A preliminary corpus investigation of the syntax and semantics of OE preverbal *ge-*

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OE had a prefix *ge-*, cognate with German *ge-*, Gothic *ga-*, found on most lexical categories but especially common in the verbal system. The traditional historical work on OE *ge-* never satisfactorily resolved its status, and it hasn't gotten much attention recently. The issues presented largely boil down to it having an ambiguous status on a number of dimensions, in ways that make it reminiscent of its modern cognates, but still frustratingly distinct. For example the German prefix appears productively on the participle used in the perfect and passive (henceforth the PPP), unless the verb has non-initial stress (*'spielen* ∼ *gespielt*, but *spa'zieren* ∼ *spaziert*), and it also occurs as a non-productive derivational prefix, with irregular semantic contribution (e.g. *fallen* 'fall' ∼ *gefallen* 'please', *stehen* 'stand' ∼ *gestehen* 'confess'.) OE *ge-*, on the other hand, is extremely common in PPPs, but by no means obligatory, independent of the phonology of the verb stem. It is also common outside of PPPs, occurring on all other forms of the verb, but is not clearly derivational here, as the forms with *ge-* are far more transparently related to the parallel forms without than in German. We are led to wonder whether OE *ge-* is one unified prefix or two different ones within PPPs and elsewhere, whether it is derivational, or perhaps an inflectional marker indicating aspect, aktionsart or something else entirely. Previous accounts range from the claim that OE *ge-* is meaningless, to the proposal that it marks perfective aspect (e.g. Streitberg, 1891), to the idea that it expresses abstract direction (Lindemann, 1970), and the suggestion that it indicates resultativity in a manner not unlike verbal particles like *up* and *out* in Present-Day English (van Kemenade and Los, 2003). Further work is clearly needed, and the newly available parsed electronic corpora of OE should be instrumental, as we will need to develop a detailed picture of the statistical patterns of *ge-*'s co-occurrence with other elements of the language.

I have thus begun such a study using the *YCOE* (Taylor, Warner, Pintzuk, and Beths, 2003). The most important initial result is that *ge-* is extremely common – out of a total of 172,154 clauses examined, 42,010 (24.4%) have *ge-* on their main verb. A complete investigation of that many examples will take a great deal of time, and it would not be practical to embark on it without some initial guidance of what things to look for and focus on. I have thus carried out an initial investigation of the examples based solely on factors which are unambiguously tagged in the corpus and can thus be searched for and isolated to an acceptable level of accuracy without hand-coding. In the proposed talk I will report on this preliminary investigation, the insights it already provides into the status of *ge-* in OE, and its implications for the development of the ongoing full-scale investigation. Overall, there is basic confirmation that *ge-* is favored in environments suggestive of perfectivity and/or telicity, and disfavored elsewhere, though it is not clear whether this should be understood in aspectual, aktionsart or other terms. E.g. we find considerable variation according to the identity of the main verb (Table 1). The low frequency with (pre-)modals, 'have' and 'be' is expected as these are all statives, as is the high frequency with 'hallow', as this is a highly telic achievement verb which appears particularly commonly as a PPP. The very low frequency with 'come' and the very high frequency with 'see' are not expected. *Ge-* is extremely frequent with PPPs, as expected, but nowhere near categorical, and it is extremely **in**frequent with present participles, again not surprising since these are imperfective (Table 2). Table 3 shows that, as expected, the auxiliaries of the perfect and passive have a very strong favoring effect. Interestingly, past tense on the finite verb has a small but clear (and statistically significant) favoring effect on the appearance of *ge-* compared to the present (Table 4). In the full-scale study, then, it will be important to investigate what else tense correlates with, and what might explain its effect on the use of *ge-*. It will also be important to investigate the effects of specific verbs and their lexical meanings, and to develop versions of standard aktionsart tests and to look in detail at patterns with different types of adverbial and PP modification and with different classes of NP and clausal complements.

Verb	**Gloss**	**ge-**	**no**	**% ge-**
(pre-)modals		0	2631	0.0
habban	'have'	14	5077	0.3
cuman	'come'	29	4838	0.6
beon/wesan	'be'	490	31214	1.6
halgian	'hallow'	393	112	77.8
seon	'see'	2693	219	92.5

Table 1: Incidence of *ge-* according to lexical verb

form	**ge-**	**no**	**% ge-**
Pres. Ptc.	109	1662	6.2
to Infin.	432	2219	16.3
Finite	23617	105728	18.3
PPP	11508	1991	85.3

Table 2: Incidence of *ge-* according to form of verb

Aux.	**ge-**	**no**	**% ge-**
none	27482	118319	18.9
(pre-)modal	3384	7925	29.9
'be'	9776	3084	76.0
'have'	956	92	91.2

Table 3: Incidence of *ge-* with different auxiliaries

Tense	**ge-**	**no**	**% ge-**
Pres	15118	55961	21.3
Past	22933	61557	27.1

Table 4: Incidence of *ge-* according to tense

References

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