OED* is of the same opinion as Mitchell.

From these preliminary comments, it should be clear that the functions and meanings of the prefix *be-* are:

a. The original meaning of *be-* is "about", from which its various senses are derived, such as "all about", "over", and "throughout".
b. The secondary meaning is privative: "deprive of".
c. The function of *be-* is to make an intransitive verb transitive.

Many scholars and handbooks affirm these meanings and functions. However, it is necessary to investigate them in detail especially since they reveal the difference between the compound verbs and the corresponding simplexes, e.g., in *becuman* and *cuman*.

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[1] See *OED* (*be-*, prefix).

2.2 Marchand

In addition to the general comments noted above, Marchand provides a further, more detailed explanation regarding the prefix *be-*. He is of the same opinion as Clark Hall and Mitchell; i.e., he has noted that *be-* makes an intransitive verb transitive. On the other hand he writes about an original meaning and functions:

1. The original meaning is locative sense "about, around", such as *becnyttan* "beknit" / *bedelfan* "bedelve" / *begyrdan* "begird" / *belicgan* "belie" / *berinnan* "run" / *besawan* "besow" / *bewalwian* "bewallow" / *bewyrcan* "bework".
2. The prefix *be-* is intensifying element, such as *besmirwan*,
3. It also means "overdoing the action", that is "deprive of". (98)

His analysis of the prefix *be-* is of particular significance. The most important aspect is that the original meaning is of locative sense, which shows that *be-* has spatial and concrete meaning. Concerning this locative meaning, Fraser has observed that many denominative verbs utilizing *be-* can express "covering with X" (where X is mentioned as the notion represented by the noun) (123). Although he describes only denominative verbs including *be-* as the idea of "covering with X", this idea might be applied to all the compound verbs because *be-* as in the locative sense could connote originally "covering with X" in any case, which we shall examine later using some instances taken from Old English times. Moreover, Hiltunen confirms Fraser's view and also observes that in *be-*, the original locative connotations survive better, which probably explains why it remained productive for the longest duration (97). These facts would seem to point to the conclusion that the prefix *be-* had originally a locative sense, i.e., "covering with X" or, in other words, "something covers something". This paper, therefore, bases its analysis on the locative connotation of the prefix *be-* as Marchand and Hiltunen put.

Marchand also writes about the prefix as an intensifying element:

> In connection with verbs such as *smear*, *weep*, *wail*, the prf is easily understood as an intensifying element. It also possible that the sense development was "from" to "all round" to "all over, thoroughly, completely" which *be-* had acquired by the ME period. (ibid)

This development thereby enabled *be-* to have an intensifying meaning, which develops further into another one, i.e., "deprive of".

The third gives an explanation of the privative meaning. Marchand notes that when the intensification is overstressed, *be-* linguistically morphs toward meaning 'overdoing action'

and further that "according to the meaning of the unprefixed vb, the overdoing of an action may turn into the opposite of what is originally meant by the prefix, i.e. into destruction." (99). To this group belong the prefixed verbs meaning "deprive of", such as *bescieran* "shear", *beneotan* "deprive", and *beceorfan* "carve".

As Marchand states above, it should be clear that the prefix *be-* had originally a locative sense, i.e., "covering with X". Thus, this research adopts this position as a starting point throughout the analysis of the functions and meanings of *be-*.

3. Etymology

Before commencing an analysis of the specific function of *be-*, it is necessary to enter into some etymological considerations which make clear the relationship between *be-* and other prefixes. Firstly, in Old English there were two prefixes, *bi-* and *be-*, which are derived from the preposition/adverb *by* (see Table 1). The former is the stressed form of *by,* the latter is the unstressed form discussed in this paper. The prefix *bi-* is found in a lot of nouns: *bicwide* "proverb", *bifylice* "neighbouring people", *bigeng* "practice", *bigirdel* "belt", *bileofa* "sustenance" and *bispell* "example". The prefix *be-*, on the other hand, combines with verbs, such as *bebugan* "to encompass", *beclingan* "to enclose", *becweþan* "bequeath", *bedrincan* "to drink in, absorb", *behealdan* "to behold", *beheawan* "to cut off" and *belicgan* "to surround".

Table 1. The Relationship between *bi-* and *be-* in Old English
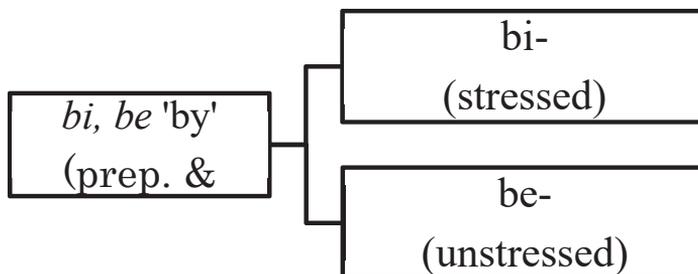
Moreover it is important to take a broad view of the relationship between the prefix *be-* in Old English and cognates in other Indo-European languages. Fraser, for example, demonstrates this (see Table 2). Following him, the original spatial meaning of *be-* can be understood as "movement up to a point", which is found in various Indo-European languages: Latin *ob-*

"toward, against", Sanskrit *abhi* "movement towards" and Gothic *bi-* and these cognates derive from Proto-Indo-European *obhi.*

If *be-* meant originally "movement up to a point" as Fraser argues, it would not be compatible with the statements of Mitchell and Marchand, which are discussed above. However, he offers a further explanation concerning *be-* alongside Delbrück, who has argued that this can be interpreted by the fact that Got. *bi-* has a dual origin: *obhi* and *mbhi* 'around' (684). The latter has the same root with Latin *ambi-*, Greek *amphi*, Old Norse *umd-*, Old Saxon *umbi-* and Old English *ymb-* (see Table. 3). In addition to both statements, following Meid, there is a natural relationship between *obhi* and *mbh*i (38). Specifically, he suggests that Indo-European languages formed a root *bhi* by aphaeresis from *mbhi*. Priebsch and Collinson have likewise noted that the German *be-* stems from the Proto-Indo-European *mbhi*, which has given in Germanic both *umbi* and, with full stress on the last syllable, *bi*, and therefore *um-*, *be-,* and *bi-* are originally the same word (253). All in all this etymological evidence is sufficient to allow a valid comparison between the prefix *be-* and *ymb-* in Old English.

Table 2. The Relationship between *be-* and Cognates in Other Indo-European Languages
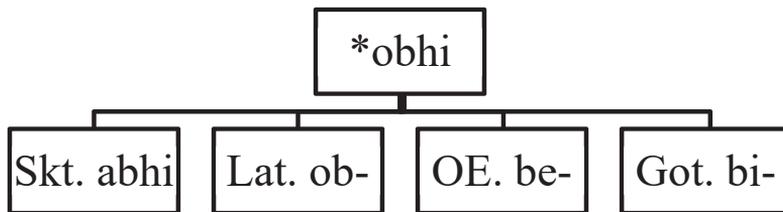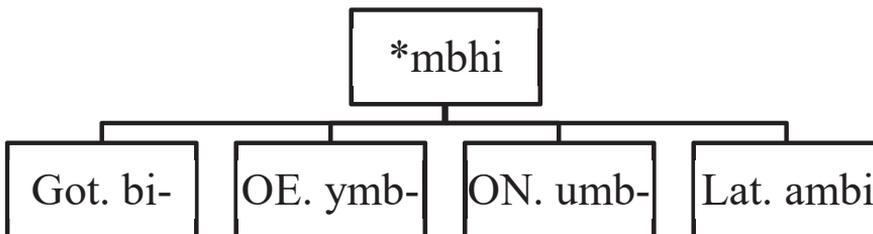

Table 3. The Relationship between Got. *bi-* and Cognates in Other Indo-European Languages

From the etymological point of view the relationship between *be-* and *ymb-* or cognates in other Indo-European languages is understandable, though there is an important problem that *be-* expressed by nature "movement up to a point", not "around". Concerning this, Fraser has argued that it happened that *be-* took on the meaning of *ymb-*, i.e., semantic development, and uses the following example from *St. Luke*:

> oþ ic hyne (þone fictreow) bedelfe and ic hine beweorpe mid meoxe. (*St. Luke* 13.8)
> (Till I dig around the fig tree and spread dung around it. [116])

Moreover he notes:

> The semantic development seems to have taken place in classical or late Old English . . . this shift of meaning undergone by the prefix *be-* takes place at the same time as loss of meaning, or dematerialization. (ibid)

Thus, it is obvious that *be-* had the same meaning as *ymb-* yet at the same time lost its spatial connotation. The fact that the meaning of *be-* had been the same as *ymb-* would therefore result in the spatial diversity of the meaning of the prefix as Marchand has noted.

4. Methodology

Before undertaking the analysis of the prefix *be-* in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, this paper takes the position that *be-* has a locative or spatial meaning "about, around" and specifically "covering with X". This is because the semantic development of *be-* from "movement up to a point' to 'about, around" had taken place in Old English times during which the locative sense seems to have remained stronger.

This analysis proceeds as follows: (1) Collecting all verbs including *be-* in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints.* (2) Classifying them into three groups according to specific functions of *be-*. (3) Reexamining the meaning of *becuman*.

5. Data and Analysis

Table 4 shows all verbs with *be-* in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints.* On the basis of the definition of Marchand that *be-* means a locative meaning "about, around" or "covering with X", they are classified into three groups: the first shows that the original locative sense remains stronger. The second group involves the compound verbs with *be-* which had lost the locative connotation "about, around" and had transferred into the mental field, i.e., changed "covering

with X" of the locative one into that of the psychological one. The last group contains the compound verbs which include the most abstract *be-* and are related with feelings of people.

Table 4. Compound Verbs with *be-* in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*

	N		N
bebeodan	24	**belucan**	12
bebyrgan	46	**bemænan**	5
beceapian	2	**benæman**	4
beclyppan	4	**beniman**	2
beclysan	2	**bepæccan**	5
becnytan	2	**berædan**	2
becreopan	1	**bereafian**	3
becuman	83	**berypan**	3
becweþan	2	**besargian**	7
bedælan	4	**bescieran**	2
bediglian	8	**bescufan**	4
bedydrian	9	**beseawian**	3
bedyrnan	2	**besencan**	6
befæstan	9	**besendan**	1
befealan	4	**beseon**	24
beferan	1	**beseowian**	2
befon	11	**besettan**	4
befotian	1	**besincan**	1
befrinnan	22	**besittan**	5
befylan	3	**besmitan**	2
begalan	1	**besprengan**	1
began	32	**bestælan**	2
begeotan	1	**bestandan**	4
begietan	10	**bestealcian**	1
beginnan	7	**bestingan**	2
begleddian	2	**bestreowian**	6
begyrdan	1	**beswincan**	14

begyrdan	1	**beswingan**	10
behæpsian	1	**betæccan**	31
behættian	3	**betellan**	2
behamelian	1	**beteon**	1
behatan	41	**beþencan**	5
beheafdian	23	**beþurfan**	1
behealdan	17	**betynan**	1
behelan	2	**bewacian**	1
behofian	3	**bewæfan**	1
behon	1	**beweaxan**	1
behreowsian	11	**beweddian**	3
behweorfan	1	**bewendan**	4
behydan	14	**beweorpan**	4
behyldan	1	**bewepan**	5
belaccan	6	**bewerian**	9
belæfan	2	**bewindan**	5
belæwan	3	**bewitan**	6
beladian	3	**bewyrcan**	2
belecgan	1	**belisnian**	1
belifan	18	**belimpan**	7

The first group is understandable from the point of view that the compound verbs with *be-* have the locative nature, i.e., "covering with X". This means that a noun placed in the position of subject covers a noun in object. The following sentence helps make it clear:

> Þa landleoda þa siþþan ledon þæt heafod to þam halgan bodige, and bebyrigdon
> hine . . . and cyrcan arærdan sona him onuppon. (*ÆLS*, *Edmund*, 164)
> (Then the country-people afterward laid the head by the holy body, and buried
> him . . . and full soon built a church over him. [Skeat, 326])

This sentence means that the head of Edmund was buried in the ground, in other words, covered with soil. The locative sense of *bebyrgan*, therefore, remains stronger here. This type focuses on the original spatial meaning of *be-*. On the basis of the fact that *bebyrgan* has the highest frequency in *ÆLS,* this group is named *bebyrgan*-type, which has the locative nature.

There belong some verbs, for example, *belecgan* "to cover", *beteon* "to cover, surround", *befon* "to surround, clasp, include", *belucan* "to lock, surround, block up", *bedyrnan* "to conceal", *becnytan* "to knit, tie, bind", *behealdan* "to hold, have, occupy", *bestreowian* "to besterw, bespinkle", *belimpan* "to concern, happen, befit" and etc. Those principally concerned with "covering with something"

The second group contains the verbs including *be-* which had lost the original spatial locative sense and thus expressed a more abstract one. It is that "physically covering with X" might change into "psychologically covering with X", specifically, 'someone has so great an influence on another as wholly covers him'. Therefore in the position of the subject would be placed a noun expressing a powerful man in force, authority, and so on. Furthermore, the sentence itself mainly refers to the danger or threat of the person, or conversely the honor or glory attributed to him. In respect of this, compound verbs meaning "deprive of" such as *beniman* are the most evident examples:

> Þa fleah Iudea cyning þe com mid ðam oþrum, ac Hieu hine offerde and him his feorh benam. (*ÆLS*, *Book of Kings*, 338)
> (Then fled the king of Judah who came with the other, but Jehu pursued him, and took his life from him. [Skeat, 404])

In this sentence the subject Hieu exerts a great influence upon Iudea and threatens his life. From the standpoint of Iudea, Hieu is dangerous for him. Therefore this group, which is labeled *beniman*-type, shows privation, or the threat of the person who is set on as the subject. Other verbs, likewise, follows: *benæman* "to deprive of", *befealan* "to fall, deprive of", and etc. Moreover herein belongs the majority of denominative verbs which are in general to be found with parts of the body: *beheafdian* "to behead" and *befotian* "to cut off one's feet".

From the point of view that the second type expresses the privation of the subject via the prefix *be-*, the original meaning of *becuman*, if it remains more or less as is, could be obvious. As *beniman* demonstrated, it also would originally mean the threat of the person in subject as follows:

> Hinguar þa becom to east-englum rowende on þam geare . . . (*ÆLS*, *Edmund*, 36)
> (Then Hinguar came rowing to East Anglian the year . . . [Skeat, 36])

In the situation of war *becuman* is probably used to suggest privation. Accepting this interpretation, this sentence would be that Hinguar could be a frightening man for East Anglian people and arrive there as a kind of tyrant. This is distinct from the usual explanation

concerning *be-*. Admittedly one might argue that all examples of *becuman* seem to have lost the sense of privation or have originally the same meaning as *cuman* "come". Although this paper concedes that the meaning of *becuman* is equivalent to *cuman* in some instances, it still could be improbable that all examples of it had lost the specific function simultaneously during late Old English times. Thus, this interpretation would provide some insight into the singularity of *be-* in *becuman*.

The third group is *behreowsian*-type, which is composed of the prefix *be-* and verbs meaning "to repent of" or "to lament". The meaning of the compound verbs are equivalent to un-prefixed verbs since *be-* functions as intensifying element "thoroughly". It is exemplified by the following sentence:

> Þa ongunnon heora magas mycclum behreowsian þæt hi æfre þa martyras mislæran woldon, and gelyfdon þa ealle endemes on Crist. (*ÆLS*, *Sebastian*, 118)
> (Then began their kinsman sorely to repent, that they had ever wished to misteach the martyrs, and in the end they all believed in Christ. [Skeat, 124])

The number of such verbs is only four including *behreowsian* in *Lives of Saints*: *besargian* "to lament", *bemænan* "to bemoan, lament", *bewepan* "to weep over, mourn".

6. Conclusion

From the point of view that *be-* in Old English had originally a locative sense, compound verbs including the prefix could be classified into three groups: (1) *bebyrgan*-type, which has the strong locative nature. (2) *beniman*-type, which mainly expresses privation or the threat of a person on subject. (3) *behreowsian*-type, which is the representation of the feeling of lamentation and repentance. This classification would make it clear that *becuman* has the specific meaning, which is that a person placed as the subject has a frightening influence on another, not the same as *cuman*. The specific function of *be-* in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, therefore, is to emphasize the threatenness of the subject. This research focusses only on the examples in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints.* In further studies, attention should be paid to these issues in other Ælfric's works–written in late Old English–and the specific function of the prefix should be thoroughly analyzed.

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