

SOME PECULIAR FORMS OF OLD ENGLISH VERBS

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ABSTRACT

In late Old English it became common to find strange verb forms of which had less frequently appeared in earlier texts. It is clear that Old English paradigms started to modify their shapes, though their structure had never been completely established in the first place due to limited data. This article discusses some examples of Old English verbs which show a morphological merger in addition to phonetic, syntactic, or semantic resemblance, e.g., between *wendan* and *gewendan*, *þyncan* and *þencan*, *læran* and *leornian*, *(ge)witan* and *(ge)wītan*, *blissian* and *bletsian*, and *biddan*, *(be)beodan*, and *forbeodan*, so as to show the natural selection of Old English verbs in the process of lexical conflict.

Keywords: Old English, Middle English, verbs, morphology, synonyms

1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Old English is characterised by a significant number of synonyms. Nouns, adjectives, and adverbs which could occupy an alliterating position in poetry decreased in frequency as soon as alliterative poems were replaced by rhyming

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<sup>1</sup> This article is written under the strong inspiration of Stanley (2013), which points out some peculiar verb forms found in earlier editions of Old English texts. In the present-day situation web corpora are so prevalent and editions published in late 19th to early 20th century become so unavailable that such forms are often neglected to be examined. As I have studied semantic rivalry for years, I should like to focus on some unusual forms found in Old English texts and see if they are adequately explained in dictionaries and web corpora.

poems, together with compounds, first elements of which were employed for alliteration. Verbs were not necessarily used for alliteration, except for infinitives and participles, but they also suffered conflict for survival. It is well attested by Gorrell (1895) that there was a rivalry between *cweðan* and *secgan* among the synonymous verbs of saying. The former took direct speech and the dative of person with the preposition *to* as the indirect object, while the latter governed indirect speech/questions and the dative of person without *to*; these syntactic features were gradually transferred from the former to the latter, and from the latter to *tellan*, around the time of transition from late Old to early Middle English, and eventually *cweðan* was fossilised and died out in Modern English.<sup>2</sup> There is also an obvious confusion and merger between *þyncan* and *þencan*, an ‘impersonal’ verb and a personal one, especially between the preterite and the past participle forms *þuht(e)* and *þoht(e)*, which is examined by van der Gaaf (1904). Thus the semantic rivalry may lead to syntactic changes, morphological mergers, and/or the replacement of one of the synonyms by a native or foreign synonym, and to the ultimate demise of the once flourishing word.

There must be cases of less obvious conflict caused by morphological resemblance, considering the fact that a number of Old English synonyms disappeared in the course of the language history. This cannot be explained away only by the prosodic change from alliterative to rhyming verse. There must be phonological and morphological as well as syntactic and semantic features that caused the conflict between synonyms or beyond groups of synonyms. In this paper I try to illustrate the process of morphological merger of several verbs through the extant texts of Old and Middle English periods in order to find the causes of their demise and survival.

## 2. *wendan* and *gewendan*

*Wendan* ‘to turn’ takes the accusative as a coreferential pronoun in the reflexive construction, while *gewendan* ‘to turn’ takes the dative, as in

- (1) Ða gebealh hine se cynincg and to his bedde eode.  
**wende hine** to wage woodlice gebolgen.  
 ‘Then the king became angry and went to his bed, and turned himself to the wall, madly enraged.’ (ÆLS (Book of Kings) 178–9<sup>3</sup>)
- (2) He forlet þa þæt swurd stician on him ⁊ **gewende him** ut æt sumere oþre duran, oð þæt he eft becom to his agenum geferon.

<sup>2</sup> For the rivalry of the verbs of saying based on Gorrell (1895), see Ogura (1981).

<sup>3</sup> Abbreviated titles follow the basic conventions used in *DOE* and *MED*.

‘He then left the sword stuck on him and went himself out at another door, until he came again to his own comrades.’ (Judges 3.24)

But in some instances the reverse is found, as in

- (3) Nicanor þa sceawode salomones templ.  
and swor þurh his godas þæt he þæt godes hus  
wolde mid fyre forbærnan butan him man betæhte  
iudan gebundene to bismorlicum deaðe.  
**wende him** swa awæg woodlice geysod.  
‘Nicanor then beheld Solomon’s temple, and swore by his gods that he wished to burn up the house of God with fire, except Judas should be given up to him bound, (and) so turned himself away, madly enraged.’  
(ÆLS (Maccabees) 612–6)
- (4) Ðis wearð þa gekydd ðæm casere sona, & he **hine gewende** to his  
gewunelicum gebedum & þæt gewinn betæhte þam welwillendan  
Hælende.  
‘This was immediately made known to the emperor, and he went himself to his usual service, and entrusted the strife to the benevolent Saviour.’  
(ÆJudgEp 71)

From late Old English onwards the accusative-dative syncretism proceeds, and the prefix *ge-* disappears, and consequently the two verbs merge into one.

### 3. *þyncan* and *þencan*

*þencan* ‘to think’, a verb in personal use, and *þyncan* ‘to seem’, a verb in ‘impersonal’<sup>4</sup> use, are said to be confused in the preterite and the past participle forms, *þoht(e)* and *þuht(e)*, as in

- (5) C: Þer ich lai a sweueteꝛ agan ich forto slepe.  
**me þuhte** þat in þere weolcneꝛ com an wunderlic deor.  
O: Þar ich lay a sweueteꝛ and ich gan to sleape.  
**me þohte** in þare wolcneꝛ com an deor sellich.  
‘Where I lay in slumber, (and) I began to sleep, it seemed to me that in the clouds came a marvelous beast.’ (Laz 25581–4)

<sup>4</sup> I use the term ‘impersonal’ (with single quotes) to denote a verb with a personal object in the genitive/dative/accusative and with or without *hit/þæt* as the subject. See Ogura (1986).

But preceding this morpho-phonetic merger, some examples, in which the stem vowel *-e-* appears in *þyncan*, are attested in Old and Middle English texts, including van der Gaaf's (1904) example from the *Old Kentish Sermon* of the late thirteenth century.

- (6) Hie him þonne eft swiþe bitere **þencap**, æfter þon þe se deað him tocymeþ Godes dom to abeodenne.  
 'Then again they (the youthful lusts) will appear very bitter to him, after the death comes to him to announce the judgement of God.' (HomS 17 (BIHom 5) 76)
- (7) Ðo þe mest doð nu to gode. *and* þe lest to laðe. Eiðer to lutel *and* to muchel scal **þunchen** [Dgb: **þenchen**; Eg(2): **ðinche**] eft hom baþe.  
 'Those who do now the most as good and the least as evil. It must be thought both too little and too much.' (PMor (Lamb 487) 62)
- (8) Inre fondunges beoð misliche unþeawes. oðer lust towart ham. oðer þohtes swikele þe **þencheð** [Nero: **þuncheð**] ðah gode.  
 'Inner temptations are various vices, or the desire towards them, or thoughts which seem good but yet deceitful.' (Ancr (Corp-C 402) 94/17)
- (9) bote yef ha luuie god almichti. and him serui:  
 al hit him may **þenche** for-lore and idelnesse.  
 'unless they love God Almighty and serve him; all it may seem to them destruction and idleness' (Old Kentish Sermon 35.2 (Laud MS 471) (from van der Gaaf (1904: 78))

#### 4. *læran* and *leornian*

*Leornian* 'to learn' and *læran* 'to teach' were strong candidates for morphological confusion, both starting with *l-* and having front vowels which could be smoothed into *-e-*. In *Ormulum* the two verbs should in principle be differentiated by the length of the stem vowel through the spelling system peculiar to this text. But in examples (10) and (11), *lerrnenn* 'to learn' and *lernenn* 'to teach' appear, both of which go back to *leornian*. This means that OE *leornian* developed into *ler(r)nenn* with meanings both 'to learn' and 'to teach'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In White's glossary, the headword is written as "**Leornenn**, lernenn, *to learn, to teach*", which goes back to OE *leornian*. There is another headword, "**Lærenn**, *to teach, instruct*", which goes back to OE *læran*. See Holt (1878: 483, 487).

- (10) Well mikell **lerrnde** Herode king  
 Off Crist, 7 off hiss come;  
 Forr baþe he **lerrnde** well þurh hemm  
 Whatt da33, 7 whære o lande,  
 ‘King Herod learned very well of Christ and of his coming, for both he  
 learned well through them, what day and where in the land...’ (Orm 7248,  
 7250)
- (11) Herr endeþ nu þiss Goddspel þuss,  
 [7 u]ss birþþ itt þurh sekenn,  
 To lokenn watt itt **lernep** uss  
 Off [ure] sawle nede.  
 ‘Here ends now this Gospel in this way and it is necessary for us to seek  
 through, to observe what it teaches us of the need of our soul.’ (Orm  
 19613)

In South-West Midland *Lambeth Homilies* the reflex of OE *læran* appears as *learnen*, while the versions of *Cursor Mundi* with Northern traits have *lern* (Cotton) and *larn* (Göttingen) (the later Fairfax MS. shows *lern*). In the *Wycliffite Bible*, we find *lernen* in the Earlier Version corresponding to *techen* in the Later Version.

- (12) 3if þe halia gast ne learð þes monnes heorte *and* his mod wið-innan; on  
 idel beoð þes budeles word wið-utan icleopde.  
 ‘If the Holy Ghost does not teach man’s heart and his mind inside, in vain  
 are these words of preachers spoken from outside.’ (Lamb Hom 95)
- (13) C: In crist lai þat folk to **lern**;  
 G: In cristes lai þat folk to **larn**;  
 F: In goddes name that folk to **lern** (Cursor 19028)
- (14) [qui **erudite** derisorem ipse sibi facit iniuriam]  
 Who **lerneth** [LV: **techith**] a scornere, doth wrong he to himself.  
 (Wyc(EV) Prov. ix.7)

##### 5. (ge)witan, (ge)wītan and (be)witan

*Witan* ‘to know’ rarely occurs with the prefix *ge-*, while *gewītan* ‘to go’ scarcely appears without *ge-*. Examples (15) and (16) are such rare instances.

- (15) [unde mox egressi **dinoscere** quid esset]  
 Ond heo sona arison & ut eodon; woldon **gewitan** hwæt þæt wære.  
 ‘And they arose at once and went out, desiring to know what that was.’  
 (Bede 3 6.174.17)
- (16) Nylle ic æfre hionan ut **witan**,  
 ac ic symle her softe wille  
 mid fæder willan fæste standan.  
 ‘I will never go out from here, but I ever wish to stand here gently and  
 firmly with father’s will.’ (Met 24 52b)
- In *Laʒamon* we find *witen* ‘to know’ and *wīten* ‘to guard’, which go back to *witan* and *wītan* respectively. Moreover, *biwiten*, from OE *bewitan* ‘to guard’, appears in the *Caligula* MS. and the prefix *bi-* often disappears in the *Otho* MS. In *Cursor Mundi*, *wite* ‘to blame’, from OE *wītan*, is found in the same form in four manuscripts.
- (17) C: þe ær weoren on þan londes & þa lawen **wustē**.  
 O: þe er weren in þat londes and þe lawes **wiste**.  
 ‘who were before in the land, and knew the laws’ (Laʒ 1167)
- (18) C: mid Humbres monnen. þe **wuste** Humberes fæi:  
 O: mid Humbert his mē. þat **wiste** Humbert his feo:  
 ‘with Humbert’s men who took charge of Humbert’s treasure’  
 (Laʒ 2221)
- (19) C: Ða weoren heo to þristes and to ufele heom **biwustē**.  
 ... þat heo ne cuðen **bi-witen** heom:  
 O: Ðo weren hii to þristes and to vuele ʒam **wuste**.  
 ... þat hii ne couþe **bi-wittie** heom:  
 ‘Then they were too daring, and ruled them too evilly; (alas ...) that they could not guard themselves against their enemies.’  
 (Laʒ 27531–4)
- (20) C: For-þi þat þou has don þe mis, þiself þou **wite** þi wa, i-wis.  
 G: For-þi þat þu has don þe miss, þi seluen es þe **wite** þi wa, i wiss.  
 F: for-þi þat þou has done amys. þi-self may **wite** þi wa I. wys.  
 T: And þat þou hast þus don þis mis þi seluen is to wite I wis  
 ‘Because you have done amiss, you yourself are to blame (your woe), indeed.’ (Cursor 876)

These examples show multiple meanings or semantic ambiguity, the interchangeability of prefixes, and the orthographic deficiency of telling long vowels from short vowels in the reflexes of OE *witan* and *wītan*. What we have today are the phrase *to wit* (cf. MS. T in (20)) and a Scottish or northern dialect form *wite* ‘to blame’.<sup>6</sup>

#### 6. *blissian/blīpsian* and *bletsian*

*The Dictionary of Old English* (hereafter *DOE*) has headwords *blissian/blīpsian* and *bletsian*; both verbs had been rather distinct in meaning but phonetically similar except the stem vowel. According to the explanation in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter *OED3*), semantic confusion started from the construction in which God is the subject and the verb means ‘to make happy’.<sup>7</sup> Examples (21–23) are quoted from *Genesis*, in poetry and in the *Hexateuch*. As seen from (22) and (23), OE (*ge*)*bletsian* is used as a rendering of *benedicere*, but in the *Wycliffite Bible*, *blisse* is chosen in the Earlier version in contrast with *blesse* in the Later Version.

- (21) Ic Ismael estum wille  
**bletsian** nu, swa þu bena eart  
 þinum frumbearne,  
 ‘I wish to bless Ismael now willingly, as you are a petitioner to your first-born son,’ (GenA 2359a)
- (22) [Et **benedicam** ei, et ex illa dabo tibi filium cui **benedicturus** sum,]  
 Ic hi **gebletsige**, & of hyre ic ðe forgyfe sunu, ðone ic wyll **bletsian**;  
 EV: and I shal **blis** to hir, and of hir I shal ȝyue to thee a sone, to whom  
 I am to **blis**,  
 LV: and Y schal **blesse** hir, and of hir I schal ȝyue to thee a sone, whom  
 I schal **blesse**,  
 ‘and I shall bless her, and from her I shall give you a son, whom I shall  
 bless’ (Gen 17.16)
- (23) [**benedixique** ei et erit **benedictus**]  
 & ic hyne **bletsode**, & he byð **gebletsod**.  
 EV: and Y **blisside** hym? And he shal be **blissid**.

<sup>6</sup> *OED3* has the following headwords: **wit**, v<sup>1</sup> (f. OE *witan* ‘to know’), **wite/wyte**, v<sup>1</sup> (f. OE *wītan* ‘to blame’), †**wite**, v<sup>2</sup> (f. OE *witan*, *bewitan* ‘to keep, guard’), †**wite**, v<sup>3</sup> (f. OE *wītan* (rare), usually *gewītan* ‘to go, depart’), †**i-wite/ywite**, v<sup>1</sup> (f. OE *gewitan* ‘to know; to watch, guard’), †**i-wite**, v<sup>2</sup> (f. OE *gewītan* ‘to go, depart’).

<sup>7</sup> *OED3*, **bliss**, v<sup>1</sup>. III. 7. a.

LV: and Y **blesside** him? And he schal be **blessed**.  
 ‘and I blessed him, and he shall be blessed’ (Gen 27.33)

The confusion continues throughout the medieval period and beyond. Two examples are given in addition.<sup>8</sup>

- (24) Wel may þe barne **blisse** [C. *text* **blesse**] þat hym to boke sette.  
 (1377 Langland *Piers Plowman* B. xii. 187)
- (25) Withe suche I loue not to meddle. God **blysse** me from them.  
 (1543 T. BECON *New Yeaes Gyfte* sig. C. iv (OED))

7. *biddan*, *bēodan*, *for(e)bēodan*, and *bebēodan*

It is stated under the headword **bid** v<sup>1</sup> in *OED3* that OE *biddan* ‘to ask’ and *bēodan* ‘to command’ merged completely in the course of the fourteenth to the fifteenth century.<sup>9</sup> *Forbid*, which is the proof of the morphological merger between *biddan* and *forbēodan*, first appeared in 1573 in the infinitive form *to forbidde*<sup>10</sup> Ahead of this merger, however, we find a possible interchangeability of *bebēodan* and *forbēodan* in manuscripts Cotton Claudius B. iv and CUL Ii. 1. 33. It is caused by a syntactic feature of *forbēodan* that a negative particle *ne* tends to appear pleonastically in a *þæt*-clause governed by a verb of negative import.

- (26) [Cur **præcepit** uobis Deut, ut non comederetis de omni ligno Paradisi?]  
 Hwi **forbead** [C: **bebead**] God eow ðæt ge ne æton of ælcon treowe  
 binnan Paradisum?  
 ‘Why did God forbid you that you should (not) eat of each tree inside the  
 Paradise?’ (Gen(B) 3.1)
- (27) [Quis enim indicauit tibi quod nudus esses, nisi quod ex ligno de quo  
**præceperam** tibi ne comederes, comedisti?]  
 Hwa sæde ðe ðæt ðu nacod wære, gyf ðu ne æte of ðam treowe ðe ic ðe  
**bebead** [C: **forbead**] ðæt ðu ne æte.

<sup>8</sup> Example (25) is quoted from *OED3*, **bless**, v<sup>1</sup>, I, †3. a.

<sup>9</sup> As explained in Sweet (1882, rev. 1953: 28 and 30), *bēodan* and *biddan* conjugate as follows: *bēodan* (*bīett*), *bēad*, *budon*, *boden*, and *biddan* (*bitt*), *bæd*, *bædon*, *beden*. A possible morphological confusion could have occurred in the third person present singular forms, *bīett* and *bitt*.

<sup>10</sup> See *OED3*, **forbid**, v., f. 2. a. Campbell states that unrounding of the second element of diphthongs is seen as a Kentish feature and gives the form *forbīet* ‘he forbids’ among examples (1959: 119); the form is cited in *DOE* from *CP* 48.369.1 (s.v. **for-bēodan**, **for-beodan**, Vb. st. 2, 1. d. ii.). See *DOE, A to G on CD-ROM*.



‘Who told you that you were naked, if you did not eat of the tree which I forbade you that you should (not) eat?’ (Gen(B) 3.11)

Thus there is also an example in *Mark*, where a negative construction in a *þæt*-clause causes the West Saxon version to choose *forbēodan* in contrast with *bebēodan* in *Lindisfarne* and *Rushworth 1* versions.<sup>11</sup>

(28) [et uehementer **cominabatur** eis né manifestarent illum]

Li:            7 swiðe **bebead** him þte hia ne æwades † mersades hine

Ru1:          7 swiðe bibead him þ hiæ ne eowde him

WSCp:       7 he *him* swyðe **forbead**. þ hi hine ne ge-swutelodon.

WycEV       And gretely he **manasside** hem, that thei shulden nat make hym opyn [*LV*: knowun]

Tyn:          And he streyghtly **charged** them, that they shulde not vtter him.

AV:           And he straitly charged them, that they should not make him knowen. (Mk 3.12)

As a rendering of *prohibere*, the form *forbidde* occurs in an interlinear gloss (MS Cotton Tiberius A. iii). *DOE* has this in attested spellings.<sup>12</sup> This may suggest an embryonic form of the morphological ambiguity in the middle of the eleventh century.

(29) [si linguam ad loquendum **prohibeat** monachus]

gif tungan to sprecanne gif **forbidde** se munuc

‘if the monk would forbid to speak the language’ (BenRGI 7.35.1)

Concerning the merger of non-prefixed *biddan* and *bēodan*, *DOE* discusses the wide semantic range of *biddan*, i.e. ‘to ask, pray, exhort, urge, direct, enjoin, command’, and suggest that the possible confusion with *bēodan* could have occurred in the sense ‘to command’.<sup>13</sup> Example (30) with explanation is quoted from *DOE*.

(30) eall hit bið swa ðu **bideþ** (from *bideþ* perh. shows confusion with pres. ind. 2nd sg. of *bēodan*). (LS 5 (InventCrossNap) 446 (*DOE*; = HRood 28.19))

<sup>11</sup> *Forbead* in *Ru2* (Mk 7.36) is a form of *forebēodan* (= *forbēodan*). See *DOE*, the reference in the previous footnote.

<sup>12</sup> See *DOE*, **for-bēodan**, **fore-bēodan**.

<sup>13</sup> *DOE*, **biddan**, Vb., st. 5.

Similar constructions appear in late OE *Martyrology* (Cotton Junius A. x): *Mart 5* (Kotzor) Jn2, A. 31 *Eall hit bið swa þu bideſt*, Ap28, B.33 *Swa hit bið swa swa þu bideſt* (DOE). Among the attested spellings of *biddan* and *bēodan*, three forms are found in common: *bit*, *bed*, and *bede*. *Bit* in example (31) may be a form of *biddan*,<sup>14</sup> and so could be the case of *bit* in (32).<sup>15</sup> *Bit* in (33) appears as a variant of *bebyt* (f. *bebēodan*).

- (31) swa man us **bit** and lærð,  
‘as we are commanded and taught’ (HomU26 (Nap 29) 73)
- (32) La Israhel, ne **bit** God ðe nanes ðinges, buton ðæt ðu ondræde Drihten  
ðinne Godd & lufie hine  
‘Ah Israel, God does not command you anything, except that you should  
fear Lord your God and love him’ (Deut 10.12)
- (33) swa hwæt swa he eow **bebyt** [B. bit]. doð þæt  
‘whatever he commands you, do that’ (ÆCHom II, 4 29.10)

*Biddan* takes the accusative and the genitive, and *bēodan* the dative. In (34) and (35) from the *Peterborough Chronicle* the dative occurs with *bed*, while in (36) from Charter 1428 we find the unambiguous accusative.

- (34) & **bed** him þet he scolde þet geten mid his writ & mid his bletsunge.  
‘and asked him that he should say yes to it with his writing and with his  
blessing’ (ChronE (Irvine) 675.3)
- (35) Ða hi wæron þær gegaderod, þa **bed** se kyng heom þæt hi scoldon cesen  
hem ærcebiſcop to Cantwarabyrig swa hwam swa swa hi woldon, & he  
hem hit wolde tyþian.  
‘When they were all assembled there, then the king asked them that they  
should choose for themselves an archbishop of Canterbury, whomsoever  
they wished, and he wished to grant it to them.’ (ChronE (Irvine)  
1123.17)

<sup>14</sup> Cf. LawICn 7 (DOE *biddan*, 5.a.iii.) *And we lærað & biddað & on Godes naman beodað, þæt ænig Cristen mann binnan VI manna sibfæce on his aġenum cynne æfre ne gewifie*, (cf. Quadr.: *commonemus, petimus et in nomine Dei precipimus*) ‘And we teach and command and bid in the name of God that any Christian man should never take a wife within the sixth degree of affinity in his own race’

<sup>15</sup> Latin is *petit*. See Crawford (1922).

- (36) Ic eode to minan abode Ælfwine & **bed** hinæ þæt ic moste norþ faran to þan halgan & hine gesecan. (Ch 1428 (Harm 113) 4)  
& **bed** hine þæt he scolde settan gode lagan... (Ch 1428 (Harm 113) 28)

*Bede* in (37) is a form of *biddan*, while (38) it appears in the attested spelling of the twelfth century.<sup>16</sup>

- (37) [serue nequam omne debitum dimisi tibi quoniam **rogasti** me]  
Li:           ðegn 1 esne wohfull eghuelc scyld *forgeaf* ic ðe *forðon* ðu  
              **bede** mec  
Ru1:        esne nawiht ealle þa scylde ic forlet þe forþon ðe þu **bede** me  
WSCp:      Eala þu lyþra þeowa eallne þinne gylt ic ðe *forgeaf*. for-þam  
              þe ðu me bæde.  
WycEV:     Weyward seruauht, I forþaf to thee al the dette, for thou  
              preidist me.  
AV:         O thou wicked seruauht, I forgaue thee all that debt because  
              thou desiredst me: (Mt 18.32)
- (38) & ic nille þafien þat men hem ani unriht **bede**.  
‘and I do not want to allow them to be commanded any wrong’ (Ch 1072  
(Harm 12) 5)

## 8. Summary

A morphological merger has accelerated the conflict among synonyms and lessened the number of synonyms. The causes of the choice were phonological,<sup>17</sup> morphological, syntactic, and semantic similarities. Two (or more) verbs merged into one, as in *þyncan* and *þencan*, *wendan* and *gewendan*, *blissian* and *bletsian*, became fossilised or dialectal like *(ge)witan* and *(ge)wītan*, or merged and gave birth to another prefixed verb like *biddan*, *bēodan*, and *forbēodan*. These points of conflict can be summarised as follows:

<sup>16</sup> DOE, **bēodan**, Vb., st. 2.

<sup>17</sup> An example can be added. *Wergan* ‘to curse’ develops into *wary*, and *wregan* ‘to accuse’, *wray*, after having produced numbers of different forms; both are now obsolete as shown with daggers by OED3. The two verbs did not show obvious traces of confusion until the end of the fourteenth century. In the following example from MED the metathesis occurs, even though *wreyen* takes reflexive constructions in Old and Middle English while *wereyen* does not: c1400 *Wrey þy self* (Cmb li.3.8) p. 80 *Werey* [alt. to: *Wrey*] *þyself als a þef doz; say þou sotȝ and noȝynge oȝer*. (Verbs in question are highlighted.)

Table 1. Possible pathways of development of verbal pairs

points of conflict	phonological	morphological	syntactic	semantic
wendan & gewendan		ge- or Ø	+ accusative or + dative	‘to turn’
þyncan & þencan	[i], [e], [y]	þinche/þenche; þuht(e)/þoht(e)	‘impersonal’ or personal	‘to think’, ‘to seem’
læran & leornian	[æ], [e], [a]	leorne/lerne/ larne		‘to teach’, ‘to learn’
(ge)witan & (ge)wītan	[i], [i:]	ge- or Ø		‘to guard’
blissian & bletsian	[i], [e]	blisse/blesse		‘to make happy’
(for)bēodan & biddan	[-e-], [-i-]	for- or Ø forbidde	(be)bēodan/ forbēodan + þæt ... ne	‘to command not to’, ‘to forbid’

Which verb is to be preferred and survive depends on chance. Verbs with less ambiguous forms or newcomers from foreign languages may be given a chance to replace the synonyms with more confusing forms and survive into Modern English. Major syntactic and semantic features of each verb are rather easily attested, but the possible examples of morphological merger are rarely identified. Only manuscript variants and different lexical choices in similar contexts can be the proof of the process of the merger.

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